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BELT SETS WITH IMAGES OF EAGLES IN THE SCYTHIAN FUNERARY RITE OF THE EARLY PERIOD 7th-5th CENTURIES BC (SEMANTICS AND FUNCTIONS)

ABSTRACT Despite the scale and diversity of achievements in modern Scythian studies, the problem of reconstructing the worldview and religious ideas of the bearers of Scythian culture, in particular those related to their eschatology, is still relevant. In the context of the above, the problem of semiotic reconstruction and functional purpose of the objects that accompanied the Scythians to the afterlife, clarification of their place and the semantics of the Scythian funeral rites is still important. The belt sets with overlying plaques in the form of eagles, which have been discovered in Scythian burials of the seventh to the fifth centuries BC in the Northern Black Sea region, are no exception.

Key words: Scythia, Scythian culture, military belt, eagles, mythology, ritual, semantics

ABSTRAKT Pomimo skali i różnorodności osiągnięć współczesnych studiów scytyjskich, problem rekonstrukcji światopoglądu i idei religijnych nosicieli kultury scytyjskiej, zwłaszcza tych związanych z ich eschatologią, jest nadal aktualny. W kontekście powyższego nadal istotny jest problem semiotycznej rekonstrukcji i przeznaczenia funkcjonalnego przedmiotów, które towarzyszyły Scytom w zaświaty, wyjaśnienia ich miejsca oraz semantyki scytyjskich obrzędów pogrzebowych. Zestawy pasów z leżącymi na nich tabliczkami w kształcie orłów, które odkrywano w pochówkach scytyjskich od VII do V wieku p.n.e. w północnym regionie Morza Czarnego, nie są wyjątkiem.

Despite the scale and diversity of achievements in modern Scythian studies, the problem of reconstructing the worldview and religious beliefs of the bearers of Scythian culture, in particular those related to their eschatology, is still relevant. The Scythian funerary rite that archaeologists deal with is a kind of "footprint" or fragment of an extensive system of eschatological ideas and the funerary rituals they generated, which has not survived in its entirety and integrity. But this does not remove the question of its existence as a living and multicolored reality, regardless of the completeness of researchers' knowledge about it. Accordingly, the task of not only a source-based approach to archaeological research, but also the introduction of an anthropological aspect into it, which allows us to see the living creators that lie behind their fossil artifacts, carriers of complex and deep eschatological ideas encoded in these objests, is becoming increasingly urgent.

In the context of the above, the problem of semiotic reconstruction and functional purpose of objects that accompanied the Scythians to the afterlife, clarification of their place and semantics in the Scythian funerary rite, draws our attention. The belt sets with overlay plaques in the form of eagles, which were discovered in Scythian burials of the seventh to the fifth centuries BC in the Northern Black Sea region, are no exception.

The purpose of this study is to reconstruct the functional purpose and semantics of belt sets with images of eagles in the Scythian funerary rite of the 7th-5th centuries BC in the Northern Black Sea region.

Interest in Scythian belt sets arose in the last century. The first attempt to analyze them was made by A.P. Mintsevych back in 1941.¹ The researcher collected and published the known cases of their discovery at that time, made an attempt at their source analysis, typological classification, dating, etc., but his research, as noted by E. Chernenko, despite its relevance and importance, was fraught with errors in determining the dating of individual complexes and the entire period of their existence.

¹ Mintsevich 1941.

In turn, more than a quarter of a century later, Chernenko devoted a separate section to military belts in his monograph on Scythian armor.² The researcher divided combat belts into two types according to their functional purpose: narrow sword belts and wide protective belts. Chernenko also proposes to divide belts of the first type into three groups depending on the presence or absence of metal parts and their nature, namely: 1) leather belts; 2) belts with a plate set; 3) belts covered with figured plaques. The author notes that belts covered with metal, like armour, an akinakes dagger, spear, bow and axe, were an integral part of the Scythian armament and were almost evenly distributed throughout the territory of Scythia. Speaking of their origin, the researcher notes their almost complete absence outside Scythia, with the exception of the Lower Don and the North Caucasus, and therefore believes that this part of the armor was the product of the Scythians' creative development of protective plate armour, of which they were an element both independently and in combination. Developing the issues of typological classification, origin, chronology and functional purpose, the author, unfortunately, left out the problem of semantics of ceremonial belt sets and images that covered them, in particular the eagles.

