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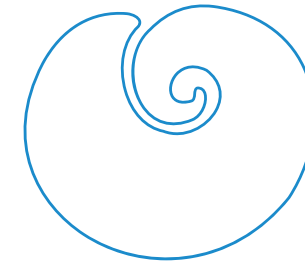
FROZEN MAGIC

THE ANCIENT ART OF SIBERIA



This publication is dedicated to the late Robert Courtoy (1924–2023).

Without him, the landscape of art world would have been vastly different for many collectors and professionals. His activity spanned an incredible 75 years, during which his unwavering standard of quality influenced and guided many in this field.



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KARIM & ISABELLE GRUSENMEYER-BILQUIN

DAMIEN WOLINER

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The objects discussed in this catalogue, entries 1 to 32, can be viewed in 3D in our virtual space, which also provides additional information about the artworks within the corpus of Ural-Siberian art.

You are invited to visit

<https://play.objet.art/frozenmagic>

or scan the QR Code to access the virtual room.



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Foreword

Kassou Grusenmeyer

Siberia's territory, east and west of the Urals, seems endless. Compared to the immense expanse of Siberia, other regions of Eurasia, such as the Indian Subcontinent, are dwarfed in size. The Steppes, bordering the south of Siberia, have served as a crucial crossroad since the dawn of mankind, facilitating bi-directional connections between the European and Asian continents. The continuous roaming of nomadic tribes across this region has profoundly shaped Siberian culture, influencing it from both west and east.

The artworks featured in this publication reveal influences that reach as far as Egypt. However, the soul of this art is deeply intertwined with the vast natural horizons and severe climate of Siberia, where small groups of humans operated to endure and survive. This sheer nullity of mankind in the Siberian setting is mirrored in the minuscule size of the bronze castings, which, while demanding a certain level of technological skill, remained somewhat simple in their execution. These castings condense the entire universe of the Siberian man, his relationship with the animals, and the natural world around him into objects small enough to fit into the palm of a hand.

A closer examination reveals that these objects primarily served as talismans for magico-spiritual practices, sometimes within a shamanic context, rather than as mere displays of aesthetic appeal. This lends the art an archaic allure. Yet, many are incredibly artistic and enormously expressive, but always enigmatic. Some even qualify as true masterpieces within a corpus believed to encompass a several thousands of castings—a relatively insignificant number given the two-thousand-year time span and the immense size of the Siberian territory.

This catalogue assembles the insights of three authors, each applying a distinct method to approach the subject. André Verstandig, an expert immensely well-read in the subject of ancient world cultures, employs an art-historical method to analyze a select group of Scythian artifacts, focusing on the Animal Style as a precursor to the later Uralic genre. Boris Erenburg, a native of the region and author of numerous publications on Uralic-Siberian cult bronze castings, passionately interprets the themes depicted on the castings through the lens of the mythology and legends of the Finno-Ugrian people, passed down since the inception of their cultures. Kassou Grusenmeyer, a strong proponent of inter-cultural transmission of ideas and beliefs, seeks to understand the meanings conveyed in the casted scenes through a method of iconographical analysis.

Although the meaning of the Siberian castings featured in this catalogue was once frozen in time, their magical aura is now gradually being unveiled. For many readers, this publication will serve as their very first introduction to the Siberian culture, a lesser-known realm of the world's cultural heritage. The Gallery Grusenmeyer-Woliner, fulfilling an educative mission, is proud to present this exciting collection of mysterious treasures that have emerged from the vast expanse of Siberia, the geographic Crown of the Eurasian continent.

Introduction

André Verstandig

Siberia, which alone covers almost a third of Eurasia, is divided into several distinct natural areas. The central region, with its dense forests of larch and spruce, forms the natural border between Europe and Asia, stretching for almost two thousand kilometres along the mountain foothills of the Ural Mountains. It is covered by a dense network of rivers and streams which, along with the abundant wildlife that haunts its forests, guarantees a reliable food supply for the human populations that have settled along their banks over the centuries. To the north, from the lakes and dwarf birch forests of Karelia (uttermost west Siberia) to the volcanoes of Kamchatka (uttermost east), stretch the icy and inhospitable wastelands of the Arctic tundra. The taiga, which stretches from the southern foothills of the Urals to the area around Lake Baikal, consists of sparsely wooded deciduous forests, with birch and poplar being the dominant species. It gradually fades to the south of the Altai massif to form a vast and grassy depression: the Eurasian steppe, which stretches like an open space, with no real natural obstacles, from the Orkhon and Kerulen basins, in northern China, to the Danube delta at its western end. These unique characteristics have naturally made Siberia a crossroads between continents and civilisations. In prehistoric times, these were already the routes taken by the first humans to populate eastern and northern Europe, north-east Asia (China, Korea, Japan) around 45,000 years ago, and the Americas at the time of the last glacial maximum, 35,000 years ago. Despite frequent population movements, these first human migrations left traces in the genetic pool of the current populations of these respective regions. During the Neolithic (ca. the 4th millennium BC), the domestication of the horse by the proto-Indo-Europeans of the Botai culture, in the steppes of present-day Kazakhstan, fundamentally altered the relationship between sedentary societies, that did not know how to ride, and the nomadic societies, that had now become extremely mobile. From the 3rd millennium onwards, the cumulative advantage of bronze metallurgy, horse domestication, and harnessed chariots set in motion a slow process that, for almost a thousand of years, would push the proto-Indo-European populations to migrate in successive waves. Cultures known to historians under the generic names of Yamna (3600–2300), Campaniform (2900–1900), Sintashta (2900–1900), Abashevo (2500–1900), and Andronovo (2000–1000) would flow cultures, westwards into Europe, and southwards through the Caucasus passes, towards Anatolia, Iran and India, spreading along with their genes a common linguistic and cultural heritage.

These peoples would give rise to the Urnfield, then the Hallstatt cultures, which succeeded the Campaniforms in Central and Western Europe; the Dorians, who replaced the Mycenaeans in Greece; the Hittites and Mittanians in Asia Minor; the Persians and Medes on the Iranian plateau, and the Aryas in India.

2:69.



*een Schaman ofte Duyvel-priester.
in 't Fungoesen Land*

This engraving by Nicolaes Witsen, a Dutch traveler to Siberia, is entitled “een Schaman ofte Duyvel-priester. in 't Fungoesen land” (A Shaman or Devil-priest in Tungus land), from Noord en Oost Tartarye by Witsen Nicolaes, 1692. (Reproduction of an image from the second edition (1785), kept in the library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.)

Their distant cousins, who meanwhile roamed the Pontic steppes, between the Black Sea and the foothills of the Caucasus, would soon be at the center of a new technological revolution. The mastery of iron metallurgy and the mobility conferred by their horses led to formidable expansions; first, of the Scythians, Sakas, and Sarmatians; then, from the Altai to the Pacific, of the Huns, Xiongnu, Turks and Mongols who would later play such a significant role in forming the great Asian empires. Alongside these vertical movements, from the northern to the southern part of Eurasia, the Finno-Ugrians, originating from eastern Asia, reached Altaiaround 2000 BC. Then, progressing towards the west along the contact zone between the Siberian taiga and the great Eurasian steppe, they reached the current territories of Finland and Estonia about a thousand years BC. These groups would later give rise to the Uralic peoples, the Finns, the Balts and the Magyars, who only migrated later, during the Middle Ages, towards what is now Hungary.

Naturally, the great steppes, and by extension the Siberian Taiga, served as a hub for trade, technology, ideas, and arts. The funerary furnishings of a kurgan from the early stages of the Maïkop culture, unearthed at the end of the 19th century by the Russian archaeologist Nikolai Vesselovski, attest (as much by the style as by the form of the objects they contain) to the close relations maintained from the 4th millennium onwards by the peoples of the Caucasus with the culture of Uruk, in Mesopotamia. The case is far from exceptional. At the end of the 3rd millennium, the popularisation of bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, made the fortune of nomadic intermediaries who were already trading tin produced in large quantities in the mines of Sarazm, in the Zeravshan valley; Karnab, in present-day Uzbekistan, or Mushiston, near Pendzhikent in western Tajikistan, for precious metal or manufactured goods from the metropolises of the Tigris and Euphrates valleys. At Mushiston, traces of ancient activities found on the mountainside attest to the successive exploitation of the site between 2450 and 1950 BC, then between 1600 and 1100 BC, precisely during the peak periods of tin consumption by the Mesopotamians. The ore, transported on donkeys or camels, then passed along the ancient “lapis lazuli route” controlled by the city-states of Margiana, Bactria and the Elamite range, before reaching its final destination.

These exchanges not only involved raw materials, but also techniques that were to spread throughout Eurasia. The populations of the so-called Seima-Turbino culture (2000–1500 BC), who originated in the region of the Altai, would be the first to introduce bronze technology to Fennoscandia in the west and China in the east, so that we can now link the first Chinese Bronze Age under the Shang dynasty, and the appearance there of harnessed battle chariots, to the contacts they had with these nomadic populations.

Ideas were not forgotten either. We know today, from the spread of the Etana story in Central Asia, that some of the great Mesopotamian myths travelled from

the south to north of the steppe, just as later, in the first centuries of our era, the doctrines of Iranian Zoroastrianism moved from the Sassanid Persians to Uralic fur traders.

In this geographical area, where so many cultures have emerged and interacted over the millennia, this complex history and geography goes a long way towards explaining the multiple influences on Siberian art. The best example of this is the “animal” style that predominates in the art of both the Scythians and the Uralic peoples of the Siberian woodlands. The stylised figures of bears, birds of prey, and deer that visible on their products, undoubtedly borrow many conventions from the artistic vocabulary of the great civilisations of the south (Greece, Mesopotamia, Persia, China).

But they are also, and perhaps above all, rooted in prehistoric common ground, in the animal archetypes determined from time immemorial by the first human populations of Eurasia, which have metamorphosed over the centuries into ever-new variations.

This is also how the belief system of these Uralic peoples was formed in the boreal forests of Siberia. Anthropologists of the last century preserved their mythical accounts before the acculturation that accompanied the Sovietisation of these territories made them disappear forever. At the top of their pantheon is Numi Torum, their great god, a celestial divinity largely inspired by the Tengri, the “High Heaven” of the Altaic peoples. He is depicted on sun discs, spinning wheels and figures with radiant faces. His wife was Kaltash Ekva, the goddess of fertility, whose characteristics and attributes—the horse, the aquatic element and the beaver-skin cloak she wore—are reminiscent of the Zoroastrian deity Aredvi Sura Anahita. Their youngest son bears the same Iranian origin: Mir-susné-khum, the celestial horseman, guarantor of pacts and intercessor for humans, whose functions recall those of the triumphant figure of Mithra. The family is enlarged and made more complex by the elder brother of the former: Em-vosh-iki, the bear-god, whose origins can be traced back to the cult of that plantigrade, which shares with humans the unique ability to stand upright in a position unique in its latitudes, and which has been worshipped in northern Eurasia since the Palaeolithic times; but also by Numi Torum’s rival brother: Khul Otyr, the much-feared master of the subterranean waters and the lower world, supposed to spread disease across the earth by shaking the hems of his cloak, represented symbolically in the form of a snake or a lizard, chthonic animals par excellence, and sometimes by a pike, the carnivorous fish that haunts the dark, still waters of the rivers. Alongside these main figures, many spirits and traditions of a specifically shamanic nature were added over time, the main themes of which can already be found on the very rich bronze ornaments produced between the 5th and 11th centuries AD by the Permians and the Ugrians of the river Ob. Here these hybridizations, these anthropomorphic hybridizations,

with head or members transformed, come alive to adopt the appearance of deer, raptors, goose, and snakes. Better yet, some mix several animal features to constitute supernatural beings with elements (for example) of human, bird, and moose. Superior spirits are surmounted by an eagle's head, or appear as eagles doubled with a human face—reminiscent of the thousand and one faces of shamanic metempsychosis.

Similarly, the Universe, this kosmos in the Greek sense of the term, was divided for them into a higher world (home of spirits and gods), an earthly world shared equally by humans and animals, and an underworld (abode of the departed). They were united to each other by a world-tree that only the initiate could climb. Siberian cultures shared this sort of shamanism (with rituals like the bear festival, so reminiscent of Ainu rites from the Island of Hokkaido, Japan, or of Amerindian traditions in the New World) with the same peoples with whom they shared a genetic heritage.

The “Frozen Magic” exhibition by the Grusenmeyer-Woliner Gallery presents a summary of this unique art form. Visitors and viewers will embarke on a journey across the centuries through the magic of these early Siberian cultures, still largely unknown to Western audiences.





SCYTHIAN-SARMATIAN CULTURE

7th Century BC – 4th AD



1. Ceremonial Poleaxe

6th – 4th century BC (C14 dating)
 Ananyino culture
 Purportedly from Gaynsky district, Perm Krai, Cis-Urals Russia
 Bronze
 34.5 cm wide x 10 cm high (central part)

André Verstandig

This axe was not a weapon intended for combat, but rather a ceremonial object, charged with particular prestige. It must have belonged to a high-ranking chief for whom it represented a symbol of his social status and customary power. Displayed like regalia, it was fixed to a wooden handle, fragments of which were found inside the socket (fig. 14) and have been tested in laboratory with the Carbon 14 method, enabling us to date it more accurately to between the 6th and 4th centuries BC.¹ The sharp blade extends on the opposite side of the haft into a wolf's head knocker. The central socket is topped by an eagle's head facing in the direction of the blade. The conciseness of the shapes, the deliberately clean outlines of the wolf's muzzle, the visible fangs, the stare, and the ears folded in a natural attitude of defiance; everything right down to the head of the bird of prey, its hooked beak and eye highlighted by delicate incisions, perfectly conveys the feeling of power that makes this object a true masterpiece of Siberian art. This type of axe, with its symmetrical neck and trapezoidal blade, originated in Mesopotamia and on the Iranian plateau, where many local Bronze Age cultures (Elamites, Bactrians, Luristans, and later Scythians) developed similar or derived models.²

Ceremonial axes with eagles and wolves, which have become emblematic of the Ananyino culture, are extremely rare. Only five examples of the same type are known (figs. 1 (1-4)), plus the one discussed in this legend), along with three slightly different variants (figs. 1 (5-7)). None of them is exactly the same. The relative variability of the models can be explained by the "lost wax" casting technique used by the craftsmen who produced them. The use of a refractory clay mould, which had to be broken during the demoulding process, made each of these axes a unique object.

The two axes presented in this exhibition are therefore the only known specimens to be in private hands. The original patina that covered the breaks in the different sections of the second specimen bears witness to the fact that the axe was buried at the same time it was broken, in all likelihood as part of a funerary ritual during which the object was deliberately damaged. This type of procedure, known as "killing the object," was commonly practiced by many peoples in the Ancient and New Worlds. Several theories have been put forward as to the significance of these rituals. For some researchers, it could be an offering to the gods, or to the higher spirits who governed the world, the destruction

Fig. 1 (1–4)

1, 2. In the collections of the Moscow Historical Museum.



3. Example from the banks of the Borovaya river, on the territory of the Izhemsky district, in the semi-autonomous Komi-Permyak region, private collection..



4. An axe in the collections of the National Museum of Tatarstan in Kazan.



¹ CIRAM report ref. 0723-OA-825R-1, dated 26 July 2023: the obtained result is after calibration (2 σ, 95,4% confidence) 537 BC — 532 BC (0.9% probability) & 517 BC — 386 BC (94,5% probability).

² Gernez 2008: 140–148.

