A VIEW FROM THE WEST TO THE EAST
An Analysis of the Characteristics, Chronology, and Distribution of the Sabretache Plates
in the 10th century
by
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1. Introduction

In early medieval societies male violence has a complexity and a social-embedded nature. However, violence and the use of weapon were integral elements of masculine personal identity, particularly for elites. In these ways, weapons and related items became an integral part of commemorating personal and group identities. The symbolic significance and mnemonic, social-psychological impact of the ornamented belts, sabretache plates, and weaponry could also have derived from the rich and complex decorations applied to weaponry and related items (in this sense for example weaponry and other ornate items from the rich graves from Rakamaz, Karos, Zemplin, etc.). These decorated weapons may have been powerful visual statements of identity.

As part of the inventories of these rich graves, the sophisticated metalworks which are represented by the most sabretache plates which were regarded as genuine Hungarian products from the beginning of the 10th century for about 150 years. Being one of the most iconic artefacts of the "funerary horizon" of the Hungarian Conquest Period (10th century AD) in the Carpathian Basin, sabretaches and in particularly their decoration has been in constant attention of – especially Hungarian – archaeologists.


Burial customs are considered the most important elements in the definition of the 10th century Hungarian cultural "horizon", cultural "conglomeration". However, we would like to mention, that instead of the outdated notion of "archaeological culture" (for a pertinent critical analysis see Sebastian Brather, Ethische Interpretationen in der frühgeschichtlichen Archäologie. Geschichte, Grundlagen und Alternativen. Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumsunde, Ergänzungsband 42 [Berlin, New York 2004] 517–567) we opted for the term "Funerary horizon" as this concept is limited to the precise chronological dating in the context of a geographical region (either micro- or macro-region).

As appreciated by László Révész, these products – among other artefacts as weapon belt, ornate sabres, bow cases, sabretache plates – are considered “insignia of rank” of the Hungarian conqueror elites.

2. The comparative Analysis of the Characteristics of Sabretache Plates

The research of the sabretache plates in the 10th century has hitherto mainly focused on the repoussé ornaments decorating the sabretaches, more precisely the decoration technique, the motifs employed (concentric circles, palmette motifs, zoomorphic, and cruciform motifs, etc.), without however attempting a comparative analysis of the structure of the finds. For this reason, the present paper sets out to analyse the functional and decorative characteristics by taking into account all known instances of such artefacts discovered so far.

As part of the present investigation we attempted to systematize the characteristics inherent to this category of finds (Fig. 1).

The observations based on the comparative analysis of the aforementioned artefacts are multidimensional:

1. The number of the undecorated sabretache plates is quite high in the Carpathian Basin and Scandinavia (12 finds), on the other side all known sabretache plates discovered in Eastern Europe with the notable exception of the find from Andreyevskaya shhel were decorate with floral and zoomorphic motifs.

2. Somewhat conspicuously the presence of the floral compositions based on palmette motifs characteristic to Islamic art is almost ubiquitous in the Carpathian Basin, and hitherto unknown among the finds from Eastern Europe (see Fig. 1 and List). It is however important to underline that this situation is determined by the state of

the research, a fact overlooked by the researchers previously dealing with this question.

3. The rectangular openwork had the role of fastening the sabretache plate: the belt fragment preserved for example on the find from Andreyevskaya shhel illustrates the fastening mechanism and the way it was mounted on the external surface of the sabretache. Furthermore, the central fitting possibly combined with a thin ring which did not survive composed the closing mechanism of the item. Without a doubt this fastening mechanism is similar with that employed in the case of the sabretaches decorated with fittings. The intact find from Martan Cu provides an almost identical analogy.

4. Analysing the 38 finds hitherto known, their fastening and closing structures can be grouped into two categories, the first one displaying structural ties with the sabretache decorated with fittings (Fig. 2). The rectangular openwork in the central part of the sabretache plate is quite rare being one of the main connection points in functional terms with the sabretaches decorated with fittings, as their closing mechanism is identical. Similar openwork – apart from the three finds in the Mardjani collection, discovered in the Western Ural region – can be found on only one of the 27 finds from the Carpathian Basin, i.e. on the sabretache plate discovered in Bana. Thus, it can be said that very few of the sabretaches decorated with plates share the same – or similar – closing mechanisms as the so-called simple sabretaches, indicating that the high number of finds displaying an alternative closing mechanism in the Carpathian Basin (a total of 26 pieces) can be understood as a change (albeit not in an evolutionary sense) in the decoration and use of these implements. Furthermore, the macro-topography of their distribution is also interesting to note. As mentioned before, with the exception of the artefact from Bana – the only such discovery from the Carpathian Basin – all of the finds come from the steppe region of Southern Russia (the Mardjani collection) and Andreyevskaya shhel (Fig. 3). The explanation for the abandonment of the central openwork is quite straightforward and logical: the craftsmen who decorated the surface of the plates intended to protect the artefacts from subsequent interventions which threatened the integrity of the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Morphological characteristics</th>
<th>Carpathian Basin</th>
<th>Northern Caucasus, steppe region</th>
<th>Volga Cama region</th>
<th>Scandinavia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>undecorated surface of the plate</td>
<td>Besenyőtelek-Szörhát, Eperjeske gr. 2, Izsák-Balázspusza, Karos-II gr. 52, Kenérlő-Fazekaszug-1 gr. 3, 14, -II gr. 28, Perbete gr. 3, Tiszánána-Csed tanya gr. 1, Tuszér-Boszorkányhely gr. 6</td>
<td>Andreyevskaya shhel</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>decorated surface of the plate</td>
<td>Floral motifs (Bana, „Báránd”), Bodrogvéc/Več, Bugyi-Felsőványa gr. 2, Dunavecse-Fehéregyháza, Eperjeske gr. 2-3, Hlóhovec/Galgóc, Karos-II gr. 29, Kenérlő-Fazekaszug-1 gr. 14, Kiskunfélegyház-Radnóti Miklós street, Rakamaz-Strázsadomb gr. &quot;A&quot;, Szolnok-Szászhalom, Svaláva/Zölyva, Tarcal-Rímai-dülő gr. 4, Tiszábezdéd gr. 8, Tűrkeve-Ecsegpuszta), zoomorphic (Tiszábezdéd gr. 8), cross (Tiszábezdéd gr. 8)</td>
<td>Floral motifs: The Mardjani collection (2 artefacts); Zoomorphic motifs (2 artefacts)</td>
<td>Floral motifs (Kryukovo-Kuzhnoye grave 472, Panovo, Veseľovo gr. 19), Zoomorphic motifs (Panovo, Perm, Veseľovo gr. 19), Human motifs (Perm)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rectangular openwork in the central part of the artefact

| Rectangular openwork in the central part of the artefact | Bana | Andreyevskaya shhel, The Mardjani collection (3 artefacts) | - | - |

