BURIAL MASKS OF EURASIAN MOUNTED NOMAD PEOPLES 
IN THE MIGRATION PERIOD 
(1ST MILLENIUM A.D.) 

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I. The origin and spreading of this burial custom

In 1973 during agricultural work a nomad horseman's grave was brought incidentally to the surface in the Ukraine near to the town of Dnepropetrovsk in the fields of a small village, called Manvelovka. Among the finds, transported to the Dnepropetrovsk museum there were the following objects: an iron helmet, a silver jug, a straight, single-edged sword, and a thin silver mask having once covered the face of the deceased. On the four corners of the mask there were holes indicating that it had been sewn onto a piece of textile. The archaeologists of the local museum hurrying to the site of the discovery found plates of armour, arrow-heads, bones of a male human being and also those of a horse in the grave (Fig. 1). The orientation of the grave-pit was East-Western.

The Manvelovka find was published by L. N. Churilova in 1986. She presumed that the find — unique in the Dnepropetrovsk area — was connected to the pre-Hungarians, who were advancing Westward (in the IXth century A. D.) through what is known today as the Ukrainian steppes. As Churilova writes “the use of noble metal burial masks, face-covers and the partial horse-burial as ensemble were singularly characteristic of the "pre-Hungarian" cemeteries of the Ural-district”.

We mention this example to show the deep effect made on Soviet archaeologists by the significant discovery of István Dienes, the well-known scientist of the Magyar conquest: by the silver- or gold-eyed silk (or other textile) masks of the conquering Hungarians unearthed from their graves in the Carpathian Basin. Soviet archaeologists and other scientists of the migration

1 L. N. Čurilova, Pogrebenie s serebranoj maskoj s sela Manvelovki na Dnepru. Sotsialistickaja Arheologia, 1986/4, pp. 261–266.
Fig. 1. The Manvelovka find

of peoples generally bring this custom together with the Ugric–Hungarians living in Western Siberia and in the Ural-District, or with their cultural and ethnical influence on other peoples (for example on the Bulgarian Turks who


were arriving into the Ural District between the VIth and VIIth centuries A.D.). The presumption of these scientists is based on the fact that ethnographic parallels of this burial custom still existed among the nearest akin in language to the Hungarians: among the Ob-Ugrians almost up to the present. The Voguls and Ostyaks covered the face of their deads with textile or with animal’s skin and sewed on this face-cover silver coins, copper buttons over the eyes, mouth and nose of the deceased. They believed that this way the dead would remain in their graves and would not disturb the living people, nor take any of them into the underworld.

However, this burial custom was characteristic not only for the Finno-Ugrian peoples in the migration period of peoples. Its direct parallels — we can even say: preliminaries — can be found in Central and Middle Asia; furthermore its roots can be followed into the depths of the past of the ancient Mediterranean and Near-Eastern civilizations.

The ancient kings and aristocrats of Mesopotamia and the Eastern Mediterranean were often buried with golden masks, eye-covers and mouth-covers. Without going into details we wish to mention the Egyptian, Mycenaean, and Thracian masks, the eye-covers found in the royal graves of Ur and on the Island of Mochlos, the mouth-covers (epystomions) from Cyprus, and Tel Halaf. This custom appeared in certain intervals in this area from the IIId Millenium B.C.; up to the second half of the first Millenium B.C. The practice was spread by the Parthians in the wider geographical area of the Near East around the beginning of our era. As cultural influence of the Parthians it appeared soon also in the bordering territories of the Parthian Empire: in the Roman province of Syria, on the lower slopes of the Caucasian Mountains, and on the Northern coast of the Black Sea including the Crimean

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7 Mylonas, Mycenaean and the Mycenaen Age. New Jersey 1966, pp. 90, 92, 102, 132; figs 84, 97.
8 A. Rieh, Antike Goldmasken. Antike Welt 1973/1, Abb. 4.
10 R. B. Seager, Explorations in the island Mochlos. New York 1912, pp. 26–28; fig. 9.
12 M. von Oppenheim, Tel Halaf IV. Berlin 1982, pp. 4–5; Tafel 1, 2; fig. 8, 8/a, 9.