Fig. 1 (5–7)

5. An axe decorated with two eagles' heads in the collections of the Syktvykar Museum of Archaeology and History.



6. An axe with a single wolf's head, from the collections of the local museum in Zlatoust.



7. An axe with two highly stylised motifs, probably later, purportedly from the Surgutsky region in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous District (private collection—17,7 cm wide).



of which served to render it permanently unusable by the living.³ Others have justified them by the idea that these tools could no longer be used by the living for fear that the spirit of the dead person who had first possessed them might otherwise stay restless; or, as the case may be, come back to haunt the living. The deceased had in turn become a supernatural entity, whose contact humans had to fear. Finally, if we are to believe the historian of religion Mircea Eliade, this deliberate alteration was intended to enable its use in another world, in which the natural order of things would be reversed, and the broken or deteriorated object would once again be perfectly functional.⁴

The Ananyino culture, ancestors of today's Komis and Udmurts, stretched between the 8th and 3rd centuries BC across the territory of the Middle Volga, between the Kama river and the lower basins of the Pechora and Belaya rivers.⁵ At the time, these communities maintained close relations with the Scythian tribes living in the Pontic steppes (Kuban) and the Caucasus, from where they are thought to have imported, at an undetermined date, iron casting and cold-working techniques that they then spread throughout Fennoscandia.⁶ The corded motifs that adorned their ceramics link them to some extent with the Corded Ware culture (3000–2350 BC), of which they may have been the heirs in this remote part of Eurasia. With the exception of Argyzhkoye on the Vyatka, the main settlements of this culture, like the eponymous village of Ananyino on the Kama, Novobitkov, Anachev, Tra-Tau (in the southern Urals), or Birk (on the right bank of the Belaya), were rarely fortified. This suggests that, at least at that time, they did not have to fear serious external threats. At Konets Gor, archaeologists have unearthed the remains of several communal houses built of logs and divided into sections, each with its own fireplace. Their iron and bronze tools were modelled on those of their Scythian neighbours, and, like them, they used kurgans to bury their dead. The oldest necropolises featured well-shaped tombs surmounted by ornate steles in a style reminiscent of contemporary burials in eastern Siberia. They held cattle and horses, but lived mainly from hunting and fishing, as attested by the geographical location of their villages and the numerous remains of bone hooks and harpoons found nearby.⁷

The choice of decorative themes on the axe is reminiscent of the classical vocabulary of Eurasian animal, that of contemporary Scythian art in particular. The wolf appears regularly, as on this knife handle from the Kama region (fig. 2); sometimes on its own, as on this openwork Scythian bronze ornament from

³ Grinsell 1961: 475–491, Aannestad 2018:149–166, Brück 2006: 297–315, Androshchuk 2018: 149–166.

⁴ Eliade 1964: 205.

⁵ Halikov 1977, Markov 1994, Orudzhov 2017.

⁶ Makhortykh 2017.

⁷ Koyakova & Epimakhov 2014: 252–261.



the 6th–5th centuries BC (fig. 3); or in opposition to a snake, as on this gold plaque from the Siberian collection of Peter the Great, in the Hermitage Museum (inv. Si 1727 1/7) (fig. 4). The posterity of the theme can be seen in the animal bronzes of the Urals, from the 5th–6th centuries AD (fig. 5). The themes and meanings are recurrent, and they can also be found in distant yet related cultures that share the same Eurasian animal style. For example, in the case of the Luristan culture (in central Iran), between the 9th and 7th centuries BC, to which this other axe belongs, the blade seems to spring straight from the wolf's half-open mouth (fig. 6).⁸

The wolf is an ambivalent mythological figure, venerated by hunters who naturally saw it as a model of social organization, and hated by cattle breeders for whom it was above all the predator of flocks. He was often associated with solar divinities such as Belen, Balder, Amaterasu, and above all Apollo, who was sometimes referred to as the "wolf" (lykeios). In "The Seven Against Thebes," a famous play by the Greek playwright Aeschylus (525–456 BC), the beleaguered Theban women invoke Apollo Lykeios with these words: "And you,

Fig. 2



Fig. 3. Bronze roundel. Scythian animal style. 6th–5th century BC. 6,5 cm high



⁸ Christie's, auction 1548, 25th of October 2012, lot 8.

Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



wolf-lord, show yourself to be a wolf against the enemy army.”⁹ Here, the god is clearly compared to a wolf. The wolf’s ability to see at night (nyctalopia), its ability to pierce material and spiritual darkness, has often led it to be seen as the guardian of the threshold between the world of the living and that of the dead. All primitive cults, from the Amerindian plains to Siberia, via Europe and the Mediterranean basin, have known myths of this nature. But the dark hunter of the Siberian forests was never far away. Among the proto-Indo-Europeans, the koryos—the bands of young men who, as part of their initiation rites, had to leave their tribes for a year in order to live by their weapons—took the wolf as their emblem, symbolically covering their bodies in wolf skins to embody the social behaviour and warlike frenzy attributed to this predator. These traditions were shared by many peoples of the Bronze and Iron Ages (Celts, Germans, Greeks, Scandinavians, and Romans). The well-known myth of Romulus and Remus, raised by a she-wolf, is a late reminiscence of this. Among the symbolic powers that the ancient peoples of Eurasia attributed to lupine divinities was their periodic ability to destroy a creation that had lapsed so that, on its ruins, it could be reborn and continue on its course. This was the function of the Scandinavian Fenrir. As, son of the malevolent god Loki and the witch Angerboda, and brother of the giant snake Jörmungandr, Fenrir belongs, like the other wolves, to the original race of Giants or Frost Thurses [hrimthursar: frost giants]. They embody, as in Greek myths, matter which, with the wear and tear of Time, involutes and collapses, dying of itself and by itself.

This process is comparable to what the Hindus call *mâyā*: at once form, matter, force, illusion and the world personified by Shiva. It is the symbol of consuming life, and hence of death, the Time that annihilates everything and works to regenerate it. Like the old cycle, the old man must “die” for the new man to emerge in the light of Truth and new Knowledge. This myth also relates to another type of alternation: that of day and night, of the cyclical death and resurgence of time and the seasons. Winter devours like a wolf the corrupted nature of autumn, symbolised by the West, only to resurrect it in spring, symbolised by the East. The Land of the Aurora, home to Knowledge, is the period during which Creation “dies,” but which contains the seeds of future life, culminating in the winter solstice (21 December), the longest night of the year.

The sun, for a moment “defeated,” reappears stronger each day, finally triumphing over the night. At the spring equinox (21 March), the sun has definitively vanquished the darkness, and the world begins to blossom anew. The cathartic action of the wolf symbolises a creation that has reached its breaking point and has no alternative but to devour itself. In its destructive/regenerative function, the wolf is linked not only to winter, but also to the North and the colour black, which amounts to the same thing: the North and black

⁹ de Roguin 1999: 104.

represent the original indistinction, the *prima materia*, carrying the potential for a new world from which the primordial light emanates, and by extension any transcendent principle of a divine and royal nature. The same is true of the Indo-Europeans, the Uralo-Altaic peoples, the Chinese, and even the Amerindians. Human appropriation of the animal’s natural behaviour sometimes made it the totemic ancestor of many peoples. According to Strabo, the Dacians referred to themselves as “wolves.” He also attributed the same etymology to the nomadic Scythians to the east of the Caspian Sea. Their ethnic name probably derived from *saka* “dahae,” wolf. This etymological link was no exception. To the south of the Caspian Sea lay Hyrcania, in Old Persian *Varkana*, literally the “land of wolves” (from the root “*vehrka*,” wolf). The fact that a people derives its ethnic name from the name of an animal has always had a particular symbolic significance. Central Asia, whether Turkic or Mongolian, would later see many variants of these traditions, including the myth of the union between a supernatural wolf and a princess, a union that would give birth to a people or a dynasty. We refer here to Börté Cino (the blue wolf), husband of Qo’ai Maral (the tawny deer), given in the secret history of the Mongols as the mythical ancestor of Temudjin, the future Genghis Khan.¹⁰

The shape and symbolism of the eagle, whose head adorns the top of the axe socket, are also reminiscent of the vocabulary of Eurasian “animal style” art. For example, the same shape of the head can be seen on the gold plaque unearthed in 1763 during the excavations of Alexei Melgounov in the Litoi kurgan, on the Dnieper. It now resides in the Hermitage Museum (inv. DN 1763 1/10) (fig. 7). This way of representing the bird of prey is also reminiscent of the long history of the Eurasian animal style. From the 3rd millennium chlorite divinatory game plates of the Marhaši culture, in southern Iran (fig. 8), to the belt buckles and Burgundian or Frankish fibulae from the time of the Germanic invasions (fig. 9), to the Permian art of the Urals, from the 6th to 10th centuries (fig. 10—9,5 cm high), these are always the same shapes, constantly renewed.

The eagle has been, in all cultures and at all times, the companion or attribute of heroes and gods. In Greece, it was the symbol of Zeus who once assumed its appearance to take on Ganymede. Among the ancient Scandinavians, the eagle was equated with the king of the sky. Symbolizing the metamorphoses of the god Odin, it also represented the *fylgja* of shamans. The *fylgja* designates here the double of each individual, comparable to the Egyptian Ka.

However, in a second sense, it can also designate a protective spirit that takes the form of an animal watching over the person it has adopted. Conversely, it can signify death when it leaves its protégé. We find a similar concept on Ugrian bronzes, with the eagles that crowned the top of the heads of certain divinities, as in this personification of Kaltashekva (fig. 11), goddess of fertility and wife

¹⁰ Even, Pop 1994 (Histoire secrete des Mongols): 41, 1.

Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



of their principal god Numi Torum. Here the bird of prey seems to represent the celestial aura emanating from the goddess. This notion of divine illumination has a meaning quite similar to the *kvarenah* of ancient Iran. The *kvarenah* was the luminous halo marking the glory of gods and heroes, frequently personified in Zoroastrian traditions in the form of an eagle.¹¹ This is why the wings and heads of these birds of prey were so often found on the crowns or ceremonial helmets of the great Sassanid kings. The origin of this tradition can be traced back to the mythical Yima, who ruled the world at the beginning of time. He was so wise that it is said he could converse for hours with the great god Ahura Mazda. However, as time went on, he became arrogant, and in the end mistook himself for a god. It was in this way, the Gāthās tell us, that Yima lost his *kvarenah*, which suddenly flew away with a flap of its wings.¹² Later Zoroastrian traditions make this association even clearer: “When Yima found pleasure in lies and falsehood, then the *kvarenah* flew away from him in the form of an eagle”. The medieval epic *Šah-nāme*, written between the tenth and eleventh centuries AD by the poet Ferdowsi, echoed this tradition when it depicted the *kvarenah* as a bird of prey hovering over the heads of legitimate princes and kings. Ongoing contacts between the Iranian world and the Urals regions since the Bronze Age undoubtedly led to the adoption of this type of concept by the Ugrian peoples. This transmission would have taken place via the Scythians, whose material representations are full of references to these birds of prey.

The association of the two predators on the same object is not fortuitous, and probably has a mythological dimension which, in the absence of contemporary texts, remains unclear. However, it can be compared with other similar subjects represented in the animal art of Indo-European peoples who had long-standing contacts with the Siberian world. The ceremonial axe head in the Metropolitan Museum, New York (inv. 1982.5) (fig. 12), from the Bactro-Margian Cultural Complex (BMAC), dates from around the end of the 3rd millennium and provides us with an interesting example. But the association can be observed even more explicitly on this contemporary Elamite axe blade from southern Iran (fig. 13),¹³ on which an eagle’s head surmounts the figure of a wolf. The canine, incised on the blade, is depicted in profile attacking an anthropomorphic figure. The motif takes us back, beyond local particularities, to a set of cultural myths shared by the ancient populations of the steppes of Eurasia. In the context of the Ananyino axe, the combination of eagle and wolf refers to the supernatural protection afforded to its owner, and to the symbolic power of its blade.

¹¹ Avesta: Yasht 19.35–36, 19.82.

¹² Gathas: Yasna 32, 51.18.

¹³ Christie’s, auction 1548, 25th of October 2012, lot 8.

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Fig. 13



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Fig. 14. Axe and wooden fragment found within the socket.



2. Scythian Carriage Rattle Topped by a Stag

7th–6th century BC
 Scythian animal style
 Purportedly from Krasnodar Krai, North Caucasus region, Russia
 Bronze
 20.8 cm high

André Verstandig

This finial, or terminal ornament to use the term more commonly applied to this type of object, consists of an openwork oval sphere containing two metal balls designed to produce a sound effect. It is decorated here with the figure of a kneeling deer made in the purest Scythian animal style of the 7th–6th centuries. Such works can be found from the kurgans of the Dnieper and Don plains to the frozen tombs of the Altai foothills in eastern Siberia. Scythian finials frequently included sound devices such as bells. These objects, in pairs or groups of four, were put on long wooden poles, were often used to physically mark the mound where the funeral ceremony took place. Then, they would decorate the funerary carriage used to transport the body of the deceased to the kurgan or grave in which he was buried (fig. 1).¹ The sound of the bell, which was played to the rhythm of the carriage's movement, was supposed to repel evil spirits and, on the contrary, call down beneficial forces on the deceased to facilitate his or her transition to the afterlife.

Our specimen can be compared with its twin, found last century in Gawerdovsky's kurgan 1, in the Maikop region of the Republic of Adygea, and since exhibited in the Sochi Museum (inv. Gawerdovsky 85 AOM 11640/A-586) (fig. 2). The two, seem to share a common origin, or at least the mark of the same craftsman.

The name Scythian (*Sakā in Old Persian) is a generic term for a group of nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples, mainly Indo-European, who inherited the cultures of Srubna (18th–10th centuries BC), which chronologically succeeded the Yamna culture in the plains of the upper Danube and Dniester basins, and the proto-Indo-Iranian cultures of Sintashta, Karasuk and Andronovo in northern Bactria.² Forced by the general cooling of temperatures in the northern hemisphere at the end of the second millennium to adopt an increasingly nomadic lifestyle,³ from the first millennium BC onwards, they eventually extended their influence across the great steppes of Eurasia, from the plains of the Danube, in Europe, to the steppes of Ordos, on the upper loop of the Hoang He, in northern China. They were gradually supplanted in the early centuries of our era by the Uralo-Altaic peoples who are now in the majority there.⁴

We learn a great deal about this Scythian culture from the contents of the burial mounds, the kurgans, which, particularly in the westernmost regions, yielded an abundance of the precious gold and silver objects for which they are famous.

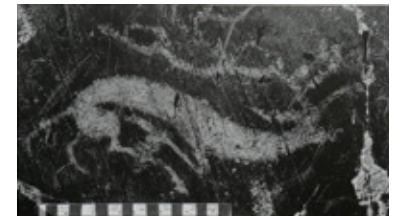
Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig.3



¹ Rolle 1978 vol. I: 117–118.

² Allenloft, Sikora et al. 2015., Unterländer 2017, Krzewińska 2018.

³ Anthony 2009.

⁴ Herodotus: IV, 57., Kovalev 1996: 121–127.

Fig.4



Fig.5



Fig.6



Fig. 7



The 7th century BC Scythian kurgan of Kostromskaia Stanisa, where a notable man was buried in the company of thirteen servants, twenty two horses, together with an abundance of funerary furnishings, and the contemporary kurgan of Kelermes, in the Kuban, are the most striking examples of the emergence of a powerful warrior class aristocracy that developed there from the 8th century BC onwards. The gigantic size of some of these tombs reflects the power acquired by the tribes who built them. In the Tuva region of southern Siberia, the Aržan kurgan, erected in the 8th century BC, consists of a tumulus one hundred and twenty metres in diameter. Its construction required the labour of one thousand five hundred men for an entire week.⁵ It contained the remains of a couple of high-ranking individuals, covered in furs, buried in a wooden sarcophagi, placed in the centre of the kurgan. They were accompanied by fifteen of their servants, one hundred and sixty fully harnessed horses and hundreds of weapons and objects of gold, silver and bronze, decorated with the same animal motifs that made Scythian art so distinctive and whose themes were later to be found among the Uralic peoples of western Siberia. Further east, on the Ukok plateau in the Altai, the frozen tombs of Pazyryk, which date back to the 4th century BC, have yielded a wealth of objects made of wood, felt, cloth or wool, including the oldest carpets in the world, perfectly preserved by the frozen ground. These objects give us a clearer idea of the lifestyle and beliefs of these people. The social organisation of the nomadic Scythians consisted mainly of a group of families who came together to form tribes of varying size, independent of each other and often rivals. They would tear each other apart over the possession of a pasture, a watering place, or a quarrel of honour. They were governed by a kind of military aristocracy, perhaps elective in nature. The particular care given to the tombs of the shamans, both men and women, suggests that they must also have exercised considerable influence in the affairs of the tribe. They lived off the produce of their horses, sheep, and cattle, which they bartered in the border towns for any manufactured goods they might want from sedentary peoples. Skilled craftsmen and blacksmiths, they also acted as commercial intermediaries, transporting goods across the Eurasian steppe, particularly ores from the tin, gold, and silver deposits in the Urals and Altai.

Unlike farming peoples, nomads, whatever their origins, always regarded trade as a prestigious activity, and were prepared to guarantee their access to the markets of sedentary societies by force, if necessary.⁶ Accustomed to combat, they developed a composite type of bow, therefore known as the "Scythian bow", with a range twice as great as their equivalents among their sedentary contemporaries, a formidable weapon in the hands of these bands of warriors whose use of the horse made also extremely mobile. From the 8th century BC onwards, this advantage was coupled with a major revolution. A new type

⁵ Chugunov, Parzinger, Nagler: 2004: 5–29.