Central fitting mounted on the openwork part

| Central fitting mounted on the openwork part | - | Andreyevskaya shhel | - | - |

frame of the plate

| frame of the plate | Dunavecse-Fehéregyháza, Karos-II. gr. 29 and 52, Tarcal-Rímai-duő gr. 4 | - | Veseľovo gr. 19 | Birk gr. 819 |

Side fittings

| Side fittings | Besenyőtelek-Szörhát, Kenérlő-Fazekaszug-1 gr. 3, Svaláva/Zölyva | Andreyevskaya shhel | - | Birk M. 956 |

Central fittings with gemstone settings

| Central fittings with gemstone settings | - | Andreyevskaya shhel | - | - |

Flattened rivets of rectangular plates

| Flattened rivets of rectangular plates | - | Andreyevskaya shhel | - | - |

Central fitting/central setting for gemstones

| Central fitting/central setting for gemstones | Dunavecse-Fehéregyháza, Tűrkeve-Ecsegpuszta | - | - | - |

Gemstone settings

| Gemstone settings | Dunavecse-Fehéregyháza | - | - | - |

* The analysis of the backsides is yet to be carried out in the case of the artefacts from the Mardjani collection.

Fig. 1 Systematization and analytical comparison of the components of the sabretaches discovered in the Carpathian Basin, Scandinavia, in the regions of Cama and Volga, and the Northern Caucasus.

fragile decoration. In our view this is the best explanation for the fact that only five out of 38 analysed finds display openwork decoration.

5. However, the find from Andreyevskaya shhel, in Northern Caucasus, displays a further formal and functional trait which sets it apart from the sabretache plates and brings it closer to the simple sabretaches decorated with fittings: the rectangular plates and rivets on its backside which were used to fasten the fittings on the exterior. Such a fastening system was observed only in the case of the find from Martan-Ću Catacombe – grave 10. The backside of both artefacts displays the flattened rivets and rectangular plates which fastened the fittings on the front side of the artefacts (Fig. 4). As mentioned above, this decoration technique brings the piece from Andreyevskaya shhel closer to the simple sabretaches only decorated with fittings.

6. A further similarity with the simple sabretaches decorated with fittings lies in the fastening system, as shown by the examples from Martan-Ću Catacombe, grave 10, Kryukovo-Kuzhnoye, Karos-B. g. II, grave 41 (Fig. 5).
Fig. 2 Systematization of the closing mechanisms of the sabretache plates (The Ancient Hungarians [Note 2], 362 Fig. 1; Füredi, Honfoglalás kori tarsolyelemz [Note 4], 13. kép; National Museum of Chechen Republic, Russian Federation, and Archaeological Museum “Gorgippia”, photograph: Dávid Somfai Kara).
7. One last formal characteristic worth mentioning involves the central fittings with mounted gemstones. The edge of the sabretache plate from Türkeve-Ecsegpuszta (Fig. 6,1) was decorated with gemstones in four distinct places. In two cases the central parts were also decorated with gemstones (Dunavecse-Fehéregyháza, Türkeve-Ecsegpuszta) (Fig. 6,1-2; see List with affrent bibliography; Pl. 1,6).

3. The Chronology of the Sabretache Plates

One of the fundamental issues of every archaeological analysis is the assessment of the chronology of the contexts and finds. Out of the 38 known sabretaches only 22 come from documented archaeological contexts, while 17 out of the 22 finds were discovered in the Carpathian Basin, three in Eastern Europe in the Cama-Volga region and further two in Scandinavia.

3.1. The Carpathian Basin

Given that the state of research concerning the issue at hand is by far the most evolved in this macro-region, the complex chronological analysis will be limited to the finds from the Carpathian Basin.

3.1.1. Seriation

Based on the mathematical-statistical method involving the analysis of correspondences between finds carried out with the help of the PAST software, all in all 16 burials with sabretaches could be analysed, accounting for 44.73% percent of all sabretaches known today, i.e. 38 finds. Only a limited part of the burials featuring sabretaches discovered in the Carpathian Basin could be integrated into the said analysis, moreover the Scandinavian and Eastern finds - due to their low numbers - could not be subjected to such an investigation. The result of

7 Gemstones were mounted on a wide range of artefacts during the 10th century AD. For an analysis of this issue see Ciprian Horváth, Adatok a honfoglalás korai kő- és üvegkeret élő dísztípt megvétő, arsélyok és veretek kérdésköréhez. Communications Archaeologicae Hungaricae 2004, 151-171.

8 The list of the burials: 1 Baná; 2 Bugyi-Felsővány grave 2; 3-4 Eperjeske graves 2-3; 5 Ízsák-Balázspuszta; 6-7 Karos-Bg. II graves 29 and 52; 8-10 Kenéziő-Fazekaszug B.g. I graves 3 and 14; B.g. II grave 28; 11 Kisunkelégvára-Radnótí Miklós Street; 12 Szolva/Sválava; 13 Tarcal-Rimai dűlő grave 4; 14 Tiszazsádház-Hargangláb dűlő grave 8; 15 Tiszacsázlár-Bashalom B.g. I grave
Fig. 4  The position of the rectangular plates and the flattened rivets on the surface of the backside of the sabretache plate from Andreyevskaya shhel and the sabretache decorated with fittings from Martan-Ču Catacombe grave 10 (Archaeological Museum "Gorgippia" from Anapa; National Museum of Chechen Republic, Russia Federation, photograph: Dávid Somfai Kara).

Fig. 5  Sabretaches decorated with fittings (Krylazova/Belavin/Türk, Újabb adatok [Note 8], 11. kép 1; Révész, A karosi honfoglaláskori temetők [Note 4], 56 Pl.; National Museum of the Chechen Republic, Russia Federation, photograph: Dávid Somfai Kara).
the analysis involving the aforementioned 16 burials can be illustrated as such (Fig. 7).