Acta Orient., Hung. XLVI, 1992/3
Peninsula. Golden masks and mouth-covers were found on the very same skull in certain cases in Parthian graves. A certain type of face-cover tied with a narrow ribbon covering both eyes of the deceased appeared first in the Parthian cemeteries. Sir Aurel Stein unearthed the parallels of this type of Parthian face-covers from the Astana Cemetery (Chinese Turkestan, Turfan) and named them as “spectacles.”

The appearance of the “spectacles” form in place of the simple golden eye-covers was a result of formal development. Namely, the masks, eye- and mouth-covers of the Mediterranean world were not sewn on textile, only strengthened on the nape of the deceased by wires. These wires laced through holes, which were drilled on the corners of the masks, or on the small golden plates. This was followed by the innovation of the Parthians: they melted the two eye-cover together with a golden ribbon. This way two short pieces of wire were enough to tie the two eye-covers onto the head of the deceased. The “spectacles” form of the burial eye-covers soon spread among the Caucasian peoples to the Northern coast of the Ponthian sea, and also on the Crimean peninsula. Its variations, made of different precious metals and sewn on silk appeared in Central Asia in the first half of the 1st Millenium A.D.; and later after the VIIth century A.D., in the rich Nomadic graves of the Ural District (Fig. 2). (Such “spectacles” were found in the Carpathian Basin in one case: in the Hungarian princely grave of Rakamaz; Xth century A.D.)

In the 1920s Michael Rostovtzeff presumed that certain motifs and objects, which were characteristic of the Hellenistic World, infiltrated into Middle and Central Asia not from the coasts of the Black Sea and through the great Eurasian steppes, but straight from Asia Minor and Syria, through the Southern way: through Parthia and Bactria. This commercial road, which — much later, already in the XIXth century — became known as the Silk Road, established direct contact between China, Central Asia and the Mediterranean. Beside commercial contacts, the Silk Road also intermediated cultural influences (Fig. 3). The accuracy of Rostovtzeff’s theory is proved by the fact that two Mediterranean burial customs: the burial masks, eye- and face-covers, and the so-called “Charon’s obol” were introduced into Central Asia via this route.

In the predominantly Nomadic Central Asian territories, Northward from China, from the T’ien Shan Mountains to the Altai-Sayan region, the custom of

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17 A. Stein, Innermost Asia II. Oxford 1928, p. 646.
18 Les peuples Ouraliens. Budapest 1975, Fig. 23.

Acta Orient. Hung. XLVI, 1982/93
Fig. 2. a, b: Silver spectacles from the Astana cemetery (Turfan) c, d: from Demionki (Ural District, Káma region) e: from the pre-Hungarian cemetery of Bolshije Tigan' (Bashkiria)

*Acta Orient. Hung. XLVI, 1992*
Fig. 3. The Silk Road.
burial with masks, eye- and face-covers met and fused with an ancient Chinese burial custom described in the Ceremonial Book of the Chou Dynasty, the I Li Shu. This custom was to wrap the noble deceased’s head in silk, or in other words, silk face-cover was used as a mask. From the turning point of the IIInd–IIIrd century A.D. the masks, eye-covers were sewn or placed on silk face-covers in Central Asian Nomadic burials.

Nikolai Mikhailovich Przhevalskij unearthed a wealthy female’s grave on the Southern side of the Tarim Basin, on the bank of the River Cherchen where the Southern branch of the Silk Road led towards the Chinese Empire. Here at that time the silk face-covers had not appeared yet. However, in those three cemeteries which were discovered and excavated by Sir Aurel Stein in 1915–16; in the cemetery of Astana, (the oasis of Turfan); in the cemetery of Yingxian, and in the cemetery of Lou Lan, the basic material of the found masks was silk. An eye-cover, made of silk was also discovered on the excavation of P. K. Kozlov and G. I. Borofka, in the Asian Hun tumuli-graves of Noin Ula (Central Mongolia). Masks, eye- and mouth-covers, sewn on silk were unearthed in nine cemeteries of the Kenkol civilization in Kirghizstan. These Nomadic burial masks, similarly to the Central Asian ones appear between the IInd and VIIth centuries A.D. Kirghiz archaeologists are more and more convinced, that the mounted nomads, who brought the Kenkol culture to the T’ien Shan mountains, were Asian Huns, and arrived from Central Asia.