Since an archaeologically recorded funeral rite with the use of certain artifacts is only a fragment of a broad and deep text in the semiotic sense, this does not mean that the ideas about it have disappeared forever and cannot be reconstructed. In particular, by using typologically similar materials left by genetically related cultures that contain detailed information about funeral rites, we can hope that "assumptions about the details of Scythian funeral practice and beliefs cannot be far from the real ones, since they hardly carried something fundamentally unique, not typical of other peoples. By means of probabilistic forecasting, the gaps in the Scythian worldview can be filled with representations with a stipulated tolerance of "either/or" variability, which turns out to be not very wide"3. Moreover, the expansion of the range of such options inevitably brings researchers closer to recreating the real picture of the semantics of the Scythian funeral rite and its elements.

Taking up the reconstruction of the eschatological ideas of the Scythians using semiotic methods, it should be borne in mind that "mythological thinking, at the first opportunity to weaken the restrictions of the normative canon, implies blurring, vagueness and, as a result, the variability of ritual options, since it largely operates with an image rather than a sign, that is, the very language of archaic thinking in a number of its manifestations can be called to some extent "dumb". Therefore, in this regard, it is worth noting that the semiotic method studies not quite logical, irrational phenomena derived from often ignorant thinking by means of logic, and this, in turn, implies the existence of a certain number of details that do not fit into the reconstructed models".⁴ At the same time, the natural impoverishment of the conceptual picture in comparison with the realities of life, as well as the presence of a certain number of inevitable contradictions, caused by the theoretical approach, cannot be the reason for rejecting semiotic reconstructions of the past. Accordingly, the focus on the traditions of semiotic research, which allow us to get closer to the inner spiritual world that prevailed in Scythian society, is due to the aim of the study.

Before proceeding to the functional and semantic analysis of the above-mentioned belt sets with images of eagles and their components in Scythian funerary rituals, let us dwell on the circumstances of their discovery and detailed description.

Such a belt was first discovered during the excavations of the Lyta Mogula (Chervona), the first Scythian royal mound in the history of archaeological science in Ukraine, which were carried out in the fall of 1763 by order of the governor of the Novorossiysk Territory, Lieutenant General O.P. Melhunov, 30 miles northeast of the fortress of St. Elizabeth near the village of Kucherovi Bueraky (now Znamianskyi district of Kirovohrad region). A Scythian stone anthropomorphic stele was found in the mound, and under the burnt mound consisting of earthen slag at the level of the buried soil were the remains of a burnt wooden tomb. To the west of the center, at a depth of 2 meters, there was a box made of stone slabs, in which an iron dagger (akinakes) with a golden coating of the handle and scabbard was found; a golden tiara; 17 golden plaques in the form of an eagle, which decorated the belt; the silver components (legs) of an Assyrian stool, cylinders, nails; bronze arrowheads.5

Let us dwell separately on the characteristics of the eagle figurines. All golden eagle figurines were of the same type and represented relief plaques that depicted a steppe eagle, a juvenile,

² Chernenko 1968.

³ Саєнко 1994: 164-167.

⁴ Саєнко, 1994: 164).

⁵ Pridik E. 1911.

in a rather stylized way, at the moment of falling on a victim from a height. The attributive features of these figures are the frontal image of the supportive shape of the bird's body with half-folded wings that have a claw-like shape, a sub-rectangular long tail, a head turned to the left with a massive curved beak and a relief eye. The anatomical details are represented very schematically in relief. A characteristic feature of these figures is the absence of legs and the lack of feathers.⁶

Chernenko, following Pridik, is of the opinion that the 17 figures of eagles were nothing more than a ceremonial belt set of a Scythian king. A wellknown Ukrainian Scythologist O.I. Terenozhkin dated the finds from the Melhuniv barrow to the turn of the VII-VI centuries BC and attributed this burial to the royal type.⁷

In turn, during excavations in 1890 of the Zolotoi Mound in the central part of the Steppe Crimea near Simferopol, the burial of a Scythian warrior of the late sixth and early fifth centuries B.C. was discovered. The skeleton was lying on an open shelf or shield. He was wearing a golden necklace, a belt with a bronze set of round bronze buttons (40 pieces), at the ends of which there were two plaques in the form of an eagle figure and two in the form of a griffin's head; a sword with a golden chape and a quiver with 180 arrowheads, decorated with a bronze figure of a lioness with her head turned in front. The animal's torso is wrapped in gold leaf with almond-shaped settings for colored inserts. In addition, a Samian jug of the late sixth and early fifth centuries BC was found in the grave⁸. According to the nature of the inventory, as noted by O. I. Terenozhkin, the Zolotyi Mound is especially close to the Gostra Mogyla near the village of Tomakivka. According to the researcher, the burial in the Zolotoi Kurgan occupies an outstanding place among the mounds of the steppe Scythian nobility of the early period.