As shown by the seriation table, the chronological assessment of the finds is relatively accurate in cases in which coins are also featured among the grave goods. The four phases involved in the creation of the numismatic record (emission, circulation, acquisition, and deposition) indicate that the timespan between the release of a coin and the moment when that coin is regularly placed in a burial amount to at least ten years. Along these lines grave 52 from Karos-Burial ground II (the first entry in the table) containing the remains of a 41–60 years old man, can presumably be dated based on the coin finds (emitted between: 899–911 and 904–905) to around 920.9 Grave 14 of the Kenézlő-Fazekeaszeg burial ground I yielded dirhams emitted by Samanid Emir Ismail ibn Ahmad (H279–295/892–907) at Al-Sas between H290 = 902/903 and H291 = 903/904, and by Nasr ibn Ahmad Samanid Emir (H300–331/914–943) in Andaraba in H309 = 921/922, as well as a Dirham with uncertain emission dated to H320–330 = 932–941/942. Consequently, this burial as well a grave 110 from burial ground I at Kenézlő can be dated to the mid- or second third of the century. A similar assessment can be made in the case of the possible lone grave from Kiskunfélegyháza-Radnóti Miklós Street: the numismatic evidence consisting of 39 pierced coins indicates that the date of the burial can be set around the 930s–940s. The assemblage consists of 5 denarii emitted by Emperor and King Charles (II and III) the Fat (881–885–887) in Toulouse, 2 denarii emitted by Odo King of Frankia (888–898), 2 denarii emitted in Milan and Pavia by Berengar I of Italy (888–915), 4 denarii emitted in Pavia by Rudolf of Burgundy, King of Italy (922–926), and lastly 22 denarii emitted by William (Guillaume) II of Auvergne (918–926) in Brioude. The basis for the later dating is provided by the so-called pear-shaped stirrup, which in reality is of the trapezoid type and is conventionally dated to the latter half of the 10th century.11

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9 According to László Kovács, A magyar kalandozások szákmányáról (Budapest 2011) 50, a later dating around the 930s is also viable.
10 László Kovács, Münzen aus der ungarischen Landnahmezeit.
**Fig. 7** The seriation and systematisation table of the sabretaches in the Carpathian Basin.
The assemblages featured in the first and last rows of the seriation table indicate the earliest and the latest known examples of burials with sabre-taches. The timespan separating the two ranges between three and six decades. Consequently, if the earliest burial, i.e. the grave from Karos is dated to 920/930, while the burial at Kiskunfélegyháza is considered to be the latest on account of the trapezoidal stirrup, than we can assert that the period of use of this item lasted for c. 50–60 years around 920/930–960/970/980.

The remaining funerary assemblages in the table reflect a quite unitary picture in terms of dress implements and grave goods which hinders any possibility of a more refined seriation dating within the aforementioned period.

3. 1. 2. Typo-chronological Dating of 10th century Artefacts

The relative dating of the burials with sabre-taches (some of them only partially documented) based on the typo-chronological system devised for 10th century finds and the evidence of coins is possible at least in part.

1. In the case of grave 2 at Buggy-Felsővány, which benefited from an exemplary documentation, the four-lobed dotted circular motif found on the grip plate of the artefact are known exclusively in contexts dated to the latter part of the 10th century.12

2. With regard to the burial ground at Eperjeske, only a total of eight graves were researched, probably accounting for only a small proportion of the burial ground, the finds yielding a surprising uniformity. The burials with sabre-taches reflect a high degree of similarity with grave no. 52 at Karos-B.gr. II, indicating an analogous dating, corroborated by the seriation analysis as well.

3. Grave no. 8 of the burial ground at Tiszabezdéd which yielded a unique sabre-tache plate can be considered to be among the earliest graves of the funerary site according to its position within the necropolis, which however cannot be dated before the second third of the of the 10th century.13

4. Among the surviving parts of the assemblage from Hlobovec/Galgóc, besides the sabre-tache plate we can find the Volga Bulgarian "pseudo-Samanid" copies of a dirham emitted by Nasr ibn Ahmad Samanid emir (H 301–331/914–943) in Samarkand in H 306 = 918/919. Based on this find, the burial can only be dated after the first third of the 10th century.

5–7. According to the typo-chronological analysis of the finds the small burial ground at Tarcal comprising four burials with sabre-taches can be dated to the first part of the 10th century. The burial grounds at Bana and Svaláva/Szolyva can also be dated to the first part of the 10th century.

8. The burial from Bodrogvéc/Somotor-Več containing the remains of a man, together with sword displaying a sabre-like hilt and a sabre-tache, according to the typo-chronological analysis can be clearly dated to the latter part of the 10th century.16

3. 1. 3. The internal Chronology of Burial Grounds with Sabre-tache Burials and the Dating of the Graves

Given the uniformity of the assemblages already discussed above, additional chronological information can only be obtained within the framework of the respective burial grounds. The conditions for this assessment exist in 21 cases out of total of 26 sabre-tache burials in the Carpathian Basin.

1. The Kenézlő-Fazekasforg burial ground II is clearly earlier than burials belonging to the Kenézlő-Fazekasforg I. This fact is corroborated by

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12 In addition to this Füredi mentioned further 16 graves with very poor inventory (simple open loops, strap rings, bronze wire bracelets, as well as on example of a poorly worked stirrup with precious metal inclusions). It is uncertain whether the burial ground was entirely excavated or not (Füredi. Honfoglalás kori tarsolyemer [Note 4], 212). For the question of the dotted circle decoration see Béla Kárrl Egy honfoglalás kori tárgy eredetéhez. Communications Archaeologicae Hungaricae 1996, 151–163; Ervin Gáll, Az Erdélyi-medence, a Parint és a Bánás 10–11, századi temédi. Magyarország honfoglalás kori és kora Árpád-kori sírleletei 6 (Sieged 2013) Vol. I, 364, note 427. Based on the aforementioned finds, the respective graves can be clearly dated to the latter half of the 10th century.


the seriation analysis of grave no. 14 belonging to burial ground no. I, and grave no. 28 of burial ground II.