I find it significant, that those eye- and mouth-covers, and masks, which were unearthed in Western and Southwestern Siberia, in the Ural Region, on the Ukrainian steppes and in the Carpathian Basin, dated to the second half of the IInd Mill. A.D., were sewn on silk like the Central and Inner Asian masks, and were not strenghtened by wires on the deceased’s heads as in the Middle East and in the Mediterranean. This fact is sufficient to prove that this burial custom entered Siberia and Eastern Europe from Central Asia in the migration period and not directly from the Ponthian sea and the Caucasian region.

20 A. M. Tallgren, The South Siberian cemetery of Oglatky from the Han period E. S. A. XI, 1937, p. 82.
21 N. M. Przhevalskij, Ot kiyast na istoki Zel’toj Reki. Issledovanije severnoj okrajni Tibetam i put’ cerez Lob Nor do basejna Tarima. St. Petersburg 1886, p. 366.
25 S. I. Rudenko, Kul’tura chuvash i novinskih kurgany. Plate XVI, fig. 1. Silk face-covers were also wrapped around the deceased’s heads under the clay burial masks of the Minussinsk Basin, from the Han period. See: A. M. Tallgren, Op. cit. pp. 69–90.
I must also mention that all three types of the burial masks found in the Siberian and East-European steppes during the migration period, were also discovered in the medieval cemeteries of the Turfan Oasis (the ancient K’ao Chang), where Chinese archaeologists are continuing the research begun more than eight decades ago by Le Coq and Sir Aurel Stein. The most frequent variant of the burial masks found in Turfan was the silver or bronze “spectacles” sewn on a silk face-cover, which was wrapped around the head of the deceased. This mask — as a peculiarity of the Astana Cemetery of Turfan — was covered by the so-called “fu mien” (mask in Chinese) which is a piece of very precious polychrom silk, ornamented in Sasanian style (Fig. 4). Together

with this type of mask in the mouth-cavity of the deceased nobles sometimes “Charon’s obols” were found.28

The most ancient burial mask of Turfan is from a grave dated to 561 A.D. On the plain silk face-cover two beans of bone were sewn over the eyes of the dead, and a piece of agat over his mouth.29 This is a perfect parallel — and surely an antecedent — of the silver-gold eyed masks used by the conquering Hungarians in the IXth–Xth centuries A.D.; and also by the Ugrian peoples of the XIXth century. A gilded iron mask with several holes in its corners for sewing up was also discovered in Turfan, and it is now kept in the Chinese collection of the Hermitage.30

Returning to the find of Manvelovka, examining the data at our disposal we cannot state that the mounted warrior buried there was a Hungarian. Silver or gold masks covering the whole face of the corpse were not unearthed from the graves of the conquering Hungarians. Conversely, more than a dozen silver masks resembling in every detail to the mask of Manvelovka were discovered in the largest excavated Bulgarian–Turkish cemetery in the Ural-District: from the graves of the rich warriors in Tankeevka. (Xth–XIth century A.D.)\textsuperscript{31} The rest of the finds at Manvelovka are not characteristic either of the cemeteries of the conquering Hungarians or of the cemetery at Tankeevka. The parallels of the silver jug found in the Manvelovka grave-pit turned up most frequently in the ancient Turkish cemeteries of the Altai region dated between the VIIIth and IXth centuries A.D. according to L. N. Churilova too.\textsuperscript{32} Sabres were more frequently used by the conquering Hungarians than straight single-edged swords. No helmets were discovered in Tankeevka; in the Carpathian basin only one is known from the period of the Hungarian conquest. Plates of armour have been unearthed neither from the graves of the Hungarian conquerors nor from those of Tankeevka up to our days.

The ensemble of helmet, plates of armour, and a single-edged sword was characteristic of two large groups of Nomadic peoples during the migration period: of the Avars of the VIIth–VIIIth century A.D. and of the Oghuz-Kipchaks of the IXth–Xth century A.D.\textsuperscript{33} It seems probable that the mounted warrior found in the grave at Manvelovka was either a Bulgarian–Turkish horseman who had joined the Avars, or an Oghuz-Kipchak warrior. I myself am rather inclined towards the latter opinion. The reason of this is that no masks have been unearthed from the Avar period on the steppes up to this date and only one has been discovered in the Carpathian Basin: the T-shaped gold plate sewn on textile from the grave of an Avar Kakhan at Kunbáhony (South-Central Hungary) (Fig. 5). The grave of Kunbáhony is dated to the VIIth century. On the other hand, the iron burial masks strengthened to the helmets of the deceaseds were quite frequent among the aristocracy of the Steppe Kipchaks and — as it is proved by the discovery of the silver mask, sewn on silk, found in the grave of a Kipchak horseman in Chelkar\textsuperscript{34} (XIth–XIIth c. A.D.; Northern Kazakhstan) — they were also acquainted with the burial custom described in detail in this article.