⁶ Khazanov 1975, 256, Zhivkov, Manova 2015: 167.

of alloy, iron, which was much stronger than bronze and is said to have been developed by the peoples of the Caucasus, gradually spread throughout the Near East and then throughout the Ancient World. However, the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age varied considerably from one region of Eurasia to another. The inhabitants of the steppes, by their geographical position, had access to this technology before most others. The power of their reflex bows, equipped with iron-tipped arrows, soon made these nomads irresistible conquerors. This is why many sedentary states, such as the Greek city of Athens, the Neo-Assyrian empire and then the Persian empire, all used Scythian mercenaries at some point in their history. The Scythians began to live in a more sedentary way in the northern contact zone, in the foothills of the Urals, and in the south-west, near the Greek cities on the Black Sea coast, like Olbia, Tanais, Panticapaea, Phanagoria and Chersonesis (Kherson), the Scythians were already living in a more sedentary way. They settled in medium-sized villages, where they grew cereals and legumes such as wheat, barley, millet, lentils, garlic and onions, which they used extensively. They also planted fruit trees including apples, plums, and cherries. The animal bones that have been found tell us about their diet and lifestyle. Poultry, pigs, and cattle were reared at the expense of horses, which tended to become rarer, the most striking sign of a form of sedentarisation from which these populations could not escape.⁷ These were the "ploughing" Scythians described by Herodotus.⁸

The reclining stag, the bird of prey and the coiled feline made up the triad of the plastic vocabulary of Scythian cultures. The stag has been linked to an ancient Siberian mother goddess and to the reindeer that the ancestors of the Scythians probably hunted.⁹ The particular treatment given to it here, with its legs folded in on itself, is typical of the first age of Scythian art (8th–6th century BC). Despite the extreme symbolism of the model, the animal is depicted in a lively, nervous and almost surreal manner, with certain elements deliberately accentuated and even exaggerated, such as the superb elaborate antlers that unfurl in fiery volutes over the deer's taut spine. It is thought to derive from a motif borrowed from Siberian art and found as early as the 10th century BC on petroglyphs from Mongolia and eastern Siberia, such as Tsagaan Salaa (fig. 3), where the same motif is already clearly recognisable.¹⁰ The predilection of the Scythians, and in particular the eastern Scythians, for this motif of the stag described classically as "kneeling" or "at rest" has given rise to numerous attempts at interpretation. By comparing the Ossetian word *sag, "stag", Abaev has put forward the hypothesis that the etymology of the word *Sakā, used in Old Persian to designate the Scythians as an ethnonym, could have derived

⁷ Lebedynsky 2001: 141–146.

⁸ Herodotus: IV, 17–25.

⁹ Jacobson 1993: 47, 61, 97, 179, 230–240.

¹⁰ Tseveendorj & al. 1997.

Fig. 8



Fig.9



Fig.10



Fig.11



from “male stag”. The Scythians would thus be the “stag men”, and the kneeling stag would represent the totemic animal at rest among its people.¹¹ However, the very notion of a stag at rest has perhaps been misinterpreted here. In later depictions, dating from the 4th century BC, a similar type of stag literally collapses under the blows of predators (griffins, eagles, lions, or snakes).

Its attitude would then be more that of a defeated animal, or rather a sacrificial one, as described by the Greek historian Herodotus (480–425 BC), who himself lived among the Scythians of the Black Sea: “Their sacrifices are made as follows: the victim stands with both front feet tied with a rope. The one who is to immolate him stands behind, pulls the end of the rope to himself, and drops it. As it falls, he invokes the god to whom he is going to sacrifice it.”¹² The kneeling stag would thus be seen as a possible offering made in honour of their deities; a funeral offering in the case of the bell finial, a propitiatory offering for the battle ornaments later found in “royal” kurgans.

This last hypothesis seems to be confirmed by the discoveries of kurgans 1, 2 and 5 in Pazyryk, Altai, dated between the 5th and the first half of the 4th centuries BC. Here horse ornaments consisting of headdresses reproducing deer antlers made of wood, leather, and felt (fig. 4), were found.¹³ On another wooden ornament, the deer’s flaming antlers are transformed into multiples surrealistically undulating bird heads (fig. 5).¹⁴ This special treatment of antlers is far from unique, and still appears on many precious metal ornaments, such as this gold plate from a private collection, dated from the end of the 6th century BC (fig. 6). These ornaments helped to symbolically “transform” the horse, sacrificed and then buried with the dead, into a deer to which the Sakās probably granted the supernatural power of carrying the soul of the deceased into the afterlife.¹⁵

Over the centuries, the kneeling deer motif spread to all Scythian and related cultures, from the steppe region, as on this Tagar culture garment appliqué found in the Krasnoyarsk district (6th century) (fig. 7—6.6 cm wide), to the frontiers of Europe, with the ornate contemporary headdress from the Mohyla Ternivka kurgan (fig. 8), the Kelermes quiver ornament (fig. 9),¹⁶ or the shield umbo from Kostromskaïa Stanitsa (fig. 10),¹⁷ in the Kuban, North Caucasus, now in the Hermitage Museum collections. With Scythian incursions into the Near and Middle East, it would eventually be found as far away as Iran, such as on a gorytos¹⁸ in Ziwiyé (fig. 11), to become a true classic of Eurasian animal style and a cultural marker of Scythian art.¹⁹

¹¹ Abaev 1978: 11–16.

¹² Herodotus, Histoiry: 4,60.

¹³ Rolle 1980: 62–65 and 102–117.

¹⁴ Roudenko 1970: pl. 142 d.

¹⁵ Rozwadowski 2004: 59.

¹⁶ State Hermitage Museum inv. Ku. 1904/ I28.

¹⁷ State Hermitage Museum inv. 2498/1.

¹⁸ Housse de carquois.

¹⁹ Ghirshman 1964: pl. 143.

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3. Finial Ornament of a Tree of Life

5th century BC
 Scythian animal style
 Purportedly from Krasnodar Krai, North Caucasus region, Russia
 Bronze
 37 cm high x 13 cm wide

André Verstandig

This Scythian finial ornament revolves around the head of a male deer presented in high relief. The deer's protome is treated here with an archaizing hieratic stiffness typical of Scythian animal representations produced in the 5th century BC in the region of Maïkop, in the north of Caucasus; as on this other example representing a stag standing on all four legs (fig.1), from the same region, but this time presented in high relief, in a style reminiscent of the Hittite standard ornaments from Alaca Höyük (fig. 2). The tall antler springs from its head and unfurls into a perfectly symmetrical pattern of linear and openwork scrolls, topped by a bird of prey with outstretched wings. This vegetal antler and the bird atop clearly evoke the Cosmic Tree that traditionally linked the three levels of the world in early Siberian societies: heaven, earth, and the subterranean abode of still waters. Ensuring communication between heaven and the underworld, where the dead reside, it is also the Tree of Life, an inexhaustible source of fertility and regeneration.¹ Its association with the deer may stem from the observation in ancient times of the annual renewal of male deer or reindeer antlers after their annual fall, which could offer a natural metaphor for the eternal renewal of life. In certain stylistic respects, our finial can be compared with a doe-headed ornament from the same period in the Don Cossack History Museum in Novotcherkassk (fig.3), which also features the same Tree of Life motif.²

These finials ornaments were originally mounted on long wooden poles. They were traditionally used to delimit the mound where the funeral ceremony took place, and then to decorate the funeral wagon during its procession to the burial site.³ However, the sheer number of finial ornaments found in excavation contexts, and the wide variety of motifs used to decorate them (deer, but also griffins, or birds of prey) suggest other possible uses, like delimiting an encampment, or more simply any given ceremonial space. Whereas sedentary societies traced a permanent line or furrow to mark a consecrated place (a Greek *temenos* or Latin *pomerium*), Scythian nomads gave meaning to space through these mobile axes surmounted by symbolic ornaments dressed vertically, orienting a place without enclosing it, making it sacred without rooting it, as they constantly moved.⁴

The special feature of our specimen here is the presence of the Tree of Life. The belief in a sacred tree was widely shared by most of the indigenous peoples

Fig. 1. Rattle deer finial in bronze. Scythian animal style, 5th century BC. North Caucasus. 41 cm high. Courtesy M. Doustar.

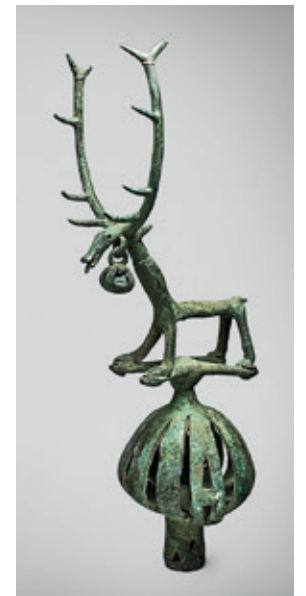
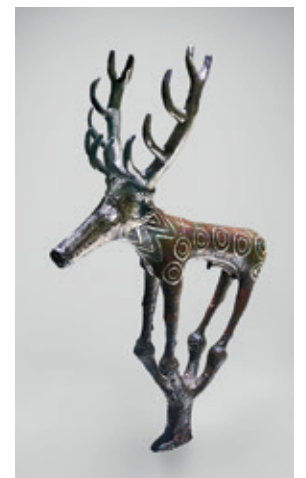


Fig. 2



¹ Il'inkaja 1967: 295–301.

² Inv. KP-2833.

³ Rolle 1978 vol. I: 117–118.

⁴ Perevodčikova 1980 : 23–44., Perevodčikova and Raevski 1981: 42–51.

Fig. 3



Fig. 4



of the Ancient and New Worlds. It originated in the observation, in the earliest ages of mankind, of these great trees, with their subterranean root systems, median trunks and canopies that grow higher and merge with the sky, offering a natural metaphor for the worlds, real or imaginary, that populated their symbolic universes. Among the peoples of the Siberian Taiga, it was supposed to allow supernatural entities, such as shamans, to move freely along its trunk, which formed a sort of cosmic ladder. Each people, or tribe, had its own traditions concerning that tree. For the Dolgans and Evenks, the souls of newborns rested there before birth in the form of small birds, awaiting their incarnation. The Khantys believed that their mother goddess, Kaltashekva, inscribed there the fate of every human being.⁵ For the Yakuts, it grew at the “golden navel of the Earth.” According to them, this was a kind of primordial paradise, where the first man was born and nourished by the milk of a woman who had half emerged from the tree’s trunk.⁶ For the Khantys of Sosva, this tree was generally described as a larch that took root in the Ural Mountains, which they placed at the center of their world. For the Mansis, as for most of the Altaic populations settled on the borders of the great steppe, it was, on the contrary, a birch. The concept of a cosmic tree was also closely linked to the idea, widespread in early societies, of a pivot upon which the three worlds were anchored. This “axis mundi” was invariably linked to the stars, which were the natural landmarks on which the sacred or profane geography of early humans was based.

Among Paleo-Siberians such as the Chuchki, Koriaks and Evenks, this axis ran from the pillar-tree to the North Star, which they called “the nail in the sky,” and which was its natural extension. This name was shared by the Finns, the Sámi and the ancient Estonians. The Mongols, Tatars, Kyrgyz and Bashkirs called it the “iron pillar,” and the Buryats pictured the stars shining nearby like a herd of horses tied to a stake.⁷ The principles of the symmetrical sky are also to be found in the traditions of many of the classical civilizations of the Ancient World. In Egypt, the sycamore tree was considered sacred, to the point of sometimes being likened to a protective deity. In the tomb of Pharaoh Thutmose III, the goddess Isis is depicted as a tree with muscular branches, breastfeeding the deceased pharaoh. At Deir el Medineh, in the tomb of Sennedjem (TT 1), who lived during the reign of Sethi I (1324–1279 BC), a sycamore tree is depicted, from which the goddess Nut emerges, pouring a libation of life-giving water to the kneeling deceased. Finally, in the tomb of Userhat (TT 51), dug into the hill of Sheikh Abd el-Gournah, a painting depicts a meeting between the deceased and the goddess Nut in her form as goddess of the sycamore tree. The accompanying inscription reads: “I am Nut, high and tall on the horizon... Under me, you refresh yourself in the shade of my branches, you satisfy yourself

⁵ Harva 1959: 172.

⁶ Eliade 1978: 218–222.

⁷ Eliade 1974: 212.

with (my) offerings, you live on my bread, you drink my beer... and my milk...”⁸. The same imagery of the goddess emerging from the tree can be found in the ancient traditions of India in the character of Yama,⁹ the first human who drinks with the gods at the foot of a miraculous tree; or in ancient Iran, with Yima, whose story covers much the same symbolism.¹⁰

In Akkadian texts, it was the Kiškānu tree, “shining like lapis lazuli,” which grew within the precincts of the temple of Eridu, and whose roots extended as far as the subterranean domain of Apsu, stronghold of the god Enki.¹¹ It was reputed to house the divinities of fertility and civilizing sciences, making it the prototype of the “tree of knowledge” later to be found in the Old Testament (Genesis 2-3). It was also the precursor, of the Babylonian “tree of life,” represented in the form of a date palm, which can be seen reproduced from the 3rd millennium BC on numerous reliefs or on cylinder seals, such as the Zaganita scribe’s copy, which depicts an assembly of gods regenerating vegetation at the time of the spring equinox festivals.¹² For the Avesta, the sacred book of the Zoroastrians, it was the Saēna tree described as growing on an island in the middle of the ocean of Vourukaša.¹³ All the seeds of useful plants were found on its branches, and its touch was supposed to cure diseases. This tree also served as a home for the Simurgh, which had made its nest at its summit. Every day, as it flew away, the bird scattered the tree’s seeds across the surface of the earth. According to the Mēnōg ī Xrad, “the spirit of knowledge,” a text of Zoroastrian commentaries, Tištar (the star of Sirius) then watered the seeds, and favored the development of all plants. The ancient Chinese also believed that pillar trees growing at the four ends of the earth held up the sky. Craftsmen from the Sānxingduì culture in Sichuan represented some of these cosmic trees in bronze in the 13th century BC. The largest of them, reached 3.84 meters in height, and was also surmounted by birds of prey, recognizable by their curved beaks and sharp claws (fig.4).¹⁴

As with other Indo-Iranian peoples, the sacred tree is also an integral part of Scythian beliefs. At Kelermes, in the Kuban region, a 7th century BC kurgan has yielded an astonishing gold-covered ceremonial axe featuring two caprids surrounding an Assyrian-style Tree of Life (fig. 5).¹⁵ On a textile from the Sakās culture of Pazyryk, Altai (3rd century BC), a seated goddess (possibly Tabiti) holds a stylized tree in her hands, symbolizing the fertility of Nature (fig.6).¹⁶

⁸ Baum 1989.

⁹ Rig Veda: X 135, 1.

¹⁰ Avesta: Yasna 9, 4, Videvdāt: 2, 5.

¹¹ Eliade 1974: 278–279.

¹² Verstandig 2016: 16, et 49 fig. 22.

¹³ Avesta, Yašt 12.17.

¹⁴ Thote 2003: 135.

¹⁵ Schiltz 1994: 96–97 and 393.

¹⁶ Schiltz 1994: 278.

Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9. Bronze plaque. 6th-10th century, Kama River Basin, Perm Krai, West Siberia, Russia. 6,9 cm high.