2. Grave A of the Rakamaz-Strázsadomb — according to the reconstructed plan of the burial ground — was identified in the immediate vicinity of grave C which yielded a double-edged sword with sabre-like hilt. The respective finds are generally dated to the latter part of the century.

3. Grave no. 1 from Tiszánána according to the plan of the burial ground appears to belong to a different group as the one represented by graves 4 and 21 which comprised 10th century coins. Given that the coiled lockring emerged in the southernmost group (grave no. 11), thus dating this part of the necropolis to the latter part of the century, it seems that the chronological evolution of the burial ground followed a N→S direction. Accordingly, the sabretache burial can be dated in our view to the second third of the 10th century.

4. With regard to the remaining cases of sabretache burials the burial ground plans either do not reveal any chronological data, or they are simply not available:

4.1. The dating of the burial ground at Tuzsér — especially grave J6 — cannot be refined beyond the timespan of the first two thirds of the 10th century.

4.2. The chronology of grave D from the Tiszazs-lár-Bashalom I burial ground is uncertain, however grave F = 13 located in the immediate vicinity yielded denarii emitted by emperor Louis the Pious (814–840) in Bourges, by Odo king of Francia (888–898) in Limoges, and most importantly by Lothar king of Italy (947–950)

Given that grave no. 3 of the burial ground was destroyed, it could not be included in the current analysis.


Révész, Heves megye 10–11. századi temetői (Note 18), 309.


in Verona. This indicates that the respective sabretache grave cannot be extracted from the general chronology of the burial ground, and thus can be dated to the interval between the third of the 10th century and the latter half of the century.

3. 1. 4. The Dating of the Artefacts based on the
Traces of Wear and Tear

1. Traces of wear and tear are clearly visible on the sabretache plate discovered in the grave at Izsák-Balázspuszta, even so, according to the archaeologist who carried out the investigation the find is dated between the first third and the second quarter of the 10th century.

2. The sabretache discovered in Bugyi-Felsőványi displays clear signs of wear and tear as well as traces of repair, which suggests a prolonged time of use.

Based on this four-tiered relative chronological system, the following chronological assertions can be put forward with regard to the finds of the Carpathian Basin:

1. None of analysed sabretache plates can be dated earlier than 925–930. Based on this assertion the following question arises: were these clothing implements already in use during the late-9th century Hungarian migration and conquest or, did their widespread use start only later?

2. The Exact date when the latest sabretache plate entered into the archaeological record is uncertain, however the sword with sabre-like hilt (Bodrogvéc/Somotor-Véc) and the trapezoidal stirrup (Kiskunfélegyháza-Rádnoti Miklós Street) clearly indicates that these implements were still in use during the latter part of the century.

3. The age of the deceased in the case of the sabretache graves is extremely diverse (see Fig. 7), suggesting a high degree of chronological and spatial variety in the use of these implements.

20 It is important to underline that analogies from the Caucasus of the belt decorated with fittings discovered in grave no. 9 are typically dated to the 11th century. For the respective fittings see: István Dienes, Un cimetière de Hongrois conquérants à Bashalom (Fouilles exécutées par L. Kiss). Acta Archaeologica Academica Scientiarum Hungaricae 7, 1956, LX/1–50.

4. All in all the number of sabretache plates dated to the 920–930 period is lower than the amount of artefacts dated to the subsequent decades, suggesting that the general use of sabretaches reached its peak at a later date than suggested by previous authors, the second group being more numerous than the first one. In terms of dates this situation implies that the usage peak of this clothing implement can be placed in the period between 920/930 and 970/980, rather than 920/930–970/980 as suggested earlier.

5. In the case of Bana, Perbete, Rédőzberencs-Paromdomb grave 3, Svaláva/Szolyva-Rimai dűlő grave 4 and Tuzsér-Boszorkányhegy, only a loose dating to the first two thirds of the 10th century can be implied (Fig. 8).

6. In macro-topographic terms – based on the relatively well-dated finds – currently the earliest instances come from the burial grounds situated in the Upper Tisa valley, however – as shown by the map below – an early dating can also be implied in the case of certain finds outside this geographical region, such as Bana and Perbete. Their distribution in the Carpathian Basin suggests a multi-levelled chronological process, however it is still open to debate whether this situation can be interpreted in terms of long distance commerce, or whether it is the result of the activity of local or foreign craftsmen and their “apprentices”. Furthermore it cannot be excluded that in fact we are dealing with the archaeological expression of the sifting of the centre of political and military power from the Upper Tisa valley southward to the region between the Danube and the Tisa. Moreover one can notice that the spatial distribution reflects the second network type defined and illustrated by Richard Hodges, i.e. the “solar system type” (see Map 1–2, Fig. 9). This model emphasises upon the control of distribution, but we have to ask the question whether in this case we can discuss on the uncommercialised exchange or partially commercialised, non-competitive exchange?

The chronology and the distribution of the sabretache plates is illustrated as follows (Fig. 9). Consequently, it can be said that the Upper Tisa region provided the earliest instances and the highest numbers of sabretache plates, just as in the case of dirham finds and weapons in funerary contexts (Map 3).

3.2. Eastern Europe and Scandinavia

The current section is an attempt to refine the chronology of the Eastern European and Scandinavian finds, notwithstanding the very low-resolution data available in this regard. With regard to the Scandina-

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25. Richard Hodges, Dark Age Economics. A New Audit (London 2012) 4 Fig. 2/B.
26. Révész, A karosi honfoglaláskori temetők (Note 4), 79, 94, 113/2. kép; Gáll, An attempt to classify the stirsups (Note 12), Fig. 22.
Fig. 9 The dating of the sabretache plates in the Carpathian Basin and their geographical distribution (for the numbering, see List 1).
vian finds it can be mentioned that the two sabretache plates discovered in the burial ground at Birka are analogous to the 10th century finds in the Carpathian Basin, furthermore the piece discovered in grave 644 is associated with a coin emitted by Nasr II Ibn Ahmad (914–943) in 920–921, thus dating the sabretache plate to the second third of the century.