\textsuperscript{34} I. Fodor, Op. cit. p. 178, note 74.

\textit{Acta Orient. Hung. XLVI, 1992/95}
Beside the silver masks the metal-eyed silk masks were also known among the Oghuz-Kipchaks having lived in Kazakhstan and Western Siberia in the IXth-Xth centuries A.D. The skeleton of a Nomadic horseman was unearthed on the Baraba steppe from the 5th tumuli-grave of the Ust’ Tartass cemetery by S. M. Chugunov in 1895. In the eye-sockets of the skull there were found two heart-shaped bronze plates waved through with silver threads, and embedded into thin, disintegrating textile.32 The other finds of the grave were: gilded silver ear-pendants; remnants of a leather-belt with bronze fittings and strap-ends; eleven iron arrow-heads, two of which had whistling-frame from bones; a straight, single-edged sword which had crumbled into pieces; stirrup, bridle. The heart-shaped bronze-plates found in the eye-sockets of the deceased relate to the use of the Hungarian-type of metal-eyed silk mask in the Ust’ Tartass cemetery. The find has a direct parallel in the Carpathian Basin. In 1925 János Sóregi unearthed the grave of a conquering Hungarian warrior on the pasture-lands of an East-Hungarian town, Hajduböszörmény. Two rectangular gold plates were discovered in the eye-sockets of the deceased, and a heart-shaped bronze-plate in his mouth-cavity (Fig. 6).36

The Siberian archaeologists of our days date the 5th tumuli-grave of the Ust’ Tartass cemetery between the IXth and Xth centuries A.D. and connect it with the ancient Turkish tribe-group of the Oghuz-Kipchaks or Kimaks. (All the other tumuli-graves of the Ust’ Tartass cemetery had been robbed and

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Fig. 6. 1: Golden eye-covers and bronze mouth-cover from Hajduböszörmény-Vid. 2: Bronze eye-covers, belt-strap and clasp from the 5th tumuli-grave of the Ust' Tartass cemetery. (After the photography of S. M. Čugunov)
therefore nothing else was found there.) Their research made it clear that the tumuli-graves of the Baraba steppe cannot be connected to the Ugrian peoples as it had been supposed before.\textsuperscript{37} Direct parallels of the bronze strap-ends and fittings of the belt unearthed from the 5th tumuli-grave of the Ust’ Tartass cemetery are well known from the ancient Turkish cemeteries of the Minussinsk Basin and of the Altai Mountain Region dated to the IXth–Xth century A.D.\textsuperscript{38}

The connections of the Western-Siberian silver-bronze eyed silk burial masks (Ust’ Tartass, Barsov Gorodok,\textsuperscript{39} Basandajka)\textsuperscript{40} (Fig. 7) with their parallels from Central Asia, the Ural Region, the Eurasian steppes and the Carpathian Basin demand further investigation. These are the most direct parallels of the gold-, silver-, or bronze-eyed burial masks, widely spread among the leaders and prominent warriors of the conquering Hungarians. What is more, they were found on a territory where aboriginal Ugrians and ancient Turks who migrated into Siberia from Central Asia, had lived side by side in the second half of the first Millenium A.D. So, the custom of the metal-eyed silk and other textile or leather burial masks got to Western Siberia, Northern Kazakhstan and to the Ural Region from the direction of Central Asia and most probably through Asian Hun and ancient Turkish intermediation.