Finally, the traditional Tree of Life associated with deer can also be found on this Sarmatian diadem from the 1st century AD, unearthed at Khokhlach, on the lower Don (fig.7).¹⁷

The symbolism of the deer refers to another set of beliefs, associated since Neolithic times with fertility and life renewal.¹⁸ A mural from the antechamber of a Level III house in the Neolithic village of Çatal Höyük, Anatolia (ca. 6000 BC), offers us a pictorial version of one of these primordial myths. The scene depicts a red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) in profile, tongue out, sex erect, attacked by a group of humans armed with bows and arrows and clad in leopard skins. The hunters are represented here by figures of abnormally reduced size compared to the animal, which occupies the entire center of the panel, further reinforcing the dominant impression of the main subject (fig.8). In the northern regions of Eurasia, the deer that first embodied these primordial forces was the moose or elk (*Alces alces*). This solitary animal, which can measure over two meters at the withers and weigh up to seven hundred kilos, has large antlers in the male that can pierce any clumsy hunter who dares get too close. A legend, borrowed from Khanty folklore, attributed to them the formation of the stars of the Orion constellation in the night sky:

“At the very beginning of life on earth, the elk had six legs. It was so fast that no hunter could catch it, which enraged Numi Torum’s son. Numi Torum often discussed this with his father, telling him that he should never have created the animal in the first place. No one could catch it and taste a morsel of its flesh. One day, he got so angry that he decided to go after the animal himself. But despite moving as fast as he could on skis or running, it was impossible to catch him. As soon as he spotted it, he’d set off in pursuit, but the elk would disappear in the blink of an eye. One summer’s day, when he was about to capture it, the irritated hunter struck the elk’s tracks with his ski stick, saying, ‘What kind of animal are you that no one can catch you?’ He then noticed that the moose was watching him from a distance. He tried again later to capture it but was unsuccessful. One winter’s day, the hunter stumbled across the moose crossing a lake. For some reason, the animal didn’t hurry. Perhaps it was sick or tired? The hunter realized that his time had come. He killed it with an arrow and took out his knife to cut it up. He then cut off both its hind legs, saying that his father had been wrong. Then, with his magic wand, he drew the silhouette of the Elk in the sky. Thus, on dark nights, it would show hunters the way. That’s why you can find your way back with the Elk’s head. This constellation moves across the sky, and thanks to it we can always see the dawn.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Preserved in the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg under the inventory number 2213-2.

¹⁸ Jacobson 1993: 165, Champouillon 2012: 25, 40.

¹⁹ Pentikainen 1996: 173–174.

For similar reasons, the Khantys considered the elk to be under the special protection of a master spirit, and their capture was as much the result of the animal’s willingness to let itself be killed in order to feed humans as of the hunter’s skill. For this reason, certain rituals had to be performed to satisfy his spirit, including the obligation to return the animal’s bones to the forest. This custom was still practiced a short time ago.²⁰ Traces of this personification of Nature can be found on some Uralians bronze ornaments from the first centuries of our era, where a figure can be seen presented from the front in a pose generally reserved for supernatural figures. The figure is flanked by two stylized elk-females, recognizable by their lack of antlers (fig. 9).

Thus, these spirits took on an essentially feminine form; mother-spirits governing the multiplication of game, or celestial mistresses who blended feminine features with those of a deer (fig.10).²¹ This was the case of the “Bougady Enyntyne” of the Evenks, the animal-mother who gave life to all living beings, and devoured their bodies after their death so they could be reborn again.²² This mythological figure, invoked by men before setting out on the hunt, was represented in oral traditions as an antlered woman resting at the feet of the Tree of Life, which was rooted on her antlers, exactly as on our Scythian finial.²³ Similar conceptions can be found with the character of the reindeer goddess “Tomame” of the Kets,²⁴ or the “Yliuonda Kota” of the Selkups. One of these mythological creatures is undoubtedly the subject of that Permian figurine found in the Ural region (fig. 11). On this bronze, which can be dated to the 6th–9th centuries AD, the goddess is draped in a long and is surmounted by the three-dimensional head of a female elk, giving it the spectacular effect sought by the artist. Like this “Bougady Enyntyne,” these spirits were supposed to feed on the flesh of the dead to renew life and, like her, were associated with the return of spring and migratory birds.²⁵

The idea of regenerating life through the intermediary of cervids is also to be found in China as far back as the Neolithic period. First, it emerges in the form of antlers displayed freely in the tombs of Dawenkou, in Shandong. Then, it appears in the territory of the Yue, in Anhui, between the 9th and 8th centuries BC.²⁶ Finally, more figurative expressions came during the Warring States period (5th–3rd century BC), like this Zhenmushou guardian spirit wearing antlers, exhumed from a tomb in the Jiangling region, in the former feudal kingdom

²⁰ Jordan 2003: 106–107.

²¹ The Karelian Sami consider the female reindeer to be the “life-giving mother” who guides her countless herds during the migration period, providing milk, meat, and skins to build tents and clothe humans.

²² Jacobson 1993: 192–194.

²³ Anisimov 1963: 179.

²⁴ Jacobson 1993: 197.

²⁵ Jacobson 1993: 165.

²⁶ Thote 2006: 61.

Fig. 10. Bronze plaque. 1st- 4th century. Cherdyn Region, Perm Krai, Cis-Urals Russia. 16,2 cm. Museum of Local Lore, ChKM-1932.



Fig. 11. Bronze Figure of Deity with Moose Head on Top. 9th–10th century. Near Ust’ Yazva, Perm Krai, Cis-Urals Russia. 9,4 cm high.



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



of Chu (fig. 12). There are nearly four hundred known examples in public or private collections.²⁷ These objects, originally placed inside the tomb at the head of the deceased, were intended to help his spirit escape the tomb and reach the land of the immortals.²⁸ The stylized head of the spirit that appears under the deer antlers has been treated in a deliberately schematic manner. The outstretched tongue is a chthonic symbol. An identical feature can be found in representations of Gorgons in contemporary Greek art from in the 6th and 5th centuries BC. It symbolizes here the consumption of the dead man's flesh by the creature, which is a prerequisite for the liberation of his soul.²⁹ More prosaically, it could also represent the shaman's altered state, when he is transformed into an animal-spirit at the time of the funeral rites.³⁰ The whole piece rests on an artificial column that seems to imitate the shape of a tree trunk. This arrangement recalls the displays of animal skulls placed in tree branches during reindeer or horse sacrifices in Siberia. These creatures are part of a long transcultural tradition of deer which, from Fennoscandia to East Asia, accompanied the deceased and guaranteed their rebirth in a beyond of which they were sometimes also the guardians.

The motif of the deer and the tree of life survived in many Indo-European traditions from the Bronze and Iron Age, often in association with the solar cult. It can be found on a seal exhumed from a tomb dating from the early 3rd millennium BC, belonging to the first phase of the Maikop culture, in the northern Caucasus;³¹ in the kurgans of the proto-Indo-European Yamna culture, which geographically linked the Caucasus to the boreal regions of Eurasia;³² on bronzes from the Märlik culture, dating from the early 1st millennium from the Gilan region of northwestern Iran (fig. 13); or the Saldyar petroglyph, in the Altai region (fig. 14). It also appears in Northern Europe as on a petroglyph from Bohuslan, Sweden (1800–500 BC), where a large-antlered deer can be seen guiding the course of the sun over a ship with a high bow.³³ Similar scenes can be found throughout Scandinavia, as at Laxon, or on the Lillforshallan panel, confirming the important symbolic significance attached to this motif.³⁴ The association of the deer and the sun appears similarly on a gold bowl found in Zurich-Altstetten, dating from the same period.³⁵ It also features a doe depicted below a crescent moon, which seems to confirm the astral symbolism

²⁷ Notably in the Guimet Museum under ref: MA6831, in the Cernushi Museum under ref: M.C.9923, in the British Museum under inventory number: 1950,1115.1, and in the collection of Arlene and Harold Schnitzer, under reference: 2002.71.1A-E.

²⁸ Thote 1987: 45–53., Cook 2006: 138–140.

²⁹ Cook 2006: 139–140.

³⁰ Major 1999: 132–133.

³¹ Nekhaev 1991, Munchaev 1994, Anthony 2007: 288–290.

³² Schuldt 1961.

³³ Gelling, Davidson 1969: figs 44c and 44g.

³⁴ Ginn et al 2014: 145–149.

³⁵ Nagy 1992.

associated with deer. East of the Urals, petroglyphs from Altai, on the southern borders of Siberia and Central Asia, present fairly similar subjects. At Sayan Altai in Mongolia, for example, there is a group of megaliths decorated with engravings depicting numerous deer, some surmounted by a circle that once again symbolizes the sun.³⁶ Stele no. 1 from Gol Mod (fig. 15), dated to the first millennium BC, depicts deer in the company of the moon and the sun, like on the Zurich bowl, confirming the clear mythological dimension of the subject. The large number of animal bones found in the vicinity of these structures suggests that they must have served as sacrificial sites. These ornate megaliths are not a phenomenon confined to the Altai region or Mongolia.³⁷ Archaeologists have uncovered over a thousand of these “deer stones,” from the farthest reaches of southern Siberia to the more westerly regions of the Kuban, as far as the Bug and Dobrudja rivers on the edge of Central Europe. Once again, their vast distribution bears witness to the existence of cultic symbols shared, or passed down from one generation to another, by a large number of communities with different ethnic characteristics. This is why the association of the tree of life and the deer bears such a particular symbolism, which in this case define the cultic use of this finial ornament.

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³⁶ Magail 2004, Fitzhugh 2009 and Fitzhugh 2010.

³⁷ Breuil, Magail 2017.

Fig. 14



Fig. 15



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4. Set of Three Sarmatian Cauldrons

2nd century BC – 3rd AD

Purportedly from Krasnodar Krai, North Caucasus region, Russia

Bronze

67 cm wide x 61 cm diameter x 72 cm high

54 cm wide x 50 cm diameter x 54.5 cm high

33.8 cm wide x 34.5 cm diameter x 41.4 cm high

André Verstandig

These three cauldrons, with their wide globular bellies, rest on high, truncated cone-shaped feet. They are crowned at the top by two round handles, hemmed by concentric circular curves arranged in parallel, and surmounted by knobs that can be seen repeated on the lips of the two largest examples. A weld line divides the upper third of the body from the lower parts, emphasizing the delicate simplicity of their shapes. These three vessels, different in size but equally well preserved, all come from the same chance find on farmland in the North Caucasus, which is why they are presented here as a set.

Metal cauldrons with somewhat similar shapes were produced without interruption by successive nomadic peoples in the Eurasian steppe from the 8th century BC to the 5th century A.D. Examples derive from the Cimmerians and Scythians in the west to the Xiongnu and Huns in the east, via the Sakās, Alans and Sarmatians, to whom our examples can be traced.¹ The cauldron was a typical piece of nomadic crockery. Meat was cooked in them and, judging by the bones found during excavations at certain sites, they also contained meat provisions for the deceased.² However, the cauldron was much more than a simple object for preparing food. In the nomad's yurt, it always occupied a central place. Located above the hearth, it was in direct communication with the opening in the roof that allowed contact with the high-Heaven, the Tengri, the main component of the supernatural universe of the peoples of Eastern Siberia.³ By extension, the cauldron symbolized the link between the gods, the family, and the clan. This is why it was, above all, a heritage object that could be passed down for generations, even centuries. This prestigious and symbolic role attributed to the cauldron within nomadic societies was highlighted in a recent study on the funerary furniture of the Scythian social elite.⁴ It shows that the number of cauldrons found in the tomb of an individual's grave was proportional to the rank of its owner; a set of three cauldrons, as in this case, would testify to a status equivalent to that of a tribal chief. In folklore, it was also sometimes used as a metaphor for the forces of nature. For Uralic peoples such as the Khantys, the deep forest was often compared to a cauldron, with trees forming its outer wall.⁵ This is why they were sometimes buried as offerings to the powers of the Earth, usually not far from a spring or on the banks of a river from which they were frequently exhumed.⁶

¹ Chlenova 1994: 506, Yukishima 1995: 325–362., Demidenko 2008: 141, 152, 231.

² Rolle 1978: II, 117.

³ Eliade 1968: 180, 202, 252, 360.

⁴ Kuznetsova 2018: 17–56.

⁵ Rebourcet 2006: 383.

⁶ Spertino 1995: 21–24, Masek 2015.

Fig. 1

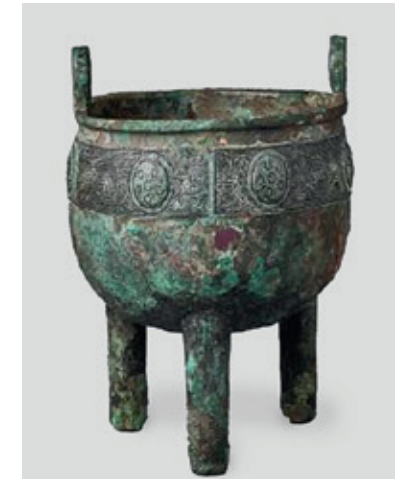


Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

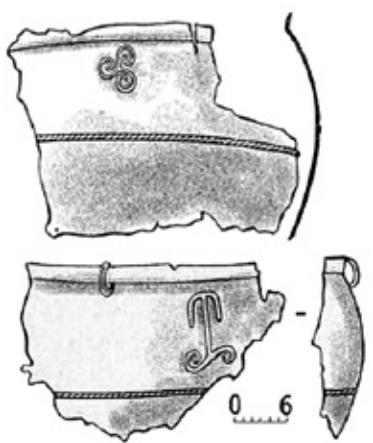


Fig. 5



The original form of the Scythian cauldron comes from the Far East,⁷ and in particular from China, from where it borrows the artistic vocabulary and, in part, the cult symbolism of “*dǐng*” (鼎) tripods of the Shang (1600-1046 BC) and Western Zhou (1046-771) dynasties (fig. 1). For this reason, the earliest nomadic cauldrons were also tripod (fig. 2.) The classic nomadic cauldron, resting on a truncated cone-shaped base of varying height and framed by rounded handles, has been found at several sites in northern China, such as this example from Xinjiang (fig. 3), dated to the first half of the 1st millennium BC, which suggests the existence of ongoing reciprocal contacts (metallurgy and metalworking techniques in one direction, aesthetics in the other) between the Pontic steppes and northern China from this period onwards.⁸ Later, in the 4th and 5th centuries AD, the spread of Hun cauldrons in Eastern Europe provided further evidence of the routes taken by the Huns, from their native East Asia to the Danube plains and the Hungarian Puzsta, where they built up their short-lived empire (see map below).⁹

The three cauldrons presented here feature several ancient marks below the weld line, which enable us to pinpoint their origin and date of manufacture. These “Tamgas”, or heraldic emblems that symbolize membership of a clan, family, or tribe, were invented by the nomadic peoples of the Eurasian steppe. They were also adopted by their immediate neighbors (the Uralians, Slavs and peoples of the northern Caucasus) to adorn their weapons, pottery and utensils, or to mark their herds of horses and cattle.¹⁰ These Tamgas regularly appear on cauldrons among the Sarmatians, a nomadic people belonging to the eastern branch of the Indo-European group who settled from the 4th century BC between the Tanaïs and the Daïkos, now the Don and the Ural. Examples include these fragments from the village of Mokryy Chaltyr’ (fig. 4), and another from the village of Oktyabr’skoe in the Novocherkassk district (fig. 5).¹¹ In the Pontic steppes and Kuban region, these marks are closely associated with the Sarmatian period, and more specifically with the first centuries AD.¹²

The largest of our three cauldrons has three Tamgas. The first is a classic solar motif, consisting of a disc intersected by three straight lines (fig. 6). Similar motifs have been reported on other types of support (bricks or pottery shards) at the Sarmatian site of Kanka, in Central Asia.¹³ The other two are naturalistic, representing a wolf recognisable by the particular shape of its head and tail, but whose long legs here end in bird heads (fig. 7). This motif, which can also be seen on a Sarmatian scabbard ornament found in the Perm region (fig. 8—9 cm high), can be compared with Uralian bronzes of the 6th–8th centuries AD, on which these

⁷ Iessen 1954.

⁸ Wang et Wang 1996: fig. 49; XIA 1989a: fig. 24:2; Guo 1999: 122–150, Guo 2009: 112. fig. 8.

⁹ Maenchen-Helfen 1973: 307–325, Erdy 1994: 379–438, Vaissiere 2005: 17.

¹⁰ Dratchuk 1970, Dratchuk 1975, Lebedynsky 2011: 57, 103, 128–137.

¹¹ Kozlovskaya et Ilyashenko 2018: 174–175, 191 fig. 2, 4.

¹² Yatsenko 2010a, 140, Kozlovskaya et Ilyashenko 2018: 172.

¹³ Boroffka 2005, Yatsenko et al. 2019: 216.

same metamorphoses or hybridizations of the body can frequently be found. On this other ornament, the figure’s lower limbs are also transformed into bird heads (fig. 9).¹⁴ It bears witness to the reciprocal influences between the Uralians and the more northerly Sarmatian tribes, with whom they maintained close relations as part of the fur trade, for which the Sarmatians had already become the obligatory intermediaries in the first centuries of our era.