As in the previous case, let us focus on the image of an eagle. The figure is a depiction of a steppe eagle, a juvenile, whose body and head are turned to the left, and whose wings are fully extended, blade-shaped, and pointed downward. The tail is short and trapezoidal. The legs are shown in profile, pressed to the stomach and turned to the left. The feathers on the upper part of the wings and on the tail are schematically rendered in relief.⁹ Exactly the same paired plaques in the form of eagles and griffin heads were found in the mounds G near Zhurivka.¹⁰ In addition, the discovery of five bronze plaques in the form of eagles decorating a belt is reported in a brief publication of the results of excavations by O. M. Sinelnikov of one of the mounds near the village of Apostolove-Mykhailivka.¹¹

As we can see, all of the sites were burial sites, since items from the Melhunivka treasure were also found in the mound. However, while the burials from the Zolotyi, Zhurivka, and Apostolove mounds are classified as classical, the situation with the Lytyi mound is more complicated. The Melhuniv treasure in a stone box was inserted into the top of the mound after the wooden tomb had burned down, and was perhaps chronologically quite distant from the time of construction of the original mound.¹² It is possible that the described treasure belonged to a cenotaph-type burial. At the same time, these monuments represent the elite of Scythian society. The Lytoi Mound is fit to be a royal burial, and the Zolotoi Mound for the lower aristocracy, and the same can be said for the other two cases. Based on the peculiarities of the funerary rite and the geography of their location, their owners could belong not only to different strata of the social elite, but also to different ethnic groups.

Chernenko draws attention to a certain set of images on the plaques of the belt sets: a lion (Berestniagy, Stebliv, mounds near Simferopol and near the village of Baksy), an eagle (Melhunivskyi and Zolotyi mounds, Zhurivka, Apostolove), and a griffin (Zolotyi mound, Zhurivka, Hryshchentsi),¹³ of which only the eagle is represented in the local fauna. As an integral component of the predators of the local steppe fauna, eagles were quite popular objects of Hellenic-Scythian toreutics, and in particular in the numismatic iconography of the Greek colonies of the Black Sea region.¹⁴

Despite the significant differences in the funerary rites at these sites, they are united by the presence of belt sets with images of eagles in the assemblage of artefacts discovered, the iconography of which is radically different, but united by their orientation of the birds' heads to the left,

⁶ Chernenko 1968: fig. 35/7,8.

⁷ Ilinskaya, Terenozhkin 1989:103, 109.

⁸ Steven 1891: 65, fig. 5, 5.

⁹ Chernenko 1968: fig. 35/7,8.

¹⁰ Chernenko 1968: fig. 35/1.

¹¹ Chernenko 1968: fig. 35/5.

¹² Boltryk , Shelekhan, Sobchuk 2020: 123.

¹³ Chernenko 1968.

¹⁴ Callataÿ 2002; Orlyk 2021; Kolesnichenko 2022; Miroshnychenko 2022; Orlyk, V. 2022-a; Orlyk, V.M. 2022-b; Orlyk & Mekh 2022; Orlyk & Kolesnichenko 2023; Orlyk & Pyzyk 2023.

and in the case of Zolote, Zhurivka, and Apostolove, the entire body of the eagle, as well as their youthfulness. When we talk about the left-side orientation of an animal or its head, we mean their position relative to the person wearing the belt, and not the viewer.