II. Ethnographic parallels among the Kazakhs of the Mongolian Altai

During my last two expeditions to the Mongolian Republic (in 1990–91) I did historical-ethnographic field-work among the Kazakhs of Central Mongolia and of the Mongolian Altai. These people under the cover of their Islam faith kept a lot of customs which relate to their ancient Shamanistic religion.\textsuperscript{41} As my collected data show ancient Turkish customs as the burying with gold—

\textsuperscript{38} I express here my gratitude for the kind verbal information of G. V. Dlužhevskaia.
\textsuperscript{39} T. J. Arne, Barsoff Gorodok. Stockholm 1935, p. 69; fig. 154, 155.
\textsuperscript{40} K. E. Gritivčič, Basandajka: Sbornik materialov i issledovanij po arheologii Tomskoj oblasti. Tomsk 1947, p. 29, plates LXVI–LXVII.
\textsuperscript{41} Here I must express my gratitude to the Arnold Stein Exploration Fund of the British Academy and to the George Soros–Hungarian Scientific Academy Foundation for the financial help which made it possible for me to cover the expenses of my 1990–91 expeditions to Mongolia. Also, I would like to express my gratitude to István Mándoky Kongur for the information and advice which he gave me on the burial customs of the Kazakhs living in Bayan Ölgiy.
silver, bronz-eyed silk masks and the partial horse-burial lived among them up to our days. I also gathered some explanations to these customs throwing light upon the Kazakhs' ancient faith.

As introduction I must mention that each Mongolian Kazakh man (and woman) insists upon being buried in his (or her) homeland: in Bayan Ölgii County in the Altai Mountains, where his clan's cemetery exists mostly since the end of the XVIIth century. If the Kazakh lives in one of the other

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counties of Mongolia he (she) asks the family to bring him (her) into Bayan Ölgii when — because of old age or a fate-illness — he (she) senses the approach of his (her) last hour. He wishes to arrive on his home soil alive, as the burial must take place one or at latest two days after the death.

On the morning of the funeral, shortly before the mourning men begin the journey with the deceased to the clan’s traditional burial place, the favourite horse of the deceased is led to the funeral yurt. A white well on the animal’s neck signifies that the horse will be sacrificed. The crowd gathers around to take a look at the horse before the animal is killed. Then, the deceased Kazakh with his relatives and close friends begins his last journey which leads to the clan’s cemetery through the river valleys and mountain passes of the Mongolian Altai. Formerly the corpse was carried on a horse or a camel but today it is carried by a truck.

In the meantime, the body of the deceased’s favourite saddle-horse is brought to the burial feast where the women who are not allowed to take part in the immediate burial ceremonies cook the horse meat and serve it to the mourners when they arrive from the cemetery. According to the Bayan Ölgii traditions the horse as sacrificial animal can be replaced by a lamb but never by cattle or camel.

On the seventh day after the funeral the bones of the sacrificial animal are buried on one of the mountain peaks. Sometimes the head of the horse is placed on the top of a pole. Formerly the skin of the animal was buried with the bones. In the last few decades, since the delivery of animals’ skin has become obligatory, the skin is given to the imam leading the ceremonies so that he can fulfil his delivery obligations.

For a whole year after the bereavement the relatives and close friends, who for some reason could not take part in the burial ceremonies, can visit the funeral yurt and have a look at the clothes and favourite belongings of the deceased there: these might be for example his pipe, smoker’s set, whip, arms, military awards. If his family moves to an other place, his second favourite horse carries these objects and nobody rides the horse. This way everybody who meets the family in the course of its moving can see that there was a bereavement in the family and the year of mourning still has not passed.

On the first anniversary of the death the relatives take part in a mourning ceremony in the clan’s cemetery. They say prayers not only at the grave of the mourned member of the family, but also at the grave of his father, mother, brothers and sisters, and — as I saw it on one occasion — at the graves of the ancestors of the family. Then the second favourite horse of the deceased is led up to the first one’s burial place and is sacrificed, cooked and eaten. After this, the second horse’s bones are buried beside the first one’s. This way the soul of the deceased have his two favourite saddle-horses in the other world. In case of very rich families he can have various ones. An eighty
year old aksakal, who belonged to one of the ruling Kazakh clans of the Mongolian Altai and the bordering Chinese regions, told me that on the occasion of the first anniversary of his elder brother’s death three horses were sacrificed and the bones and skins of these horses were buried beside the first one in a cross-shaped pot-hole after the feast. This brother, who had lived in Chinese Turkestan, had been very rich: he had owned over 5000 horses.