The same motif is found on the intermediate-sized cauldron (fig. 10). As for the third, despite its smaller size (fig. 11), it features no less than three different Tamgas: a simple solar disc, as well as two circled crosses. The motif is inspired by the polar star, recurrently used by Sarmatians from their basin of origin, as on this petroglyph found in Kazakhstan (fig. 12),¹⁵ to as far away as Great Britain, in the wake of the Sarmatian mercenaries who were barracked there by the Roman Empire in the 3rd and 4th centuries AD. It can also be seen on the rump of this horse depicted on an oil lamp found in Chester, now in the Dewa Museum (fig. 13).¹⁶ While circular motifs (solar discs, circled crosses, or intersecting lines) are frequently found on Tamgas from the North Caucasus, the oblong motif of the hybrid animal is unprecedented and could, more than a classic Tamga, represent a mythical or symbolic animal from the Siberian pantheon.¹⁷

The Sarmatians, and the Alans often associated with them, occupied the steppe territories north of the Black Sea, the Kuban in the present-day Republic of Adygea, the wooded steppes of the Dnieper, and those of the upper and middle Don basin.¹⁸ In these territories, a large number of cauldrons (with or without Tamgas) associated with the Sarmatian period have been found (see map above). They testify to the important influence of this nomadic culture, which continued the cultural heritage of the ancient Scythians.

¹⁴ Baulo 2022: 64.

¹⁵ Yatsenko 2021: 765.

¹⁶ Nicolini 2021: 3.

¹⁷ Kozlovskaya et Ilyashenko 2018: 174–175.

¹⁸ Schiltz 2002: 845–887.

Fig. 6. Large

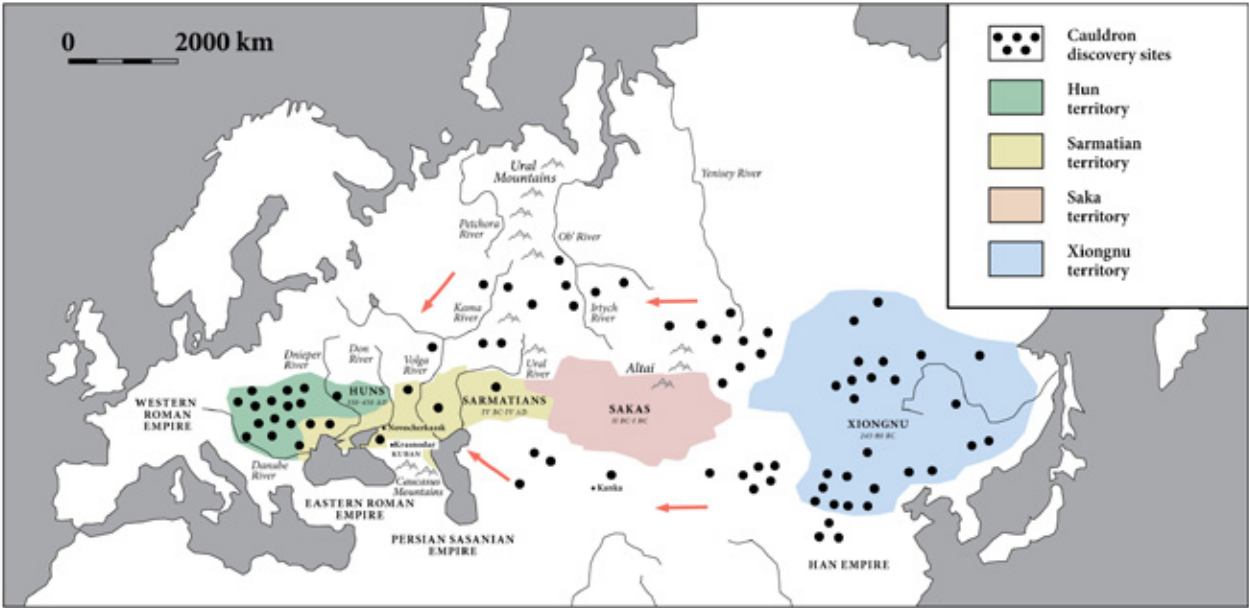


Fig. 10. Medium



Fig. 11. Small





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Fig. 9. See entry 22



Fig. 8



Fig.12



Fig.13



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Fig. 7. Wolf Tamga.



IRON AGE

4th Century BC – 4th AD



5. Figure of an Owl-Man

3rd century BC – 2nd AD

Upper Kama River Basin, Perm Krai, Cis-Urals Russia

Bronze

7.7 cm high

Boris Erenburg

The bronze Ural-Siberian figure of the Owl-Man draws intriguing connections between myth, symbolism, and cultural beliefs. In the famed Babylonian relief “Queen of the Night” (see fig. 2 on page 82), on exhibit at the British Museum, the underworld’s mistress is encircled by owls, featuring owl wings and claws. This ancient artist defines the nocturnal bird realm as the underworld.

Siberian bronze artwork similarly graces deities with owl-crowned faces, often representing the human-owl fusion with striking round eyes. This owl symbolism is rooted in the creature’s unique ability to see in the day and night with equal clarity. The Khanty people believe an owl’s eyes encompass multiple circles or rings, shifting to correspond with the time of day. According to their mythology, owls emerged as a distinct breed of birds destined to eradicate imperceptible, malevolent spirits that haunt the night, and evil spirit-embodied rodents. Consequently, the owl’s nocturnal prowess as a hunter was reflected in arts and crafts.

The Man-Owl, notably depicted with one leg shorter than the other, is found on Permic plaques from the medieval era. This physical deformity carries an intriguing mythic significance, evidenced in the mythology of several cultures and linked to the blacksmith profession. Crippled deities, like the Greek Hephaestus, Scandinavian Völund, Scythian Targitaus, and the celestial blacksmith Kurdalagon of Ossetian-Narts, collectively establish blacksmiths as border deities who straddle the realm of the living and the realm of ore, fire, death. The expression “one foot in the grave” provides historical context for the blacksmith’s limp—a connection to the world of the deceased, hidden from the living. Limping figures appear in several cultures, including the Russian fairy tales “Baba Yaga, bony leg” and “Verlioka, lame leg”.

Amidst the growth of Christianity, the Scandinavian blacksmith god Velund metamorphosed into the devil Voland, incorporating the blacksmith’s limp into Satan’s mythology. Yet blacksmiths also possess healing attributes, such as tempering magical iron weapons for greater toughness and nurturing communal well-being.

The owl’s limp is also reflected in Mansi legends, and cult hammers were found at their sanctuaries. As late as the 20th Century, belief in the owl god persisted in the Khanty-Mansi autonomous region, where it was considered the patron deity of the settlement of Khurumpaul. Stories recount the owl Yipyg-oika’s battles against the forest spirit Mys-na. The owl fell into the river—symbolizing the clash between fire and water—and injured his leg.

Thunder deities are often associated with blacksmith gods, representing elemental rulers. Siberian belief suggests singing the owl’s song in its entirety could trigger winter snow or summer storms. In folklore, the Northern Sosva Voguls venerated an owl-shaped wind spirit named Eastern Wind Man. The Mansi recount an instance where an owl’s arrival heralded a necessary sacrifice, ultimately curing a severely ill woman.

Medieval perceptions of the owl underscore its pivotal role. As a guardian against night spirits, a forger of mystical arms, and a manipulator of weather, the owl embodied a deity of great significance. Yet, its association with the spirit realm underscored its treacherous allure; the owl’s hooting was considered to be laughter, which foreshadowed a loved one’s impending demise.

6. Bird Figure with Five Faces on its Chest

3rd century BC – 2nd AD
Ust-Poluy culture
Poluy River Basin, Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, West Siberia, Russia
Bronze
10.3 cm wide x 11.2 cm high

Boris Erenburg

This artifact is a window into the Ust-Poluy culture from the early Iron Age. It stands out from the mosaic of Ural and Siberian traditions. Though our understanding of this masterpiece remains speculative due to the lack of surviving similar artifacts, we can attempt to reconstruct its lost significance. The folk beliefs of the Ural and Siberian peoples provide a multifaceted perspective.

Central to these beliefs is the notion that every individual possesses five souls. The first among these is the “breath soul,” inseparable from the body in life, it is destined to transmigrate into the body of a child after death. Often envisioned as a bird—including many varieties, from falcons to ducks—this soul concept inspired women to embellish their hair with metal bird ornaments such as ravens, hawks, and magpies. The following native phrases illustrate this tradition: “Adorned with copper birds are the braids,” and “On one braid run sable, on the other, birds flutter.”

After death, the soul of each Ural and Siberian person passes into the grave, or to a dedicated doll called an “ittherma,” crafted for them soon after their passing. The soul, often thought to emanate from one’s hair, could be obliterated through scalping.

At night, the “dream soul” embarks on journeys during sleep, sometimes straddling the borders between worlds. It is crucial not to wake a sleeper too abruptly for fear of causing the soul to flee permanently from the body, leading to madness. Visualized as a cuckoo or capercaillie, this separated soul could encounter malevolent spirits, but shamans could intervene to restore the soul to the body. This scenario is the source of the Russian phrase “sleepy capercaillie.”

Upon death, the third soul descends to the Lower World, dwelling there for a time that mirrors the length of time they spent between worlds. Subsequently, the soul metamorphoses into an insect, then ceases to exist.

The fourth soul, the “health soul,” ideally stays within the body, but may stray due to sorcery or misfortune, causing illness. Shamans, with the aid of assisting spirits, can reclaim the stray soul at the realm boundaries, using persuasion or coercion to return them to their rightful place.

The fifth soul, the “strength soul,” has the power to sever from the body and transform into a malevolent spirit, often controlled by shamans to combat adversaries. Souls of deceased shamans and twins posed great danger while untamed. To contain this threat, the soul is tethered to the grave using a pole adorned with an image of the departed and a bird featuring dog-like ears a guardian against evil enchantments. When left uncontrolled, stray souls were believed to transform into werewolves, vampires, and other cultural monsters, while the pole transformed into a wooden stake.

The fourth and fifth souls played pivotal roles in burial rituals. The deceased’s face was washed with water four or five times—four times for women, five for men—paving the way for each soul’s departure. Similarly, the hair was combed four or five times with a comb that was then discarded. A woman would loop four or five threads through a needle, passing it around the deceased’s body several times. Simultaneously, the body was encircled by four or five hawthorn branches, meant to exorcize the soul.





7. Plaque of an Anthropomorphic Figure

5th century BC – 3rd AD
Gaynsky District, Perm Krai, Cis-Urals Russia
Bronze
9.5 cm wide x 12.6 cm high

Boris Erenburg

Here is a remarkable example of ancient Siberian bronze casting from between the 5th century BC and the 3rd century CE, executed in the “skeletal” style. It represents ancient Siberian mysteries from the Scythian-Sarmatian culture.

Researchers around the world have only just begun the meticulous task of understanding the beliefs, myths, gods, rituals, and ancient symbols of cultures that flourished for millennia across this vast territory. Equidistant between the most advanced civilizations of the ancient world, between those in the Near East, Ancient China, India, and those in Hellenistic and barbaric Europe, the peoples of the Urals and Siberia shared a rich synthesis of traditions.

This object from these ancient peoples is an enigma. Set within a circle, a mysterious symbol resembling a character in a hieroglyph has only eyes and a mouth. No one to date has been able to unravel its symbolism. Nevertheless, many objects with similar motifs and different designs have been found.

The Sarmatians, like classical Iranians, venerated fire and the solar deity. Discs adorned with solar symbols like circles and radiating rays embellished sanctuaries and may also have decorated the armor of warriors and their war horses. Sarmatian goddesses of fire were marked with a solar emblem, a circle on their foreheads. Rings crowned the pommels of Sarmatian swords and daggers.

The ancient inhabitants of the Urals and Siberia produced an immense number of solar symbols. Depictions of the solar deity on plates in the animal style and traces of the fire cult in funeral rites are both characteristic of medieval Uralic tribes.

Fire cults endured. The Ossetians had rituals which entailed “feeding” fires. They are mentioned in the Nart Saga, a compilation of epic tales comprising the ancient mythology of the Caucasus. It is also known that fire-feeding rituals were performed by the Khanty and Mansi. In the Ob-Ugrian culture, fire took on various roles: the fire in a hearth warned of impending misfortune, while fire in nature accompanied the deceased to the cemetery. Fire was also associated with numerous taboos. Finally, yet perhaps most importantly, fire was believed to be alive, possessing a soul that dwelled in the blue edges of flames.

Historian and ancient art scholar André Verstandig describes the belief system of these Siberian and Uralic peoples as follows:

“At the top of their pantheon is Numi Torum, their great god, a celestial divinity largely inspired by the Tengri, who occupied the High Heaven of the Altaic peoples. They were depicted on sun discs and spinning wheels as figures with radiant faces. His wife is Kaltash Ekva, the goddess of fertility, whose characteristics and attributes include a horse, a fish, and a beaver-skin cloak, reminiscent of the Zoroastrian deity Aredvi Sura Anahita. Their youngest son was of the same Iranian origin. He came from Mir-Susne-Khum, the celestial horseman, guarantor of pacts and intercessor for humans, whose functions are reminiscent of the triumphant figure Mithra. The family also included his elder brother, Em-Vosh-Iki, the bear god who shared with humans the ability to stand upright and whose origins can be traced back to the cult of the bear. The bear god has been worshiped in northern Eurasia since the Palaeolithic period. Em-Vosh-Iki’s origins can also be traced to Numi Torum’s rival brother Khul Otyr, the much-feared master of the lower world and subterranean waters, who spread disease across the earth by shaking the hem of his cloak.”

8. Plaque of an Anthropomorphic Figure

5th century BC – 3rd AD
River Vychegda, Kortkerosky District, Komi Republic, Cis-Urals Russia
Bronze
12.8 cm wide x 14.6 cm high

Boris Erenburg

Presented here is an artifact of profound antiquity, characterized by its minimalistic style, yet shrouded in enigmatic significance. Bronze images with comparable designs are documented, but their symbolism remains a subject of ongoing research and interpretation. While prevailing hypotheses suggest a connection to solar or lunar deities, we aim to introduce additional conjectures. Among these is the consideration of the ancient and intricate symbol of the Ouroboros—a serpent or dragon devouring its own tail.

The Ouroboros, in ancient Greek οὐροβόρος, is a “tail-devouring” serpent curled in a circle, biting its own tail. It is one of the oldest symbols known to humanity. However, the origin of this symbol and the exact time frame when it first arose have been impossible to ascertain.

One theory is that the symbol of Ouroboros entered Western culture from Ancient Egypt, where the earliest depictions of the serpent devouring its tail date back to the period from 1600 to 1100 BCE. It may have symbolized eternity, the universe, and the cycle of death and rebirth. Some historians suggest the symbol migrated from Egypt to ancient Greece, where it represented a process without a beginning or end. The pervasiveness of similar images found in the cultures of Scandinavia, India, China, and Greece, makes pinpointing its origins challenging.

The symbol of Ouroboros continues to be actively used in modern culture, appearing in films, novels, mystical teachings, philosophy, and in personal applications such as amulets and tattoos. Fully understanding all the different meanings of the Ouroboros has been elusive, since it is one of the most symbolically rich and ancient symbols ever created. In Norse mythology, the Ouroboros is called the serpent Jormungand, which encircles the Earth.

It’s possible the bronze circle containing the geometric symbol represents the image of the Cosmic Serpent.

The Ural bronzes contain numerous depictions of a serpent devouring its tail. In artifacts from western Siberia, there is a person with paddles surrounded by the body of a huge serpent. This symbology captures a scene where the hero fearlessly rows through waves to confront the serpent. A bronze plate from the Perm Krai may be the illustration of a myth where three heroes set out to catch the serpent, with the bait being the head of a bear. The image captures the moment when the enormous serpent is about to swallow the head of the forest’s master. Similar to how Thor severed the head of a bull and used it for bait, the Perm hero seized a bear’s head for bait.

Another equally intriguing association with this ancient and archaic artifact is the image of the spider. The wonders and images of antiquity have been preserved in such stories and illustrated by Siberian inhabitants in Perm bronze artifacts.

In the sky, a giant spider mother reigns, the mother of all spiders. Spiders, appearing as extinguished stars, represent the souls of people. They die in the sky, fading and then falling to the ground. The enormous home of the mother ancestor is at the source of a river, surrounded by a steel fence or net reminiscent of a web. In the sky, the web is hung by the gods to dry, and fish scales, which represent stars, become trapped within it.

The spider mother ties invisible threads, called bangos, to people. When a thread breaks, the person dies, returning to their mother, the mistress of the land of shadows. The spider mother winds up the bangos into balls and devours them. This great spider rules the realm of the dead.

The main hero in Selkup folklore, the boy Itte, often takes the form of a spider, son of the spider mother. In Selkup drawings, attention is drawn to the celestial spider mother’s abdomen. She carries a sack with unborn spiderlings, the souls of people.