The belt occupied a special place in Scythian religious and mythological ideas. No wonder, according to Herodotus, it is this attribute of a man's costume that Hercules leaves as a legacy to his sons in one of the Scythian geological legends.¹⁵ Moreover, it is the ability to tighten the belt around his waist, along with the stringing of the bow, that determines the priority of the heir. The belt with weapons, accessories of nomadic life (kanchuk, whetstone) and a ritual bowl suspended from it is an obligatory element in Scythian anthropomorphic sculpture of the early period, including on the ceiling from the Cast Tomb.¹⁶ Already in the 6th century BC, belts were common for Scythians and were part of a specifically Scythian outfit, which allowed to distinguish a Scythian from a nonScythian.17

The traditions of venerating the belt, and thus endowing it with magical properties among the Indo-Iranian peoples are indirectly represented by the myth of the magic belt of the Amazon queen Hippolyta.¹⁸

In the ethnography of Slavic peoples, the belt occupies a key place in a man's costume: one could not go out without girding oneself, as it formed a closed line on the body, which in itself served as a talisman, but could also be enhanced by embroidery or woven patterns. In addition, the right to wear the belt was determined by attaining the age of majority and the ability to perform military service. At the same time, the removal of the belt was mandatory before the start of magical actions (by wizards, molfars, witches, etc.). In other words, along with its amulet, age, and social functions, the belt also performed a cosmogonic function on the scale of the human body, as one of the models of organizing mythological space. The belt also played a certain cultic role in the Ancient East, since inclusion in the body circle by wearing a belt was a magical means of protection against evil forces, as well documented by ethnographic materials.19

Therefore, the inclusion of the belt in the funerary clothing of the Scythians from the Zolotyi, Zhurivka, Apostolvo mounds and its placement among the funerary items of the Melhuniv treasure is quite understandable, but the question arises whether these belts were an element of everyday wear or were they made specifically for the funerary rite? It seems that the answer to these questions can be given by the images of eagles (left-sided orientation and youthfulness of the image) on the belts in the context of the semantics of spatial landmarks of Scythian burial structures, and thus the definition of the semantics of the left side in Scythian mythological representations and rites.

In traditional societies, death was perceived as a kind of destructive factor designed to destroy established social and cultural ties and patterns in society. To remove them, it was necessary to restore the world that had been disturbed by death and temporarily plunged into a state of pristine chaos. The universal archetype of the whole life of the primitive collective was based on the opposition to chaos, based on the reproduction of the cosmogonic myth in the rite, on the coordination of the most important events in the life of society with this myth. On this subject Mircea Eliade wrote: "To live in the world, one must create it, but no world can be born in the chaos, homogeneity, and relativity of mundane space. The discovery or projection of a point of reference - the "Center" is tantamount to the Creation of the World."20 It was this center that became the funerary structure, the structure and structure of which were designed to recreate the world destroyed by death.

As V. Saenko notes: "The funerary structure acts as a residence of the other world, enjoying extraterritoriality, in the world of the living, a kind of intermediate station on the way of the deceased soul, part of which remains in the burial place, and part goes to the "land of the dead," as evidenced by numerous typological parallels. But the Scythians' own ideas about the human "soul" are lost, and they can be reconstructed only on the basis of information from genetically and typologically close cultural traditions".²¹

It is likely that the Scythians had an idea of a "universal law" denoted in the Avestan tradition by the term "artha", in the Vedic tradition by "rita", and in the Slavic tradition by "row", which defined the harmony of an ordered cosmos. Its manifestation in the Scythian ideology is the solar model of

¹⁵ Herodotus: I.

¹⁶ Horbul, Bokii 1987: 48-49.

¹⁷ Chernenko 1968.

¹⁸ Piotrowski 1991: 560.

¹⁹ Chernenko 1968.

²⁰ Eliade 1994: 23.

²¹ Саєнко 1994: 165.

the world, which embodied the world order, expressed in the funeral rite through the isomorphism of the universe and the mound, the use of round ditches, the role of the horse, which has a solar nature, etc.²²

In accordance with this law, the Scythian mound had to be directly related to the ideas about the structure of the world, but it should be noted that the specific manifestations of such a model could be both conscious and unconscious, and could be limitedly interpreted by collective thought, and have a "crypto-mythological" character.²³ This means that in the Scythian collective picture of the world (conscious or unconscious), the identity of the mound with the outside world had to be "cod-ified in the ritual and through some figurative parallels quite clearly understood, although it was not always a logical construction of isomorphic models, but an intuitive and sensual process shrouded in the uncertainty of mythological metaphor".²⁴