Up to the first decades of our century in Bayan Ölgiy heroes killed in fight were buried with their belts which were ornamented with gold and silver fittings, sabres and other valuable objects. The horses of these heroes were sacrificed near the burial place and the burial feast also took place there. In the grave-pit the skull and shin-bones of the horse, with his ornamented harness, saddle, stirrup were set into a small cave. So, together with the warrior “the soul of his horse” was buried too. If the horse had been also killed in the fight it was buried as it was — with all his equipment — beside the warrior. In local tradition eating from a horse killed in battle was considered a great sin.

The graves of the baatars (fallen heroes) are known by all Kazakhs in the mountains of Bayan Ölgiy. Their tumuli-graves are holy and inviolable: not only because the heroes of the Kazakh nation lie there about whom heroic poems are sung but also because these graves conceal precious objects.

As I was informed by the aksakals of Bayan Ölgiy the above-mentioned heroes, and the chiefs and prominent members of the Kazakh tribes were buried with a mask made of silk and precious metal. The deceased’s head was wrapped in a white silk-veil and over his eyes and mouth gold or silver coins, plates, or in the case of very rich people whole silver or gold masks were sewn onto this veil.

My informants told me that the white silk-veil symbolized the innocence and honesty of the dead person. The gold or silver coins and plates shine light according to the belief of the Kazakhs of Mongolia and Eastern Turkestan. They were sewn over the deceased’s eyes so that he could see in the underworld. The coin or plate over the mouth represented the mouth itself. So, the mask, made of silk and precious metal represented the deceased’s face. For poorer people the coins or plates were often made of bronze.

The explanation connecting this burial custom with the idea that precious metals shine light has ancient tradition in Central Asia. Not long ago a mounted warrior’s grave was unearthed in the North-Western border-region of China. The grave can be dated to the period of the Kitay dynasty ruling in Northern China in the XIth–XIIth centuries A.D. The skull of the unearthed warrior was complete. In one of his eyes a gold coin, in the other a silver coin

was discovered. In other words "the light of the Sun run from one of his eyes and the light of the Moon from the other". The gold was the symbol of the Sunlight and the silver of the Moonlight in Chinese symbolism in the Middle Ages and in earlier periods.43

Today this custom is dying out in Western Mongolia, because the Kazakh communities own very little precious metal. The deceased’s head is wrapped in gauze or white textile as white silk became a rarity, too. The gauze or textile is wrapped around men's head five times and around women's seven times. An opening is left on the cloth over the eyes, and a piece of twig or grass is placed into this opening. This way it is ensured that the dead can still see in the underworld. So, despite compromises the spirit of the traditional burial custom still lives on.

The ethnographic descriptions of horse-sacrifices, partial and complete horse-burials, well known from the archaeology of Nomads during the migration period, are abundantly represented in scientific literature from the time of V. V. Radloff.44 But the ethnographic parallels of the gold- and silver-eyed textile masks were primarily known from Western Siberia from the land of the Ugrian peoples. Even then some — not widely known — parallels appeared from the Turkish world too. For example in Fergana a scarf was put on the dead woman’s head during the dressing and a cut in the shape of a cross was made on this scarf in such a way that it fell over the eyes of the deceased.45

It is interesting that exactly this form of face-cover was used even recently in the rural regions of Hungary and in the Hungarian-inhabited areas of neighbouring countries: Transylvania, Slovakia. According to the data the explanation given for this custom was the following in most cases: the cross-like opening on the face-cover was necessary in order that the deceased could see and breath under the ground.46 The collector of these data thinks it possible that this type of face-cover with the cross-like opening is a modification of the silver- and gold-eyed silk masks of the conquering Hungarians which is living up to our days.47 So, this custom may have survived in spite of the fact

43 I express my gratitude to Ildikő Ecsedy and György Kara for the informative conversation which we had about the symbolic meaning of gold and silver in Central Asia in ancient times. For the Ugrian explanation of the same custom, see above, p. 115.

Acta Orient. Hung. XLVI, 1992/25
that the pagan burial customs were prohibited and persecuted by the Catholic Church in Hungary especially in the Middle Ages.