Some Perm bronze artifacts present the Great Spider in the form of a female goddess surrounded by bird-men. She is connected to other spiders and to people, the souls of future human generations.





9. Bird Figure with an Anthropomorphic Face and Large Ears

3rd century BC – 4th AD, early Iron Age

Ob' River Basin, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, West Siberia, Russia

Bronze

13.2 cm high

Boris Erenburg

Birds played a significant role in the lives of artisans who worked in the animal style of the Ural and Siberian cultures. Gods could transform into birds. Earth was created with the help of a bird that dove into the water at the command of a god, bringing up bits of dry land from its depths.

Birds with anthropomorphic faces were believed to be ancestors of the people who created the animal style in ancient times. They are messengers of the gods, flying between three worlds, and have either one or three heads. Bird features, such as goose and duck feet, are often found in jingling pendants and ornaments on women's attire. Women wore headdresses with protective bird images. They believed that eagles were the assistants of gods and leaders. Winged dogs and moose-birds were the assistants of shamans.

In the Western Siberian animal style, images of the gosling were widespread. It represents Mir-Susne-Khum, protector of people and a son of the celestial god.

The ancient world of Ural and Siberian beliefs was also populated by bird monsters. These dangerous creatures appear both on the ground and in the sky. Based on the accounts of Siberian inhabitants, ethnographer Galina Pelikh describes various types of bird-monsters.¹ The fearsome spirit Kinglanka is a bird-human who captures people, carries them to the tops of tall trees or to underground caves, and drinks their blood. Its body is covered in iron feathers. The voice of Kinglanka resembles thunder and a human being will not survive after hearing its cry.

The malevolent forest spirit Mashe-Karra takes the form of a human with bird-like feet instead of legs. It has sharp, iron-like claws and its entire body is covered in gray down feathers. When encountering a person, Mashe-Karra turns its back to them, in order to strike them with its sharp claws.

¹ "The History of Selkup Shamanism" // Tomsk State University 1964, Vol. 167.

10. Anthropomorphic Figure

5th century BC – 3rd AD

Kurgan Oblast, West Siberia, Russia

Bronze

9 cm wide x 21.6 cm high

Broken in the middle, now repaired

Boris Erenburg

This bronze figure of a Kulai deity was crafted between the 5th century BC and the 3rd century CE. Artifacts this large (21.6 cm) rarely survive to the present day. The artistic language of this artifact is different when compared with the widely recognized bronze works of the Kulai culture, characterized by disproportionately large heads adorned with various symbols, and tiny limbs. Here, an angular schematic figure stands in an archway, legs spread wide, with elongated limbs, a sculpted face, and a depiction of three simplified, anthropomorphic figures on its chest. It seems to beseech the viewer to proceed no further.

Scholars believe this figure is a chthonic deity associated with the Moon God among Siberian tribes. The moon spends a significant portion of its time beyond mortal sight, emerging only at night from a subterranean world, the realm of the dead. The archway symbolizes the transition from one dimension to another, a journey between worlds.

Many ancient beliefs and images were brought to the Urals and Siberia from cultures in the ancient East. The prototype of the moon deity could possibly correspond to other deities such as Sin in Akkadian mythology, or Nanna in Sumerian mythology.

Nanna, the Sumerian moon god, may have referred to the full moon, while Su-en, later renamed Sin, represented the crescent moon. Nanna was closely connected to cattle herds that sustained the people who lived in the marshes of the lower Euphrates. The city of Ur, in the same region, was a central hub for Nanna's worship. The crescent moon, Nanna's symbol, was sometimes depicted with the horns of a great bull. Nanna brought fertility and prosperity to the cowherds, governing water, reed growth and progeny, resulting in the reliable availability of dairy products. Nanna's consort Ningal was the goddess of reeds. Each spring, Nanna's worshippers in Nippur recreated his mythic visit to his father Enlil through a ritual journey, carrying the first dairy products of the year. Gradually, Nanna took on a more human form, evolving from a bull or boat (due to his crescent emblem) to a cowherd or boatman.

Sin was portrayed as an old man with a flowing beard, a wise but unfathomable god wearing a headdress of four horns surmounted by a crescent moon.





11. Ust-Poluy Anthropomorphic Figure

3rd century BC – 2nd AD
Poluy River Basin, Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, West Siberia, Russia
Ust-Poluy culture
Bronze
21 cm high

Boris Erenburg

This anthropomorphic figure is a relic from the Ust-Poluy culture, an enigmatic civilization that thrived between 300 BC and 200 CE in northwestern Siberia. This culture takes its name from the archaeological site of a fortified city situated along the Poluy River, near its convergence with the Ob River.

These artifacts produced by the Ust-Poluy culture are stylistically similar to another notable Siberian culture—the Kulai—despite the considerable geographical distance between them.

Another piece of the same origin and subject, but where the anthropomorphic face is crowned by a bear's head, is also presented in our exhibitional space. Both artworks feature flat, slightly outwardly curved anthropomorphic figures with elongated heads.

Distinguished by their brown hue, a result of the high iron content within the bronze alloy, Ust-Poluy objects are intriguing and visually unique.

Our current understanding of this culture, its historical significance, and the symbolism underlying its art forms remain limited. The underlying secrets of their ancient beliefs are found in present day traditions that survive in the Ural and Siberian regions, as well as in abundant bronze artifacts from later epochs that exhibit similar attributes and symbols.

Folklore narratives and rituals, documented extensively by ethnographers during the 20th century, offer a glimpse into how we might decode these symbols. The most distinctive feature of these figures is the disproportionate human form. It is unlikely that this effect was unintentional, given the meticulous precision exhibited in their depiction of animals. This deliberate choice reflects an intention to convey the supernatural nature of these entities, including spirits, deities of the subterranean realm, and totemic embodiments. Although this particular figure lacks animal attributes, it does have a limping stance, a consistent trait among all known figures in this style. Ancient artisans intentionally crafted one leg shorter than the other, creating a deliberate asymmetry that contrasts with the figure's symmetrical facial features. The limping motif is also seen in later Ural and Siberian art, frequently in depictions of Owl-Men and heroes of the underworld.

There may be a connection across cultures between limping deities and the blacksmith archetype. Mythological figures such as the Greek Hephaestus, Scandinavian Völund, Scythian Targitaus, and the celestial blacksmith Kurdalagon of the Ossetian-Nart people all share a limp. Blacksmith deities often straddle the boundary between the underworld of ore and minerals, and the celestial realm of fire. This theme is illustrated in the Russian expression “one foot in the grave,” which highlights the blacksmith's limp, and symbolizes their connection to the realm of the dead. Blacksmiths also possess healing powers to enhance magical iron weapons, and improve the well-being of the community.

Numerous other characters appear in myths across these cultures, such as the Russian folklore figure “Baba Yaga with the bone leg” and “Verlioka, lame leg.” As Christianity spread across the region, the Scandinavian blacksmith god Völund transformed into the devil Voland, and his limp became one of Satan's defining physical characteristics.

12. Kulai Anthropomorphic Figure Standing on a Fish

3rd century BC – 2nd AD

Kulai culture

Kazym river, Beloyarsky District, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, West Siberia, Russia

Bronze

8.8 cm high

Boris Erenburg

This is an example of the kind of enigmatic art that flourished in communities along the Ob River and its tributaries in western Siberia, a biome with marshy meadows and lakes. The Kulai culture thrived in this region between the 5th century BC and the 5th century CE. Its cultural domain stretched along the banks of the Ob River, from the modern settlement of Narym to the city of Surgut, a ride of several hundred kilometers by boat.

The name “Kulai” is derived from a hill called “Gora Kulaika” or Mountain Kulai, a site excavated in 1920.

As with the Ust-Poluy culture, we can only speculate about what this figure was meant to portray, but scholars believe it is a deity from the underworld. An immense head supported by tiny limbs, in the absence of a body, is perched atop a fish. The fish is a chthonic creature, residing in the underworld. The role of the fish in the myths and legends of the Ural and Siberian peoples is significant.

In ancient Iran, it was believed that the Earth was upheld by a bull positioned atop a colossal fish, swimming in the ocean of the world. The inhabitants of Siberia could have encountered depictions of this cosmogram—a cosmology depicted in a flat, geometric form—on Iranian artifacts. Traders ventured to the Middle East via water routes in pursuit of valuable furs. The goods they traded for furs included items made of silver. The world’s largest collection of Sasanian silver items was found in the Urals and Siberia, far beyond their origin in the Middle East.

In the mythology of the Urals, the bull transforms into a moose standing on a fish. A moose signifies the Earth. In another myth, a hybrid of a beaver and other animals stands on the back of a massive pike. When the pike reaches the age of 1,000, it metamorphoses into a colossal monster, the Koliko zara. The creature’s flesh putrefies after death, so their treacherous habitat was referred to as a “purolto,” lake of black water.

In the 19th century, researcher Nikolai Grigorovsky collected numerous details about Koliko zara in the Narym region. The creature was sometimes referred to as kamya-eta, and old moose, shaman, and women could also transform into this underwater pike-turned-monster. They believed an old moose never dies a natural death. Sensing the approach of death, the moose walks to a lake where it transforms into a kamya-eta. At times, the kamya-eta swims close to the shore and gazes into the taiga, reminiscing about its past life.

Belief in these monsters in taiga lakes continued for hundreds of years. To this day, the Selkup people do not catch or kill the enormous taiga pikes, unsure if they might actually encounter a former moose, elderly grandparent, or great-grandparent.





13. Kulai Anthropomorphic Figure with Face Markings

3rd century BC – 2nd AD

Kulai culture

Kazym River, Beloyarsky District, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, West Siberia, Russia

Bronze

11.2 cm high

Boris Erenburg

Emerging from the annals of history, a remarkable bronze anthropomorphic figure from the Kulai culture captivates our imagination. This enigmatic artifact bears symbols of profound significance, an encoded narrative echoing with whispers of ancient beliefs and rituals.

Upon closer inspection, the symbols depicted on this figure evoke the likeness of two creatures—fish or perhaps, intriguingly, beavers. These symbols unravel tales of chthonic beings intertwined with the depths of the underworld, a realm beneath the watery veil where mysterious forces converge. These creatures, symbols of an otherworldly existence, bridge the gap between the terrestrial and the subterranean, illuminating the intricate cosmology of the Kulai culture.

Myth and history intertwine as echoes of divine entities, once revered as human-fish beings by Siberian communities, have evolved into complex narratives over time. The ebb and flow of generations, along with the nuances of oral tradition, have contributed to the metamorphosis of these beings. Among them, the enigmatic fish-human deity has undergone a transformation, evolving into a fearsome entity that encapsulates the complexity of mythos.

As history beckons us into the realm of the Kveli people—a lost tribe—new layers of intrigue unfold. This tribe worshiped cryptic fish entities, the Kveli-Kozhari, as deities. These entities, embodying both human and fish characteristics, occupy a unique space within the tapestry of folklore, straddling realms of existence.

Journeying deeper into Siberia's cultural mosaic, the beaver emerges as another chthonic creature. This creature's submerged existence lends itself to mythic tales. For the Vasyugan Khanty people, the beaver holds the secrets of an esoteric worldview, boasting 47 limbs, most hidden from human eyes. Bronze sculptures of beavers, diverse and mystical, resonate with ancient narratives.

The great goddess Kaltash Ekva can transform into a beaver. Beavers guard the boundaries of our world or surround the central figure of the composition like the bodyguards of a deity. By riding on a beaver, as with a horse or a dragon, the hero passes into another world. The role of the beaver as a carrier persisted in Russian fairy tales like in this excerpt: "Ivan the Russian warrior sat on a beaver and rode across the sea, crossed it, and then dismounted from the beaver." The beaver is a figure closely connected to higher deities. In the Altai, the mighty Erlik takes cover in an underground beaver skin blanket. According to the Avesta, religious texts of Zoroastrianism, the Iranian goddess Anahita wears a coat made of 300 beavers, and in one passage she states: "...its fur blinds the beholder with the brilliance of gold and silver."

14. Kulai Anthropomorphic Figure with Face Markings

3rd century BC – 2nd AD

Kulai culture

Ob' River Basin, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, West Siberia, Russia

Bronze

13.9 cm high

Boris Erenburg

Before you stands an ancient deity from the underworld bearing a hallmark shared with beings from the realm of the dead—lameness—while adorned with two lizards on its cheeks. In Kulai culture, lizards are chthonic creatures of the subterranean realm.

The lizard is a small yet potent dragon. The giant Menk makes its abode inside the lizard. When a lizard's tail is broken off, it signifies Menk's departure. At dusk, lizards emerge from their hiding places to gaze upon the setting sun.

In modern Mansi beliefs, killing a lizard is a commendable act. It is thought that the creature, as it gazes at the sun with its mouth open, is urged by a demon to try to swallow it. Red snakes, who often resemble lizards, are guardians of the sky, and their immense yet invisible bodies cover the world.

On the front of Selkup shamanic drums, a lizard is depicted at the center. On these drums and in drawings, the lizard's body divides the world into two realms: the domain of headless dead and the realm of living beings. The lizard demarcates the divisions between space and time, day and night, upper and underworlds, and the domains of humans and spirits.

The image of a dragon-lizard beneath celestial figures in Permian bronze signifies the boundary of the underworld. Sometimes, for example, the lizard appears beneath a bear in the realm of the dead. Bronze depictions of lizards are at times adorned with silver ribbons.

Permian dragons were seen as transportation to another world, ferrying humans and spirits across the boundary between worlds, and returning them elevated to the ranks of the immortals. The Permian dragon-lizard has two heads, and both are vigilant day and night, ready to move in any direction.

Starting with the Babylonian god Marduk, who had a horned dragon, Mushkhush, it was believed that owning such a creature bestowed upon its master the status of a deity. Small and large dragon-lizards are found among nearly all Permian deities, from the human-haired protectors to the main trio of Uralic gods. The Permian "holy family" includes a father, a mother, and a child—all depicted as riding on a dragon-lizard. Dragons were seen as invaluable, connecting the realms of gods and humans, the heavens and Earth, water and air.





MIDDLE AGES

4th – 11th Centuries



15. Plaque Illustrating the Clawed Goddess as Creator of the Universe

1st–4th century CE, late Iron Age

Purportedly from Medvezhskaya, Pechora River, Komi Republic, Cis Urals Russia

Bronze

8,5 cm high

Kassou Grusenmeyer

In this legend, we focus on a meticulously crafted plaque, measuring 8.5 cm in height and 5 mm thick with a nearly square proportion. The central figure, devoid of clear gender or age, has a face that shows no emotion, yet the open mouth appears as if drawing breath. Its arms, reminiscent of slender, drooping wings devoid of distinct hands, gesture towards touching two large, symmetrically opposing spiral motifs below. The voluptuous legs, slightly apart and lacking articulated feet, stand sturdily upon these motifs. One end of each spiral unfolds into a singular tip, while the opposite end bifurcates, producing two distinct tips. The motif of the double spiral resembles a pair of intense, fearsome eyes, suggesting the gaze of an omnipresent spirit. On each side of the central figure, on a plane a just behind her, appear two figures. These side entities, clearly of lower hierarchical order, have heads slightly smaller but identical to the central figure. Their combined bodies consist of only wings, also devoid of hands, torsos, or legs. A bar spans the top, resting on all five heads. The design is accentuated with openwork, deftly tracing the contours of each element.

ROOTS & ARCHETYPE

As pointed out by Boris Erenburg, the plaque under discussion holds a profound connection to a group of eight significant plaques discovered in Cherdyn, located in the Perm region (fig. 1). These Cherdyn plaques are generally considered to be absolute highlights of the Permian Bronze corpus.¹ While they initially received a dating of the 7th–8th centuries, subsequent scholarly investigation has revised their dating to around the 1st to 4th centuries, equating to the late Iron Age. This revised dating places our plaque within the same temporal framework.²

Our plaque was found hundreds of kilometers away from Cherdyn, in the Komi Republic, situated approximately 500 km to the north, purportedly near Medvezhskaya village, on the banks of the Pechora River. Despite this geographical distance, the artistic style of our plaque maintains a striking resemblance to the Cherdyn examples.

The resemblances between our plaque and the Cherdyn plaques are evident in various aspects. Notably, both feature figures with wing-like arms and spiral claws for hands or feet. Moreover, both our plaque and the Cherdyn plaques feature a distinct protruding, hooked nose that stands out against the flat casting, reminiscent of a bird's beak.

¹ Ernits 2001: 238–239.

² Boris Erenburg, personal communication, email of July 8, 2023.