The mythological space in the archaic worldview was imagined to be finite, qualitatively heterogeneous and discontinuous.²⁵ It consisted of vertical and horizontal subsystems connected by a cosmic axis, from which its central-radial structure unfolded.²⁶ It is important that these subsystems were perceived as a single whole, within which interchange (transformation) of horizontal and vertical directions of movement could take place.²⁷

"The widely spaced conditional horizontal line in the Scythian cosmology reflected in the funeral rite was speculatively transformed into a vertical line leading to the other world: on the one hand, to the lower, underground world, and on the other, to the upper, heavenly world. Thus, the Scythian funerary structure – the mound, where the submound surface modeled the mesoworld, was oriented northward in relation to the sun".²⁸

The very arrangement of the scaffolding in the northern wall of the entrance pit, combined with the absolutely preferential orientation of the buried head to the west, gives another sign characterizing the position of the deceased – placing his head to the left in relation to the participants of the ceremony, who had to be on the southern side of

²² Chmikhov, Tupchienko 1987: 88; Tupchiyenko, Shamrai 2023: 9-10.

- ²⁴ Saenko 2011: 77.
- ²⁵ Steblin-Kamenskyi 1976: 33.
- ²⁶ Meletinsky 1976: 215.
- ²⁷ Toporov1973: 113.
- ²⁸ Саєнко 1992.

the entrance pit in order to avoid the danger of the burial chamber vault collapse, as well as to be able to see the entrance to the chamber and the body of the deceased. It seems that this feature was dictated by the requirements of the sphere of ideology for a funeral rite that belongs to the category of transitional rites and is directly intended to ensure this transition. The whole rite as a whole and all its individual details are aimed at this.

Accordingly, the location of the entrance pit in the funerary rite was given special importance, while the orientation of the chamber itself was relegated to the background. "The conditional line running through the long axis of the entrance pit actually acted as a mediator, the world axis that connected all spheres of the universe. This means that the buried person was laid with his head to the left on this cosmic line.²⁹

In mythological representations, the binary oppositions right-left, top-bottom, east-west, etc. are expressions of the fundamental antinomy of life-death,³⁰ which are especially relevant in funerary rituals. The functioning of the right-left opposition can be traced in Scythian toreutics, which reflects the interconnection of the concepts of left-bottom-outside-death, and hence their semantic equivalence in the paradigmatic scheme³¹. This means that the left-hand orientation of the buried head in the Scythian rite is associated with the ideas of chthonicism and points to the "path of the dead" in the western direction.³²

The spatial orientation of the Scythian funerary rite, as shown, was determined by the trajectory of the sun, which is also reflected in the opposition of the top and bottom. It was based on the notion of the underworld or the sun of the dead, as well as the movement of the luminary from right to left, an ideal pattern in the mythological picture of binary oppositions. This results in a semantic identity: east-right, west-left. In this scheme, formed by the living participants of the rite, the right hand acted as a kind of landmark that marked the position of the sun in the initial, morning phase of its movement. The latter is the inherent ability of people to correlate orientation in space according to the location of the hands.³³

At the same time, it should be noted that sometimes the orientation of the buried person to

³³ Tolstoy 1965: 139.

²³ Ivanov , Toporov 1965: 7.

²⁹ Саєнко 1992: 76.

³⁰ Meletinsky 1976.

³¹ Raevsky 1985: 28.

³² Саєнко 1992.

the cardinal points was ignored in the mounds of the Scythian nobility, in which the position of the deceased in the latitudinal direction was often not maintained, but the latitudinal orientation of the entrance pit was mandatory,³⁴ which implied that its orientation from right to left was observed.

V. Saienko notes that "the predominance of pitfalls" in the northern wall of the entrance pit finds an explanation in the reconstructed prescriptions of the funeral ritual to place the deceased, except for the western orientation, with his head to the left (or face to the right, towards the sun). But it is possible that these signs at certain stages could be consistent with each other and united in a single set of ideas that existed in Scythian society about the universe and the posthumous path of the dead.

Since this pattern has virtually no exceptions, there is no doubt that the arrangement of the burials in such a way that the buried person, while observing the western orientation, would lie with his head to the left, was due to the clear requirements of the ritual, and not unconscious manifestations of world perception. And since the ritual regulated such moments, we can assume the possibility that Scythian cosmology came to a verbal, and therefore conscious, identity in the construction of the funerary structure and the universe. The homogeneity at the unconscious level of the mound and the universe among the Scythians is obvious".³⁵ It is important that the positioning of the deceased's head to the left was important in relation to the participants of the funeral rite, not to the deceased.