András Róna-Tas quotes a Chuvash ballad in which seven brothers go to fight in a war. Six of them survive but the youngest falls in battle. When his wife asks about her husband the brother-in-laws tell her that her husband is sleeping in a big house on a hill, he is lying on his horse’s skin, there is a white scarf on his face and he holds a green mace in his hands. The image of “the house on a high hill” brings to my mind the tumuli-graves built from stones, wood, and hidden among the high mountains of the Western Mongolian Kazakhs: the graves of the baaturs in which the warriors lie with covered face and with their horses just like the fallen warrior of the Chuvash ballad.

The Shamanistic burial customs are religious secrets among the Kazakhs of Bayan Ölgii. Women are kept away from these secrets as are men below the age of 50. From generation to generation this information is passed to the men over 50, who will become religious leaders of the Kazakh communities later. The only reason why I succeeded in getting information from the initiated was because my interpreter and caravaner was a respected man among Kazakhs and a relative of my informants.

The degrees of secrecy vary. All my informants were willing to talk about the horse-sacrifices and the partial and complete horse-burials. However, it was far more difficult to get any information about the face-covers with gold- or silver-eyes and mouth-covers. My attention was drawn to a certain legend told by all of my informants asked about burial masks. According to this legend in the depth of the ancient graves of the Altai Mountain there are stone-doors behind which there are strung bows with arrows waiting for intruders. This legend shows how deeply the old Kazakhs worry that if they speak about the silver and gold buried in the graves of their nation to anybody who


49 I would like to take the opportunity here to express my gratitude to T. Eedge, who was my caravaner, interpreter and comrade on my expedition in the Mongolian Altai. Without his help I could not have gained the confidence of the inhabitants of Bayan Ölgii.

50 Only one person disclosed to me any information about the valuables buried in the graves: Aksakal Delel. He had spent the greatest part of his life far from the closed community of the Kazakhs in Bayan Ölgii and only returned to die into his birthplace in the summer of 1991. (I took part in his burial ceremony and by doing so attained important information for my work.) When we talked in Ulan Bator in 1990 he warned me that the graves of the baaturs were holy, untouchable and inviolable, because there were objects of great value in them.

51 It would be interesting to know, whether the old Altaian Kazakhs know about the grave of the first Chinese emperor, Ch’i’in Huang-ti, which was defended by such bows and arrows, according to the contemporary chronicles (Ma Ch’ien, Historical Notes) or perhaps the legend was created by the Kazakhs themselves?
is not absolutely trustworthy, treasure-hunters will disturb the eternal dream of their ancestors.

In spite of these difficulties, my data show clearly that the customs described above existed among the inhabitants of the Mongolian Altai for several centuries and have survived in modified form up to our days.

The Oghuz-Kipchak Kazakhs living in Bayan Ölgii, moved in waves from Eastern Turkestan into the Mongolian Altai during the last three hundred years. They brought the custom of the gold–silver-eyed burial masks with them from their original homeland where this custom has existed for at least 1500 years.°

Hence more and more archaeological and ethnographic data show that the silver- and gold-eyed silk mask and the partial horse-burials known as ethnical characteristics of the Ugrian peoples and the ancient Hungarians were well known among the Turkish-speaking peoples of Central Asia and remained so up to our days. As we summarized in the archaeological section of this article, we may correctly suppose that when several Central Asian Turkish speaking tribes directed their way towards the West during the migration period, the custom of burying with this type of mask spread through their immediate and cultural influence among the peoples of Western Siberia and the Ural Region, and took root in the leading strata of the pre-Hungarians, who brought this custom into the Carpathian Basin at the end of the IX-th century A.D.

The same can be said about the partial horse-burial. Like the Kazakhs of the Mongolian Altai and of the bordering region of Eastern Turkestan, the ancient Hungarians ate the cooked meat of the horse of their fallen fellow-warrior during the burial feast, before they placed the skull and the shin-bones of the war-horse together with its saddlery on its folded skin at the feet of its master, or in its stuffed skin beside him in the grave-pit.°

So, our ancestors also took the soul of their war-horses with themselves when they departed for the underworld, and their gold- and silver-eyed burial masks assured that they would not wander blindly on the endless meadows of the afterworld (Fig. 8).°


° Gy. László, Ærpid népe. (The people of Árpád.) Budapest 1989, p. 54.