The issue regarding the finds discovered on the territory of present-day Russia is somewhat more problematic. The decorated oriental sabretaches were previously considered by the Hungarian researchers as being the prototype of finds associated with the Hungarian Conquest Period, and thus earlier than the sabretaches from the Carpathian Basin, while the recent tendencies consider the two categories as being contemporaneous. The precise dating of these finds is generally hindered by the lack of contextual data, five out of nine sabretaches are isolated finds (Andreyevskaya shhela, the Mardjani collection, Perm) and thus devoid of any archaeological context. Even so, the sabretache from Perm was dated to the latter part of the 9th century without any clear explanations. Contextual data are available only in four cases (Kryukovo-Kuzhnoye grave 472, Panovo grave 2, Rusenikha grave 2, Veselovo [near Semênovo] grave 19), however the respective information is not straightforward either. Only one of the graves produced a coin find (Veselovo grave 19), although unfortunately the dirham could not be identified. Even so, it is highly likely that we are dealing with a 10th century coin. Recently the assemblage was dated to the latter half of the 10th century. The belt set from grave 2 of the Rusenikha burial ground has a close analogy in grave no. 3 which also produced a coin dating the burial to the early-10th century. On the other side the dating of grave 2 from Panovo to the latter half of the 10th century is unsubstantiated. No additional data regarding the sabretache burial from Kryukovo-Kuzhnoye (grave 472) is available at this time.

In order to summarize, it can be said that the chronology of the Eastern European sabretache finds is highly problematic. Even so we can assert that at least a part of this group (Panovo grave 2, Rusenikha grave 2, Veselovo [near Semênovo] grave 19) is contemporaneous or even later than the finds from the Carpathian Basin. Conversely, the early dating of the find from Rusenikha clearly indicates that their interpretation as imports from the Carpathian Basin (i.e. in a W → E direction) is not tenable. Furthermore in light of the aforementioned find, it can be asserted that these implements have entered into usage in the eastern regions at an earlier date than the ones from the Carpathian Basin. Moreover, the gilded silver sabre-scabbard fittings with palmette decoration discovered around Krasnodar and almost identical with a number of finds from the Carpathian Basin, indicates that the palmette motif typical of the sabretache plates is not an indicator of Hungarian material culture, but rather an instance of 10th century international elite representation.

4. The regional distribution of the sabretache plates (Map 1-2)

By following the macro-regional distribution of the sabretache plates across the Carpathian Basin, Scandinavia, and the Ural region, we are compelled to express a number of fundamental questions regarding the cause and character of the distribution. First of all, we need to address the supra-regional character of this artefact type, in order to understand the factors which promoted this clothing implement to the position of status marker for the elite throughout such

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29 Krylaszova/Belavin/Türk, Újabb adatok (Note 29), 458.
31 "Regarding the dating of the sabretache plate from Panovo, based on the inventory of the respective grave (Fig. 8) – similarly to grave 19 of the burial ground at Vesylovë – this assemblage cannot be dated before the latter half of the 10th century, corroborated by the surprisingly well-preserved belt fittings discovered here (Fig. 8/9–12)" (translated by the authors) Krylaszova/ Belavin/Türk, Újabb adatok (Note 29), 458.
32 This theory was partly devised by István Fodor (Fodor, Az öszeremisz saroslyelemez [Note 28], 163-171). The possibility that we are dealing with imports from the Carpathian Basin has emerged previously in the archaeological literature. Vladislav P. Drévkin, Hudožestvennyj metal Vostoka (Moskva 1976) 170.
a vast territory. In this case we are also dealing with a methodological issue. Given the fact that the state of research is more advanced in the Carpathian Basin, the distribution of these artefacts was interpreted in terms of cultural diffusion. Thus, according to this line of interpretation the production area was centred in the Middle Danube region, from where the artefacts spread to various areas of Eastern Europe.

Analysing the associated inventories in funerary contexts from Scandinavia, Volga and the Cama region, steppe region, and the Carpathian Basin, a further cultural and economic link emerges between the respective macro-regions; i.e. the 10th century Arab dirhams. The distribution of the said numismatic finds associated in funerary contexts with sabretache plates is illustrated in the table above (Fig. 10). According to the information available so far in all cases we are dealing with coins emitted in the first half of the 10th century (see Fig. 11).

These items can be associated with long distance commerce. The existence of commercial networks starting from the 8th century and in the first half of the 10th century are proven by the large number of dirhams discovered (not exclusively in sabretache plate graves) in the vast area between the Caucasus and Scandinavia.

In every single case, finding places of sabretache plates are located in the vicinity of the great Eurasian commercial roads, which highlights further the “international” character of these clothing accessories. This situation can only be explained through the presence of Arabic political and economic factor, and its relations with Khazar, Pecheneg and Viking networks of power, representing the existence of a complex system of communication channels.

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35 Until recently almost all of the known sabretache plates have been discovered in the Carpathian Basin. Recently however the emergence of four new cases has increased the number of finds known from Eastern Europe to nine, accounting for 33 % of the total of known sabretache plates. Consequently, the statistic distribution according to regions is as follows: Carpathian Basin 27, Eastern Europe 9, Scandinavia 2. For the research history of the 10th century see Péter Lango, Archaeological Research on the Conquering Hungarians: a Review. In: Research on the prehistory of the Hungarians: a Review, ed. Balázs Gáspár Mende. Varia Archaeologica Hungarica 18 (Budapest 2005) 175–340.


37 Furthermore, the total lack of Byzantine coins also has to be noted.
Fig. 11 The commercial routes during the early Middle Ages, the macro-regions where sabretache plates were found (based on: https://io9.gizmodo.com/sogdia-the-lost-empire-that-ruled-the-silk-road-1553078058; completed with the network of roads by Hraundal The Rusin Arabic Sources [Note 37], Fig. 5, 10, 18).
In the Carpathian Basin the emergence of dirhams can be traced from the 10th century. This archaeological phenomenon can be ascribed to the intense commercial activity carried out on the Eurasian steppes in both a N–S and a W–E direction. This underlines the existence of a complex system of communication channels. According to Fig. 11 the sabretache find spots are in every case located in the vicinity of the great Eurasian commercial roads, which further explains the "international" character of the artefacts (Fig. 11).

5. Final Observations

Based on the data analysed so far, the main question is: how can one interpret the distribution of this specific method of sabretache decoration? The archaeological literature interpreted the use of the sabretache in the Eurasian steppes as a typical element of nomadic life. However, according to the same specialists the respective artefacts were not produced locally in the Volga–Cama region, but instead were imported from the Carpathian Basin.