Fig. 1. A group of eight bronze plaques from Cherdynsky Museum of Local Lore Cherdyn district, Perm Krai, Russia. 1st–3rd centuries CE.

15,7 cm. ChKM-1927/1. 15,7 cm. ChKM-1927/2.



16,9 cm. ChKM-1927/3. 16,4 cm. ChKM-1927/4.



14,5 cm. ChKM-1929. 16,4 cm. ChKM-1930.



16,1 cm. ChKM-1931. 16,2 cm. ChKM-1932.



Fig. 2. The “Burney Relief,” also known as the “Queen of the Night,” is believed to depict either Ishtar or, as some researchers suggest, more likely her older sister, Ereshkigal. Mesopotamia, Southern Iraq, ca. 19th or 18th century BC. H 49.50 cm. British Museum 2003,0718.1. Source photo: Wikipedia open domain.

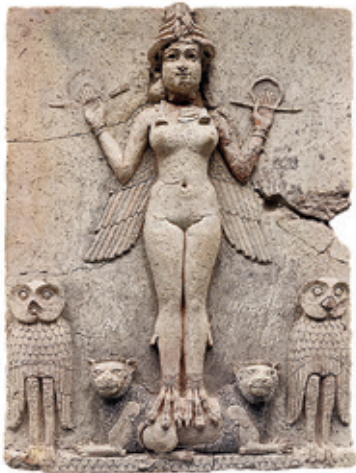


Fig. 3. Horus cippus, Egypt; Chlorite schist, 3rd century BC. Horus-the-child stands naked on two crocodiles grasping animals (snakes, scorpions, lion, gazelle), flanked by avian standards (Horus-falcon, feather) and surmounted by the head of the dwarf-god Bes. New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, 20.2.23, Rogers Fund, 1920. Source: Wikimedia Commons



While a few figures on the Cherdyn plaques exhibit distinctly feminine characteristics, scholarly consensus suggests that all the plaques portray a goddess figure,³ reflecting ancient mythological patterns rooted in a matriarchal tradition.

Throughout history, the female figure has held significant prominence within Uralic mythology, particularly during the Paleolithic era,⁴ when Uralian communities, living as hunters and gatherers, focused their beliefs on female nature spirits dwelling within natural landscapes like forests and bodies of water like rivers, lakes, and springs. The transition to a sedentary lifestyle during the Neolithic era led to the transformation of these animistic beliefs into a central agrarian goddess, often referred to as the Great Mother or Earth Mother. Traits of this goddess iconography, including depictions of female deities with animal limbs, persisted from the Bronze Age into the Iron Age.⁵

It is likely that the hybrid winged goddess of our plaque is a descendant of the Neolithic bird-goddess. Interestingly, antecedents of the bird-goddesses of the Permian plaques we are discussing have been traced back to the classical world of Mesopotamia.⁶ Erenburg draws a connection with the Sumerian goddess Inanna (also known as Ishtar; Mesopotamian, ca. 5000-1500 BC).⁷ Inanna is traditionally associated with the astral and underworld realms, and she is often depicted with wings and, at times, clawed bird feet. A similar association is made by a Finnish blogger who specifically refers to the winged and clawed female in the British Museum’s Burney Relief, known as the “Queen of the Night,” whom he identifies, not with Inanna, but with the Mesopotamian demoness Lilith (fig. 2).⁸ A further ancestral association has been proposed by L.D. Graham, who aligns the Cherdyn plaques with the iconography of the Egyptian reliefs of Horus cippus (fig. 3), suggests that it likely set the precedent for the Mesopotamian Master of Animals motif (Fig. 4).⁹

³ Autio, 2001: 175–76; P. Andreeva, 2018: 266–71; <https://www.perm-animal-style.ru/photo/goddess/>

⁴ For instance, as seen in individual motifs in Paleolithic paintings in the Ignatievka Cave in the southern Urals.

⁵ Haarmann & Marler, 2007: 63.

⁶ Iranian influences in Permian metallurgical art have been suspected since the early 1900s, see A. Spitsyn, *Shamanskie Izobrazhenia* (Saint Petersburg: Russian Archaeological Society, 1906).

⁷ Erenburg, email of July 8, 2023; continuing his hypothesis, Erenburg holds that the goddess Inanna diffused to North Eurasia through various stops. Responsible for the diffusion were the Scythians (Pontic steppe, circa 8th–3rd century BC), who were known for engendering a constant influx of cultural and artistic exchange from West to East Eurasia, and vice versa, at the same time bridging the Siberian world. The first descendant would have been the Hittite goddess Arinna (Anatolia, ca. 1600-1200 BC). As the Sun Goddess of the Underworld, the link to the chthonic realm continued.

⁸ “Pohjoinen Matriarkaatti? Mitä Permin Jumalattaret Kertovat?”, in *Vanha Uskonto ja Uusi Ajatellu*, published November 27, 2009, accessed August 8, 2023, <https://pakanat.blogspot.com/2009/11/pohjoinen-matriarkaatti-mita-permin.html>

⁹ Graham, 2020: 447: “While many types of Permian bronze animal plaque may indeed be purely local in concept and design, “goddess plaques” of the [Cherdyn] type... seem to have their roots in the Ancient Near Eastern template known as the *Master/Mistress of Animals*. Their

COSMIC DIMENSIONS

The Inanna hypothesis presented by Erenburg offers a perspective that enhances our contextual understanding of the symbolism associated with the winged goddess of the Cherdyn plaque type. Due to her association with the astral and underworld realms, and her avian capacities, “she serves as a bridge between humans and another reality, connecting the world of spirits and the deceased.” This unique capability, allowing her to journey between realms, positions Inanna as a pivotal link bridging diverse cosmic spheres. This then suggests that figures on the Cherdyn plaques, including the one we are examining, don a similar mantle — as intermediaries bridging human experience with the ethereal or otherworldly domains.

Among scholars versed in the Permian Animal Style, there’s a prevailing consensus that these plaques, which often showcase a composite plot encapsulating a multi-layered mythical narrative, act as microcosmic representations. The predominant interpretation aligns with a three-tiered cosmology: delineating the subterranean, terrestrial, and celestial worlds. Beings that inhabit these worlds are symbolically represented according to their corresponding realm. The subterranean world, perceived as a lower or hidden earthly domain, is inhabited by creatures like fish, lizards, pangolins, bears, elks, horses, and reptilian hybrids. Many of these creatures double as totemic vehicles for the central deity. Meanwhile, the terrestrial sphere is populated by humans and a diverse range of mammals, while the celestial domain is the province of birds and ethereal, stag-like entities. At the heart of this triad, typically, stands a goddess, reigning supreme over the terrestrial realm. She embodies the crucial role of a connector or unifier, tying together the disparate cosmic realms. In essence, she stands as the axis mundi, bridging these diverse realms, a role reminiscent of her Mesopotamian counterpart, Inanna.

SPIRALLING CLAWS

The claw motif consistently appears within Perm art. However, in examples like the Cherdyn plaques, its portrayal remains subtle and proportionate. What stands out strikingly on our plaque is the pair of claws. Given their size, almost half that of our winged goddess, they are notably disproportionate.

similarity to the popular Egyptian derivative known as the Horus cippus—a template known to have percolated back into the Ancient Near East, including northern Mesopotamia and Anatolia,—is particularly strong. Transfer of the *Master/Mistress of Animals* motif from the Near East to the Ural region is likely to have occurred via the Scythians of the 1st millennium BC; among bronzes of the appropriate period from Luristan are many *Master of Animals* motifs with cippus-like features. If the proposal advanced in this communication is correct, then the Permians co-opted a version of the *Master of Animals* motif into their visual vocabulary; ...” Relying on the analysis (mostly based on Khanty mythology) offered by a Perm-based website and virtual museum named *Perm Animal Style* (<https://www.perm-animal-style.ru/photo/goddess/>) Graham, p. 444, further discerns comparable apotropaic and curative functions of the Cherdyn plaques, and of both the Mesopotamian Master/Mistress of Animals and the Egyptian Horus cippus models.

Fig. 4. Master of Animals, standard finial, Luristan; bronze, ca. 1000–600 BC. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, M.76.97.92. Source: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, “Standard Finial”. Source: Wikimedia Commons



Fig. 5. Bronze plaque, Ananyino culture, 8th–3rd century BC, Perm Krai (photo retrieved on August 13, 2023 from <https://www.perm-animal-style.ru/photo/animals/>)



Even though the oversized claws could emphasize the super-natural character of the depicted deity, the imbalance and (even more) the fact that they don't appear to be an integral part of the deity suggest that they likely represent more than just claws. To see them purely as decorative elements would be a mistake, as even the minutest details on any Perm art plaque bear a deeper meaning than mere decoration. Thus, the most fitting interpretation would be to view them symbolically.

Up to this point, we have described these “claws” using the term “spiraling.” While not perfect spirals, their likeness to such a form cannot be ignored. Evidence supporting their identification as spirals comes from another unique plaque. Although this plaque belongs to a different and older culture, the Ananyino culture, they are regionally close, and a historical connection between the spiraling motifs on both pieces appears likely. This plaque, which is void of any figurative element, is composed of two main parts: a pair of spirals rotating in opposite directions situated atop another prominent design which looks like a seven-pronged comb (fig. 5). It's noteworthy that one side of the spirals unfurls in a singular curve, whereas the opposite end terminates in double curves—mirroring the motif patterns on our own plaque. Given these observations, it's persuasive to recognize the motifs on our plaque as spirals and understand them in light of spiral symbolism

Spirals, with their intricate design, embody a sense of movement and vitality. Michel Tranet aptly captures their essence when he describes the spiral as “La spirale est l'image archétypale de la création ou de la dynamique par excellence.”¹⁰ Observing a spiral, one can discern an outward expansion when tracing its path from the center, or a gradual inward contraction when starting from its edges. This fluid transformation, oscillating between absence and abundance, mirrors various dualities prevalent in nature and life: the dichotomies of life/death, light/darkness, day/night, growth/decline, male/female, fertility/sterility, etc. While the symbolism of a single spiral is potent, the message becomes even more expressive when represented by twin spirals rotating counter to each other. Consequently, the complementary nature of the spirals becomes more readily perceived and understood. The harmonious balance of these dual forces finds its epitome in the yin-yang symbol, where two gracefully intertwined spirals coexist in unity. Therefore, it can be derived that the spiral motif inspires the idea of growth, procreation, and regeneration or reincarnation.

CREATION MYTH

Considering the cosmic undertones of our plaque, the paired spirals seem to echo a significant moment often recounted in numerous creation myths

worldwide, particularly those classified as *ex nihilo* creation myths.¹¹ The foundational premise of this class of myths is the emergence of the universe from a dark, primordial ocean of chaos, crafted by a supreme deity. While various renditions exist, a recurring theme illustrates the birth of heaven and earth from an eternal, formless matter. Thus, in the Hebrew book of Genesis, God's creation of Heaven and Earth spans six days. On the first day, with the proclamation, “Let there be light,” He divided darkness from light, establishing the first bipolar foundation in our universe.

Similarly, the Indian creation myth from the Rig Veda (ca. 1500–1000 BC) portrays Indra in a comparable role. Initially, Indra manages to split the primeval mountain, allowing life to burst forth in the form of water and fire. In a subsequent phase, acting as an ever-growing pillar or tree of life (*axis mundi*), Indra props up the sky, which had been lying upon the earth. In doing so, he creates the duality of heaven and earth, enabling the sun to surge and light to escape. These successive stages give rise to an all-pervading dualism of water and fire, darkness and light, life and death, male and female, good and evil, etc.¹²

Returning to our plaque, the central deity takes prominence, reminiscent of the cosmogonic act described in the Vedic narrative. Our winged goddess, serving as the *axis mundi*, seems to support the sky. This sky, in its embryonic state, is represented by a simple bar running across the top, over the five heads. Since there doesn't seem to be a practical reason for the inclusion of the bar in terms of enhancing the plaque's rigidity, it can be inferred that it was purposefully added for a symbolic purpose, according to us, to represent the celestial vault of the sky. A tension in her wings implies a movement upward, as if the vault of the sky was being lifted.

The scrolls underneath are in motion, unfolding in opposite directions. This vividly pictures the moment when life “burst forth in the form of water and fire,” and “an all-pervading dualism of darkness and light, life and death, male and female, good and evil” arose. The wings, symbolic of the high skies, touch the top of the spirals, while the feet, symbolic of the lower realms, stand on the lower edge, opposite end of the spirals. This imagery conveys that the universe is impregnated by an inherent bipolarity.

Let's pause to examine the factors which support our hypothesis: that we are witnessing the depiction of a creation myth. We've delved into the concept of a microcosmic setting, the prominence of a central entity as the *axis mundi*, and the undeniable symbolic interpretation of the spirals and the bar. Yet, the crux of our argument might lie in the limited number of motifs that construct the narrative on this plaque.

¹⁰ Tranet, 1997: 267.

¹¹ Leeming, 2009: 2 ff.

¹² Kuiper, 1975: 9–13.

Fig. 6. Funeral mask. Gypsum and pigments applied onto the skull of a female. Oglakty burial site, Minusinsk region, southern Siberia, Russia. Tashtyk culture, 3rd–4th century. State Hermitage, Saint Petersburg VHB n0 2864/1.



It is widely held that each artifact within Perm art narrates a distinct mythical tale. More often than not, these are complex scenes populated with a range of anthro-zoomorphic characters, whether hybrid or not, all orbiting the central character and giving away a tripartite cosmic structure. Our plaque, however, stands in stark contrast due to its minimalist nature. Dominated by the central deity, there are no additional characters —aside from the side figures we will discuss hereafter. Additionally, customary markers indicating the underworld and heavenly realms are conspicuously missing.

Since the plot of our plaque zeroes in on the universe’s dawn—specifically the moment the sky is lifted and dichotomous identities emerge—nothing else, like humans or animals, had yet come into existence. Therefore, they couldn’t possibly be illustrated in the plaque, which explains their notable absence. This observation lends significant weight to our hypothesis.

Our assumption isn’t necessarily farfetched. Previous interpretations by scholars have identified the central figure cast on the Perm plaques as “the creator of the world and the mother of humankind.”¹³ Or also, as a goddess symbolizing “a healthy and strong woman who was the beginning of everything created with the world, giving life to plants, animals, and humans, and determining their fate. In this, birth, growing, death, and rebirth became personified.”¹⁴

This idea is physically embodied in a famous overmodeled and painted skull from the Tashtyk culture (fig. 6). Only ten such skulls, both male and female, have been recovered. While the male skulls were only painted with striped patterns, the female skulls were covered with spiral designs. Fodor, in attempting to understand this intriguing phenomenon, does not arrive at a satisfactory interpretation. He recaps: “According to some scholars this is the representation of the journey made by the dead person’s soul moving to the other world at a complicated, intricate path (Kuzmin 2006, 350). However, there is an argument opposing this idea: spirals are found only on women’s masks. It is more probable that it was the symbol of the Sun. It is also possible that local population took it over from the Chinese system of symbols, where spiral represented long life, immortality.”¹⁵ None of these explanations seem to convince, except that the alignment with the “Chinese system of symbols” is close. As we have elucidated, we believe that the inherent symbolism of the spiral represents growth following decline, thus regeneration following degeneration, and reincarnation following death. Who else but the female gender is capable of procuring life? The fact that our plaque dates to the same age as the skull reinforces the idea that the concept of linking the mother-creator with the life-giving spiral was a widespread belief within the larger region.

¹³ Sidorov, 1972, as discussed in Autio 2001: 171.

¹⁴ Shutova, 1998, as discussed in Autio 2001: 175.

¹⁵ Fodor 2014: 121.

Similarly, the Sumerian goddess Inanna/Ishtar, to whom the goddesses on the Cherdyn plaques have been traced back,¹⁶ plays a prominent role in the creation myth of ancient Mesopotamia. In the myth, known as the *Enuma Elish*, one aspect of the goddess pertains to her control over creation and destruction. Ishtar’s duality is further evident in her association with both the morning and evening stars. As the morning star, she represents awakening and renewal of life, while, as the evening star, she embodies the descent into the underworld and the darker aspects of existence. This dual role suggests a balance between light and darkness, life and death. With these traits in mind, it is quite possible that Inanna/Ishtar served as an archetypical model for the cosmogonic deity depicted on our plaque.¹⁷

CHÖZH, THE WILD DUCK & KOMI CREATION MYTHS

Further bolstering the identification of the Creation myth, it’s illuminating to note the similarities between the Perm goddesses—with their bird-like features like bulging beak-shaped noses, wings, and three-pronged claws—and ducks that play central roles in the cosmogonic legends of Finno-Ugrian traditions from later periods. A Komi myth, for instance, narrates how “Chozh the Duck swam in the immense primordial Ocean, bearing six Eggs of the Origin of Life. Four eggs fell into the Ocean and two eggs were saved. Two ducklings hatched from the eggs: Yen and Omol. They were two brothers, two opposites—Life and Death, Good and Evil, Truth.”¹⁸ This tale dovetails seamlessly with the symbolism implied by the pair of spirals of our plaque.