In 1992 I succeeded in collecting some illustrative documentation of the Kazakh burial customs described above, in the Sakaí River Region, and on the alpine pastures of the 3945 meters high (about 12000 feet) Cengel Khairkhan Mountain. This material is represented by Plates X–XII and Fig. 8 in my article.

The original photograph of the white silk burial cerement with golden eye- and mouth-covers is not printable for technical reasons, that is why I publish the drawing of it. (Fig. 8.) This silk shroud with the golden eyes and mouth is a perfect and undoubtable historicoo-ethnographic parallel of the silver–gold–eyes masks of the Land-conquering
Fig. 8. Silk face-cover with golden eye- and mouth-covers from the Kazakh region of the Mongolian Altai. (Bayan Ölgii Aymak, Mongolia. Recent. (After the photography of the author)

Just making the first correction of this study I got a letter from Gábor Ilon, dated to the 1st of November 1933, with the information that in the year 1972, a fragment of a thin silver plate was found in one of the eye-sockets of a 12-14 years’ old child, excavated by S. Mithay from the 6th grave of the Bakonytamás-Hathalompuszta Avarian cemetery. (The end of the VII-th century A.D.) The second silver plate was not found, it might have been unnoticed, (it was a rescue excavation) or might have been perfectly decayed in the course of time. I am very grateful to Gábor Ilon as his letter made for me possible to publish this really important information literally in the last moment.

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The drawings were prepared by Agnes Váry (Hungarian National Museum) the folded map, showing the archaeological sites of the Eurasian Nomadic masks from the migration period was prepared by Marianne Czeh. To them I also express my deepest gratitude for the help.

Hungarians. It was made in Chinese Turkestan, in the Oasis of Turfan. (The Kazakhs of Bayan Ölgii can freely visit Chinese Turkestan.) The customer was an old Kazakh, living in the Mongolian Altai, who wishes to have it put on his face in the course of his future burial ceremony.

Acts Orient. Hung. XLVI, 1992/93
Plate I. Golden “spectacles” and mouth-cover from the Parthian cemetery of Dura Europos
(1st–11th c. A.D.)
Plate II. 1: Silk "spectacles" from the 6th tumuli-grave of Noin Ula. (Central Mongolia, 1st–11nd c. A.D.) 2: Silk "spectacles" from the cemetery of Kara Bulak. This one was sewn on a silk face-cover. (Kirghizstan, 11nd–1Vth c. A.D.)
Plate III. Fragment of a “fu mien” from the Astana cemetery.
Plate IV. The golden mask from Shamshi. (Kirghizstan, IVth–Vth c. A.D.)
Plate V. Imitation of a golden mask from the symbolic grave of Džallak Džebec.
(Kinghizstan, IIIrd–Vth c. A.D.)
Plate VI. Silver mask and silk face-cover from the Bulgarian-Turkish cemetery of Tankeevka. (Ural District, Volga-Kama region, Xth-XIth c. A.D.)
Plate VII. Skull of a Land-conqueror Hungarian warrior, with silver plates on his eyes and mouth. (Tiszabeszlá-Bashalom, East-Hungary, Xth c. A.D.)
Plate VIII. Golden "spectacle" and mouth-cover from the princely Hungarian grave of Rakamaz. (Northwestern Hungary, Xth c. A.D.)
Plate IX. The find of the 8th tumuli-grave of Ust' Tartass. Down in the first row there are the two heart-shaped bronze plates, found in the eye-sockets of the buried mounted warrior
Plate X. Picture A: Kazakh Aksakal and his wife in the yurt. (Bayan Ölgii Aymak, Northwestern Mongolia. Picture B: The three silver coins over the Aksakal's bed are serving for him as health-preserving amulets up to the end of his life, and will be sewn on his silk face-cover to represent the eyes and the mouth after his death.
Plate XI. The two triangles at the end of this burial ceremonial carpet are representing two eyes. The bereaved is lying on this carpet in the yurt on the first night after his death.

Plate XII. Sacrificed horse’s skull and shin-bones, placed by Nomad Kazakhs onto a rock of the Mongolian Altai. The white veil bound on the skull shows the purity of the sacrifice. (Bayan Olgii Aymak, Northwestern Mongolia)
Archaeological sites of nomadic burial mounds from Eurasia. The migration period. (1st Millenium A.D.; the first half of the II nd Millenium A.D.)