Needless to say this socio-historical model is rather simplistic as it excludes role of the Arab, Khazar and Rus Viking (Rhos) commercial networks of the 8–10th centuries, or the activity of the ambulant craftsmen who sometimes covered large areas.

In the current stage of the research, in order to attempt to clarify the situation, each individual macro-region will be analysed in part:

1.1. We agree with the assertion that the use of sabretaches decorated with plates spread to the Carpathian Basin as a result of the macro-migration of the Hungarian/Turk power structure which prompted the emergence of the Oriental commercial structures in the region. Given that the migration of the Hungarian conquerors displays an E → W direction beginning in the region of the Eurasian steppe and ending in the Carpathian Basin, the fashion of the sabretaches decorated with plates inlaid with ornaments made of precious metal can be regarded as having a stepppe origin. In this case the main question is: why do these artefacts only feature in burials dated after 925/930, mainly in the middle and latter part of the 10th century.

1.2. With regard to the Scandinavian region this fashion can be explained through the migration of certain micro-groups of oriental populations into the area of the settlement at Birka, but also through the commercial South to North transit route. Given that we are dealing with a large quantity of dirhams in a very thoroughly researched region, the almost insignificant number of sabretache plates can only be explained in terms of a small-scale migration towards Scandinavia, as well as through the import of tech-

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42 Szenthe, Meister und ihre Kunde (Note 24), 57–75.
43 "Hägg, who considered the grave to be disturbed, did not observe the presence of eastern archer equipment, which in itself is an isolated phenomenon among the c. 100 weapon graves on Birka. It is possible that what we have here is a member of the bird who came from a different cultural background"; Fredrik Lundström/Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson/Lena Holmquist Olausson, Eastern archery in Birka’s garrison. In: The Martial Society. Aspects of warriors, fortifications and social change in Scandinavia, eds. Lena Holmquist Olausson/Michael Olausson. Archaeological Research Laboratory Stockholm University (Stockholm 2009) 113. "That the Magyars constituted a major contributing factor is indicated by the specific parts of equipment and dress," Charlotte Hedenstierna-Johnson, Magyar – Rus – Scandinavia. Cultural Exchange in the Early Medieval Period. Situne Dei 2009. Årskrift för Sigturnaforsknings utgiven av Sigturna Museum/Annual of Sigtuna Research published by Sigtuna Museum 2009, 53.
technology and fashion trends from the Eurasian steppe and the Arab world. The view held by Swedish researchers should be reassessed however, given that the ritual and composition of the graves with sabretache finds (644 and 819) indicates the adoption of a fashion trend (commercial relations) rather than the migration of individuals from the steppe or the Carpathian Basin to Scandinavia.

1.3. With regard to the find from Andreyevskaya shhel its discovery in the pre-mountainous region of the northern Caucasus underlines the importance of the respective macro-region as a contact area between the steppe and the mountains, i.e. the meeting point of nomads and the population of the settlements where the communication hubs towards the east, west, north and south facilitated not only the distribution of products, but also of technological know-how. The northern area of the “Silk road” reached the Taman peninsula, while the South to North commercial route which started in the Near East (Baghdad) crossing the Caspian Sea and the Volga region (probably through the capital Itil) eventually reached Scandinavia.

The Caucasus stood out for its high quality metalworking as well as goldsmithing and silversmithing already since prehistoric times which together with its geographic position determined a constant series of military conflicts aimed at the control of the commercial routes, the economic hubs, and the mineral resources (copper, silver, iron, and salt). This is the macro-regional geo-economic and geo-political context of the emergence of the sabretache plate at Andreyevskaya shhel.

1.4. The funerary discoveries concentrated in the region of the Cama and Volga Rivers reflect numerous flagrant differences which set them apart from the nomadic burials: especially the: a) total lack of any remains of horses, and b) the cenotaph type burials from Veselovo and Rusenkha. Virtually every burial from this macro-region comprises belt sets with fittings, indicating that this “international” fashion has also emerged in the area, — according to some opinions — arriving from the southern region of the Volga. According to some authors such as B. N. Krylaszova, A. M. Belavin, and A. Türk, the spread of the silver artefacts into this region can be linked with the active involvement of the Volga Bulgarians in fur trade with the populations from the upper course of the Volga and Cama Rivers. Nonetheless the authors of the respective paper failed to take into consideration the fact that the region of the Caucasus with its rich mineral resources was home to the most important metalworking and goldsmithing centres starting with the prehistory. Consequently the commerce which also included

44 “The caftan, or horse rider’s coat, which was used by the warrior class in the areas of the Rus’, reflected a growing Oriental/eastern influence and was probably the result of long years of contact with the steppe nomads and the Arabic cultural sphere”; Lundström/Hedensister-Jonson/Holmquist Olausson, Eastern archery (Note 44), 110.


48 Asadov, Khazaria, Byzantium, and the Arab Caliphate (Note 38), 140–150.


50 Among the 28 sabretache burials, in 17 cases the sabretache plates were associated with belt sets decorated with fittings.

51 Krylaszova/Belavin/Türk, Üjabb adatok (Note 29), 459.

silver products cannot by any means be limited to the region of the Volga, and should rather be considered as a northern extension of the realities from the Caucasus, as suggested by the known commercial routes (see Fig. 11).

Thus, the spread of the sabretraches worn on the belt is quite eloquent in socio-historical terms, as it speaks for the process whereby a certain clothing item or implement originally determined by the way of life of a community becomes a token of the elite when transferred to a different cultural environment in which the communities do not follow a nomadic lifestyle.53

2. The sabretrache fastened on the belt is considered to be a typical element of the nomadic costume.54 In this regard it is worthwhile to mention the well-known frescos from Samarkand which clearly depicts the respective clothing implement as worn by Turk nomads (Fig. 12,A). According to this picture the nomadic populations were not merely factors participating in the cultural transfers, but were also fashion initiators (Fig. 12,A–B).