Thus, it can be stated that from the point of view of the participants of the funeral rite, the Scythian mound was oriented in space to the north meridian, and in relation to the deceased – latitudinally, usually to the west, that is, the same mound structure with the burials placed in it had a mirror semantic meaning from the positions of the living and the deceased, in which left and right were interchanged. At the same time, in both worldviews, the left side was obviously the semantic equivalent of the afterlife.

In this sense, the orientation of the heads of the eagles from the Melhunivka treasure and the body and head of two eagles on a belt from the Golden Mound acquire special semantic significance. It is believed that all 17 eagles of the same type from the Melhunivka treasure were elements of the same belt set. At the same time, it is striking that all of them, except for the ones with their beaks turned to the left, have no other option, and their number repeatedly emphasizes this orientation. Taking into account, on the one hand, the significance of the left side as the equivalent of the other world, and on the other hand, the special role of the belt in Scythian culture, we can assume that the belt itself and its elements were specially made for the funeral rite in order to emphasize the deceased's belonging to another world, in which the world of the living, in turn, acts as the other world.

In the case of the set from the Zolote mound, as we have seen, not only the heads but also the bodies of both birds are turned to the left, while the heads of the griffins in this set faced right. This combination of left- and right-sided orientation of eagles and griffins in one belt set can also have two explanations: 1) the symbolic belonging of eagles to another world, which were part of the earthly fauna, was determined by the turning of the body and head to the left, while griffins, carriers of the binary chthonic and solar principles, were mythical creatures by nature, and thus were originally perceived as aliens from another world; 2) we should not ignore the chronological distance of the monuments of more than one century, during which changes (erosion) of established funerary customs and ideas could occur both in certain regions and at certain chronological stages of centuries--old Scythian history.

The inclusion of an image of a young eagle, in the bloom of youth, in the belt set also requires explanation. The author has already noted above that the essence of the funeral rite was to ensure the transition of the deceased from the world of the living to the world of the dead, and thus the funeral rite itself acquired the meaning of an initiatory rite. In traditional societies, human life is accompanied by a number of initiatory rites that mark the transition of a young man (or, more generally, a member of society) from one age and social group to another, and at the same time mark his death in the previous status and birth in the new one. The most widespread were the initiatory rites of adolescents' transition to the status of a full-fledged member of society: a hunter and a warrior. In this context, the depiction of teenage eagles on the magical protective accessory of funeral clothing, the belt, is logically complete, as the deceased became a participant in an initiatory rite aimed at transforming his or her essence. Moreover, in traditional beliefs and mythological systems, devoid of the moral and ethical component of retribution for sins, the world of the dead was perceived as a mirror image of the world of the living, with the possibility of its improvement (hunting grounds always full of game,

³⁴ Саєнко 2011: 79; Очир-Горяєва 2014.

³⁵ Sayenko 2011: 78.

pastures always green ...), a world in which no one ages, on the contrary, one can be rejuvenated. A kindred paraphrase of these ideas is the Russian fairy tale "The Hunchbacked Horse" by P. Ershov and the film "Where Dreams Go" by Vincent Ward (1998).

Summarizing all of the above, we can state that Scythian funerary rituals were closely related to the solar cult, where the movement of the sun determined the meridional and latitudinal orientation and structure of burial structures: a mythological model of the afterlife from the perspective of both living and dead members of society. In this model, the left-side orientation was a stable indicator of the sphere of death and the dead. Therefore, the use of left-facing eagles decorating the magical element of the deceased's funerary equipment (clothing) could not be accidental, but was due to the mythological idea of the left side as a sign of both death and the space of its dominion. At the same time, the use of exclusively juvenile eagles as funerary belt decorations may indicate both the initiatory nature of the funerary rite itself and its attribute, a belt set with juvenile eagles oriented with their heads or bodies to the left. All this allows us to consider this type of belt not as an accessory of everyday clothing or armor, but as a specially created magical object intended exclusively for the funeral rite. It is significant that these belts were found exclusively in burial mounds.

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