3. Without any doubt the diffuse character in the distribution of this type of artefact is deter-

53 Naturally this issue is determined by the relations between the respective groups and the socio-psychological background of the transfers of material culture between communities. For the socio-psychological analysis of intergroup relations see: Henri Teijfel, Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations. Annual Review of Psychology 33. 1982, 1–39; Ana Figueiredo/Joaquim

54 Архипов, Общие элементы (Note 35), 222; Fodor, A veszelővöl tarsolyelemez (Note 35) 466. Hedenstierna-Johnson, Magyar – Rus’ – Scandinavia (Note 44), 53: “There are a number of pouches in the Birka graves, some of which are of undisputable Magyar origin.”
minded by the state of the research. The higher frequency of finds in the Carpathian Basin in comparison with the eastern regions is to a certain extent the result of the archaeological and ideological interest manifested towards these objects in the Hungarian Kingdom since 1834. Moreover, even though the use of sabretaches decorated with plates is considered to have a 'steppe' origin, the better understanding of certain phenomena linked with the relations of the Eurasian Steppe with the great civilisations along the "Silk Road", the detailed investigation of the archaeological material of Central Asia, Iran, and Northern China will be called for in the future. At the same time, the sabretaches decorated with plates from Andreyevskaya shhel and the Mardjani Collection indicate hitherto unrevealed close relations with the steppe region, and even with the Carpathian Basin and the north-eastern Caucasus, bringing to light the geo-economic and geo-political importance of the Caucasus region during the early Middle Ages, a period largely ignored by European early medieval archaeology.

6. List of the Sabre Tac Finds

The nummering refers to Map 1–2, Fig. 9.

1. Bana: A. Kiss/A. Bartha, Graves from the Age of the Hungarian Conquest at Bana. Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae 22, 1970, 219-260; The Ancient Hungarians (Note 2), 362-364 Fig. 1; Bollok, Ornamentika a 10. századi (Note 4), I Pl. 8, 70 Fig. (Pl. 2, 1).  


57 In this sense see also: Gabriella M. Leczák/Andrey Novichkin/Erwin Gall, The analysis of the discoid braid ornament from Andreyevskaya Shhel (Anapa, Russia) (10th century). Acta Archaeologica Carpathica 53, 2018, 195–220.

2. "Báránd": László D. Szabó, A „bárándi” tarsolyelem. Debreceni Szemle. Alapítvány; tudományos és kulturális folyóirat 2013/1, 25–32; Bollók, Ornamentika a 10. századi (Note 4), I Pl. 5, 67 Fig.


4. Somotor-Vécc/Bodrogvéc (together with an Arab dirham): Gyulá Dókus, Árpádoki síleletek Zemplén vármegyében. Archaeologiai Értesítõ. A Magyar Régészeti és Mûvészettörténeti Társulat tudományos folyóirata 20, 1900, 45–47; The Ancient Hungarians (Note 2), 140–142, Fig. 5; Bollók, Ornamentika a 10. századi (Note 4), I Pl. 11, 73 Fig.

5. Bugyi-Felsövány grave 2: Füredi, Honfoglalás kori tarsolyelem (Note 13), 207–234; Bollók, Ornamentika a 10. századi (Note 4), I Pl. 13; Füredi, Tarsolyok (Note 14), 70 Fig. Dunavecse-Fehéregyháza: Elek Kada, Kecskemét videkérõl való leletek. Archaeologiai Értesítõ. A Magyar Régészeti és Mûvészettörténeti Társulat tudományos folyóirata 32, 1912, 323–329; The Ancient Hungarians (Note 2), 297 Fig., 307–308; Bollók, Ornamentika a 10. századi (Note 4), I Pl. 18, 84 Fig. (Pl. 1,6).

6. Eperjes: Eperjeske graves 2–3: Lajos Kiss, Eperjeskei honfoglaláskori temetõ. Archaeologiai Értesítõ. A Magyar Régészeti és Mûvészettörténeti Társulat tudományos folyóirata 39, 1920–1922, 42–55; Fettich, A honfoglalás magyarság (Note 14), 79–80; The Ancient Hungarians (Note 2), 72–75 Fig. 1–2; Bollók, Ornamentika a 10. századi (Note 4), I Pl. 10, 16, 72 Fig., 82 Fig.

7. Vásárosnamény: Hlohovec/Galgóc: József Hampel, A honfoglalási kor hazai emlékei. In: A magyar honfoglalás kútfoi, ed. Gyula Pauler/Sándor Szilágyi (Budapest 1900) 530–533; The Ancient Hungarians (Note 2), 388–389 Fig. 1; Bollók, Ornamentika a 10. századi (Note 4), I Pl. 7, 69 Fig. (Pl. 1,1).

8. Izsák-Balázspuszta: Tóth, The Equestrian grave (Note 31), 141–185; The Ancient Hungarians (Note 2), 317–318 Fig. 1.
11-12. Karos-Eperjesszög burial ground II graves 29 and 52: Révész, A karosi honfoglaláskori temetők (Note 4), 21, 26-29, 42 Pl., 80 Pl.; Bollók, Ornamentika a 10. századi (Note 4), I Pl. 3, 65 Fig.

13-15. Kenézlő-Fazekaszkus burial ground I graves 3 and 14; Kenézlő-Fazekaszkus burial ground II grave 28: András Jósa, Honfoglaláskori emlékek Szabolcsban II. Archaeologai Értesítő. A Magyar Régészeti és Művészettörténeti Társulat tudományos folyóirata 34, 1914, 308-309, 321-322, XIII Fig., XXX Fig.; The Ancient Hungarians (Note 2), 121-123 Fig. 1, 154 Fig.; Nándor Fettich, A honfoglaláskor archaeológiájához. Archaeologai Értesítő. A Magyar Régészeti és Művészettörténeti Társulat tudományos folyóirata 45, 1931, 84, 54 Fig. 2; Bollók, Ornamentika a 10. századi (Note 4), I Pl. 4, 12, 66 Fig., 66a Fig., 83 Fig.

16. Kiskunfelegyhaza-Radnoti Miklós street: Elvira H. Tóth, Honfoglaláskori sík Kiskunfelegyázán. Archaeologai Értesítő. A Magyar Régészeti és Művészettörténeti Társulat tudományos folyóirata 34, 1934, 112-125; The Ancient Hungarians (Note 2), 331 Fig. 1; Bollók, Ornamentika a 10. századi (Note 4), I Pl. 6, 68 Fig.


18. Rakamaz-Strázsahalom grave "A": István Dienes, A honfoglaló magyarak és ősi hiedelmeik. In: Urálí népek, ed. Péter Hajdú (Budapest 1975) 15 Fig.; The Ancient Hungarians (Note 2), 110-111, 113, Fig. 1; Bollók, Ornamentika a 10. századi (Note 4), I Pl. 1, 63 Fig. (Pl. 1,3).


20. Szolnok-Strázsahalom: Fettich, A honfoglaló magyarság (Note 14), 181; The Ancient Hungarians (Note 2), 282, 284 Fig. 1; Bollók, Ornamentika a 10. századi (Note 4), I Pl. 20, 86 Fig. (Pl. 1,5).

21. Svaláva/Szolyva: Tivadar Lehozczy, A szolzy vai hun sír. Archaeologai Értesítő. A Magyar Régészeti és Művészettörténeti Társulat tudományos folyóirata 3, 1870, 201-206; The Ancient Hungarians (Note 2), 175-178 Fig. 1; Bollók, Ornamentika a 10. századi (Note 4), I Pl. 9, 71 Fig. (Pl. 1,2).

22. Tarcal-Rimai dúló grave 4: András Jósa, A tarczai sírleletről. Archaeologai Értesítő. A Magyar Régészeti és Művészettörténeti Társulat tudományos folyóirata 34, 1895, 75-76; The Ancient Hungarians (Note 2), 120 Fig. 1; Bollók, Ornamentika a 10. századi (Note 4), I Pl. 1, 64 Fig. (Pl. 1,4).


24. Tiszaszlá-Bashalom B.g. I grave D: Dienes, Un cimetiére de Hongrois (Note 30), 245-275; The Ancient Hungarians (Note 2), 185-187 Fig. 1.

25. Tiszanána-Cséh tanya grave 1: Dienes, Honfoglalás kori (Note 14), 89; The Ancient Hungarians (Note 2), 412-413 Fig. 1; Révész, Heves megye 10-11 (Note 18), 284-285, 71 Pl.

26. Tuzsér-Boszorkányhegy grave 6: András Jósa, Emlékek a honfoglalás korából. Archaeologai Értesítő. A Magyar Régészeti és Művészettörténeti Társulat tudományos folyóirata 20, 1900, 222 Fig.; The Ancient Hungarians (Note 2), 204-206 Fig. 6; Istvánovits, A Rétköz honfoglalás (Note 14), 236-238, 228-230 Pl.

27. Türkeve-Ecsegpuszta: János Győző Szabó, Das silberne Taschenblech von Türkeve-Ecsegpuszta. Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae 32, 1980, 271-293; The Ancient Hungarians (Note 2), 294-295, Fig. 1; Bollók, Ornamentika a 10. századi (Note 4), I Pl. 19, 85 Fig.

Kryukovo-Kuzhnoye grave 472: Krylaszova/ Belavin/Türk, Újabb adatok (Note 29), 9 Fig. 1–2.

Panovo grave 2: István Erdélyi, Az ősmagyarorság régészeti emlékei Kelet-Európában. In: Magyar Östörténeti Tanulmányok, szerk. Antal Bartha/Károly Czeglédy/András Róna-Tas (Budapest 1977) 2 Fig.; Krylaszova/ Belavin/Türk, Újabb adatok (Note 29), 7 Fig. 1–4.


Rusenikha grave 2: Никитина, Появяне (Note 31), 152–153, 155 Fig. 2–3; István Fodor, Honfoglalás kori tarsolyolmezeink és keleti párhuzamaik. Magyar Tudomány 178/6, 2017, 3 Fig. 1.


The Mardjani Collection (Southern Urals): К. А. Руденко, Редкие находки эпохи Хазарского Каганата (Заметки о хазарско-венгерском искусстве). Теория и практика археологических исследований 15/3, 2016, 76, 78–79 Fig. 12–14; István Fodor, Honfoglalás kori tarsolyolmezeink és keleti párhuzamaik. Magyar Tudomány 178/6, 2017, 3 Fig. 2–4. (Pl. 2,2–4).

Birka/Björkö graves 644 and 819: Holger Arman, Birka I. Die Gräber (Uppsala 1943) Pl. 129/1a–1b, 222–223, 295.
Map 1 The geographical distribution of the sabretache plates (the numbering of the sites corresponds to List 1).
Map 2: The sabretache plates in the Carpathian Basin during the 10th century (the numbering of the sites corresponds to List 1).
Map 3 The geographical distribution of the dirhams in the Carpathian Basin (10th century).
Plate 1 The sabretache plates from the Carpathian Basin. 1 Hlohovec/Galgóc; 2 Svaláva/Szolyva; 3 Rakamaz-Strázsahalom grave “A”; 4 Tárca-Remeatló grave 4; 5 Szolnok-Strázsahalom; 6 Dunavecse-Fehéregyháza.
The subject of this article is the analysis of the characteristics, chronology, and distribution of sabretache plates, which were regarded as genuine Hungarian products from the beginning of the 10th century for about 150 years. Being one of the most iconic artefacts of the “funerary horizon” of the Hungarian Conquest Period in the Carpathian Basin, sabretaches and in particularly their decoration has been in constant attention of – especially Hungarian – archaeologists. Sabretache plates share similar characteristics within the vast areas of the Eastern Europe and the Carpathian Basin. Even so, rectangular openwork in the central part of the sabretache plate have been identified only in the Eastern Europe steppe region, with one single exception in the Carpathian Basin. The analysed items cannot be dated earlier than 920/930 in these areas, respectively the latest item not later than the last decades of the 10th century. Numerous fundamental questions have to be posed about the cause and character of the macro-regional distribution of sabretache plates across the Carpathian Basin, Scandinavia, the steppe region, and the Ural region. Analysing the associated inventories in funerary contexts from Scandinavia, Volga and the Cama region, steppe region, and the Carpathian Basin, a further cultural and economic link emerges between the respective macro-regions; i.e. the 10th century Arab dirhams. These items can be associated with long distance commerce. In every single case, finding places of sabretache plates are located in the vicinity of the great Eurasian commercial roads, which highlights further the “international” character of these clothing accessories. This situation can only be explained through the presence of Arabic political and economic factor, and its relations with Khazar, Pecheneg and Viking networks of power, representing the existence of a complex system of communication channels.