A bronze plaque, one in a series of four identical pieces, depicts two opposing ducks, possibly representing Yen and Omol, each carrying a disk (fig. 7). The exact meaning of the depicted scene remains speculative. While the disks might be reminiscent of owl eyes, this interpretation seems less likely given that owls are nocturnal, and the scene suggests the portrayal of a dichotomy. Therefore, they might symbolize the celestial duality of the sun and moon, hence of day and night. Given that the disks rest on the wings of the ducks—a gesture indicative of the heavenly realm—the latter hypothesis seems plausible.¹⁹ In alignment with the tentative symbolism of the scrolling motifs on our plaque, these disks could be emblematic of the inherent dualities in nature and life, with Yen and Omol serving as their embodiment.

Fig. 7. Bronze plaque, one of a series of four. Vuktyl, Podcherem River, Komi Republic, Russia. 5th–8th century. 8,4 x 5,9 cm. State Hermitage, Saint Petersburg GE 600/22-25.



¹⁶ *Vide supra* Erenburg and Graham.

¹⁷ According to Erenburg (email of July 8, 2023), the spiraling foot claws on the goddess in our plaque symbolically refer to the staff-and-ring attributes occasionally held by Inanna in her left and right hands, albeit depicted upside down. These attributes represent her dominion over life and death. The staff symbolizes fertility and growth, while the ring signifies her control over the underworld and the realm of the dead.

¹⁸ Chesnokova 1995: 45–46; alternative transliterations are used by different authors: Chozh , Chyzh, Chözh & Yen and Omol, Jen and Omyl, En and Omöl.

¹⁹ Chesnokova 1995: 45 suggests: “Two large disks resemble the Eggs of the Origin of Life.”

While our plaque, with its prominent scrolls, stands out as an absolute unique artifact, the twin duck plaques, characterized by their enormous disks, are similarly exceptional. Intriguingly, these twin duck plaques were discovered on the banks of the Podcherem River, a tributary of the Pechora, a mere hundred kilometers from where our plaque is believed to have been found. Might this suggest a regional predilection for such designs, or rather for the implied symbolism they surely must carry?

FOUR SIDE FIGURES & TOP BAR

Limerov, who in an in-depth discussion of this Komi myth, arrives at an analysis that may shed light on the significance of the four side figures on our plaque. In his words: “Out of the six eggs laid by the duck, two contain antagonist demiurges and the other four the energies of creation and destruction. That is why the motif of breaking the eggs is so important, as it refers to the release of the energies.”²⁰ We believe that the demiurges are clearly none other than the pair of spirals, while the four side figures are symbolic for the energies responsible for creation and destruction. In a variant of this myth, from Komi-Permyak tradition, the breaking of the egg strengthens the symbolism of the top bar on our plaque, believed to represent the sky’s vault. The story unfolds again in a world conceived as a boundless ocean, with a lone duck as its inhabitant. When this duck lays an egg that subsequently falls into the water, a loon retrieves it. This act causes the egg to break, after which the top half rises to become the sky and the lower half solidifies as the earth.²¹

Admittedly, relying on popular lore to interpret the plot of an ancient plaque can be challenging. This is especially true given that multiple legends could provide alternative explanations for the side figures. In some Finnish creation myths, the duck that lays six eggs eventually gives birth to land and water, the sky and stars, the sun and the moon. In such a context the side figures could be personifications of cosmic entities. In Norse myths, on the other hand, the sky is shouldered by four dwarfs whose names are East, West, North, and South. Instead of fixating on the number four, we should perhaps explore the number five. As it is mentioned elsewhere in this catalogue, is it not that in Uralic belief an individual possesses five souls?²² This may well be, but how to explain the pair of scrolls, the top bar and the individual’s placement in between?

A definitive interpretation of the four side figures’ significance may remain elusive. However, a highly plausible explanation can be derived from the Komi creation myth previously discussed—especially given that our plaque originates from Komi territory. Regardless of the final interpretation, this study provides a solid basis for the thesis that our plaque depicts a particular moment

in the mythological genesis of a Finno-Ugrian universe. We recognize that hypotheses often shrivel with exposure to ongoing research, indicating that they are primarily constructions of the mind. From an art historic point of view, it’s undeniable that the plaque we’ve examined is a unique and profoundly inspiring artifact. The harmonious flow of the composition is mind-blowing, especially when considering that the artist had no traditional models to rely upon, and yet, he or she crafted a masterpiece.

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²⁰ Limerov 2019: 36.

²¹ Konakov 1996: 18; Limerov 2019: 31.

²² See entry 6.

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16. Finial in the Shape of a Moose Head

10th–12th century

Ob' River Basin, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, West Siberia, Russia

Bronze

2.1 cm deep x 10.4 cm high

Boris Erenburg

In the mythology of the Ural and Siberian peoples, the deer and the moose possess the same magical powers. Certain Selkup shamans possessed two “parkas” or costumes. One was made from the hide of a wild male deer for journeys to the Upper World. The other was made from bear hide for travels to the Underworld. On the deer costume, spirits of the Upper World were depicted as winged creatures. On the bear costume, animals from the underworld were portrayed as a mole, snake, or lizard.

In incantations of Nenets shamans, deer images appear alongside ducks: “Heavenly bird, my fiery deer, let the deer come! Let him know to come. He runs amidst the clouds. Heavenly bird, my duck, bring the deer!”

In the sky, the constellation Great Moose shines. From its lofty position, the giant moose watches over the order of life on Earth. Bronze moose-birds sometimes replace moose-men and flank the central deity of the medieval pantheon from both sides.

The Celestial Hunt is an important mythological narrative that has been depicted in both animal-style plaques and folk art of the Khanty and Mansi people.

The celestial moose carried the sun in its antlers. The great bear pursued the moose with its calf. The chase continued all day until sunset. By evening, the bear had caught and killed the moose. Night arrived, and in the darkness, the calf managed to escape beyond the horizon. The next day, the calf had transformed into a grown moose with its own calf. It emerged in the east and raced westward, evading the celestial hunter. Thus, the cycle of day and night came into being.

According to another legend, the Earth is a moose, a colossal creature upon whose back people reside. The river coursing through this land is the moose’s intestine that passes through the body of the mythical beast. The river’s mouth is the great creature’s mouth. The stream that is the river’s source is its tail. Tributaries on the left bank are the moose’s legs. The opposite bank is its back.

When the moose shifts from one leg to another, storms and hurricanes occur. Its spine is the Ural Mountain range, dividing the land into two equal parts. Trees and forests are the creature’s fur, while grass and shrubs are its down. Humans, animals, and birds are insects—crawling in the fur of the giant beast or hovering nearby.

As Selkup people told ethnographer Galina Pelikh, in a state of trance, the shaman enters through the mouth of the river into the inner body of Mother Earth-Moose, passes by the heart, and roams there between its entrails.¹

Within the womb of the moose is an earthly life force that grants life to all living beings on Earth. When the moose breathes out, the life force is expelled. Holding up the moose is the “fish holding the earth aloft with its hairy horn, a fish with a spotted horn” that dwells in the sea. These ancient Siberians believed this fish was so vast and mighty that “it could lift up the very Earth itself.”



¹ “The History of Selkup Shamanism” // Tomsk State University 1964, Vol. 167.



17. Openwork Pendant Representing a Fantastic Animal

9th – 11th century

Ob' River Basin, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, West Siberia, Russia

Bronze

9.8 cm wide x 1.6 cm deep x 6.5 cm high

Boris Erenburg

In the Middle Ages, openwork ornaments with a through-hole were prevalent in the Perm region and Western Siberia. These decorations were hung on embroidered belts, decorated clothing, and in women's braids. By contrast, the Scythians and Sarmatians of the steppes adorned their horses with cult objects, while the Khanty and Mansi ancestors, people of forest culture, wore cult objects touching their bodies. Zoomorphic openwork ornaments with intricate designs were found in the Ural Mountains and Siberia, most dating from the 7th century and later.

This hollow bronze ornament depicts a hybrid creature that combines features of a hoofed animal and a hare. The hare's clawed forepaws merge with the hooves of the animal's hind legs, while its distinctive Siberian-cast snout is crowned with a single deer antler (now partly broken and lost). The ritual pose of the animal with bent, tied front legs is a common feature of deer depictions in Scythian-Sarmatian art. Analogously, ornaments in a row of crescent moons and dots are common in representations of the hare. That feature is seen in art from the Eastern Scythian culture (Pazyryk, 4th century BC) all the way to the medieval metalwork of Siberia (800–1100 AD).

Although the Scythians depicted many hybrids of deer with other animals, the hare-deer hybrid is unique. Ugrian culture has many representations of the hare; it is considered the reincarnation of the primary goddess, Kaltash. However, as with the Scythians, no combination of a hare and a deer have been found in ancient Ugrian art.

Whether it is the Shedú, the Lamassu of Mesopotamia, or even the Permian animal style Moose-man and winged dog, hybrid animals from various cultures and mythologies were regarded as powerful talismans. They originate from the belief there are periods of transition between worlds. These transitions take place in an intermediate space that lies between day and night, and life and death.¹

¹ A.R. Kantorovich, "Images of Syncretic Beings in the East European Scythian Animal Style", *Historical Research*, n°3, 2015.

18. Hollow Pendant in the Shape of a Hare

7th – 11th century
Ob’ River Basin, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, West Siberia, Russia
Bronze, leather
5.6 cm wide x 4.3 cm high

Boris Erenburg

Before you is an incredibly beautiful hollow pendant cast in bronze with a silver hue. This shade of silver was imparted to the bronze by a high tin content in the alloy. Another remarkable feature of this object is a trait common to many Ural-Siberian medieval artifacts: it can transform into an entirely different character when turned upside down. If you invert the hare figure, its hindquarters morph into a bear’s head, its tail becomes an ear, and its hind leg transforms into a sideways-facing snout.

Bronze hare figures in the form of pendants, hanging ornaments, and instrument pommels are abundantly represented in the animal style of the Urals and Siberia. All of them are female adornments and talismans, like the hare ornament that is still popular among the Ob Ugrians today.

Myths and tales of the divine and magical nature of the hare can be traced back to ancient times. One account by Herodotus of the Scythians’ pursuit of a hare shows how distinctive this creature was in Scythian culture. “When the Scythians were in battle formation, a hare darted through their ranks, and the Scythians immediately gave chase. Then the Scythian ranks fell into disarray and cried out. Darius, their opponent, asked what this noise from his enemy meant. Upon learning that the Scythians were chasing a hare, Darius told his attendants: ‘These people hold us in deep contempt...’” (Herodotus, Histories, IV, 134). The significance of hunting the hare to Scythian leaders was incomprehensible to Persian kings, their advisors, and even Herodotus himself.

To the Scythians, hare hunting was considered a sacred duty. The goddess of water, one of the great deities of these nomads, is concealed in the form of a hare. To an external observer, a hare may have dashed by, but for the Scythians, it represented the goddess challenging the Almighty. It was believed that only a future leader could catch up to the hare on horseback and could thus become betrothed to the goddess.

Scenes depicting hunting the hare, and the eagle tormenting the hare, are repeatedly found on Sarmatian artifacts. Similar scenes of a hare being tormented or pursued are found on pendants from the north. Metaphorically, the torment and hunting of the hare was seen as a battle between celestial luminaries, specifically the assault of the Moon by the Sun. The Scythians also told of a ritual-erotic aspect of hare hunting. While there are differences in the Ural version, the folklore and art of the Ob Ugrians viewed the hare as the embodiment of the goddess Kaltash-Ekwa. Kaltash-Ekwa is vividly depicted in numerous ethnographic materials. The owl’s torment of the hare on the last night of the bear festival was celebrated in an erotic ritualized celestial wedding. The owl’s form hides a man, a crippled god, most likely Numi Torum himself, while the hare transforms into a goddess. According to one Mansi saying: “The summer hare is a tender woman, the autumn hare is a tender woman...” and after its transformation into the goddess, she is as “light as a butterfly.” Considering the complex history of the Urals, the unique genesis of the Ugrians, where indigenous tribes blended with nomads arriving from Central and Middle Asia, let us endeavor to follow the trail of the frog and hare motif within the mythologies of Eastern Eurasia.

According to one ancient legend, one day the great Kushan king Kanishka went hunting in the meadows and encountered a white hare. The king gave chase, but the hare suddenly vanished and in its place was a shepherd boy. The boy told the king that he had come to remind him of a prediction by Buddha that a certain king would build a stupa at this spot. The king then erected a Buddhist structure there, and he embraced the teachings of Buddha ever after.

In that parable, the deity in the form of a hare leads the king to sacred knowledge and immortality. The Kushan pantheon includes numerous goddesses—most prominently the goddess Nana and Sivanmu—who have been represented by figures of the hare and the shepherd boy.

From the ancient east and the nomads of the Pontic region to the Ob Ugrians, creators of northern bronze cult casting, these wondrous stories about goddesses and hares survived for thousands of years.





19. Dagger Mounted with a Bronze Hilt and Scabbard

8th – 10th century (C14 dating)
River Izhma, near Kartayol', Komi Republic, Cis-Urals Russia
Bronze, iron, wood, organic material
35.1 cm long x 5.1 cm high

Boris Erenburg

This Ural-Siberian dagger, encased in an intricately cast bronze scabbard, has a striking resemblance to the renowned Scythian swords known as acinaces. The dagger's hilt boasts the figure of a bird of prey, likely a raven, while the scabbard is adorned with elaborate depictions of sacred animals. Historians like Herodotus shed light on the Scythians' reverence for the god of war, which was represented by a sword. According to Herodotus, they constructed brushwood heaps upon which they placed a sword, often an acinaces—a type of dagger or short sword—and offered bloody sacrifices. While the god's specific name remained undisclosed, later authors like Ammianus Marcellinus confirmed the cult of the sword was present among Scythians and Sarmatians. Contrary to these accounts, contemporary scholarship indicates that these people with martial values lacked a distinct god of war. Conversely, their iron weaponry was used to purify sacrificial grounds and repel malevolent spirits. Siberian cultures similarly trusted iron knives and daggers to shield infants from malicious entities.

The tale of Chokhryn-oyka, also known as "Old man-dragonfly" or "Knife-man," epitomizes the protective influence attributed to iron weapons. This guardian spirit manifests as a man shrouded in narrow-bladed knives, armed with a staff crafted from pure silver. In the summer, he adopts the guise of a dragonfly, transforming into a sky-bound man enveloped in otter fur for the winter. Functioning as a healer, lost-animal locator, and water emergency assistant, soliciting aid from Chokhryn-oyka requires an offering. People dedicated knives to this protector spirit, and consecrated locations by embedding them in boats, trees, tables, and the walls of houses. Trees adorned with numerous knives, resembling a metallic belt encircling the trunk, mark sacred spaces dedicated to Chokhryn-oyka.

Finnish scholar Artturi Kannisto documented Mansi entreaties to the Knife-man like the one below, which were often invoked for hunting success:

"Over the cape from the height of the lake swan,
over the cape from the height of the Ob swan,
Enchanting, with seven knives,
receiving a bloody offering,
Enchanting, with six knives,
receiving offerings of food!
Your wind-blown clothing,
put it on your shoulders covered in sable,
your wind-blown hat,
place it on your head with seven braids,
gird yourself with a belt wet with rain!
Your numerous sons, gripping the arrow, beseech you,
your numerous sons, gripping the bow,
cry out with agonizing cries, turn to you.
Your Supreme dear father
appointed you to be the might of the land,
your Supreme dear father
appointed you with your seven knives
to accept a bloody offering."

Offerings to the Knife-man extended beyond animal sacrifices to encompass wine, vodka, meat, and snuff tobacco. When preparing tobacco, one would turn the cup in various directions, entreating, "Chokhryn-oyka, sniff, sniff, make more tobacco! Make it strong, so that whoever sniffs it sheds tears!" As a lover of wine and tobacco, alongside his roles as a healer and protector, the Knife-man's personification stands in stark contrast to the brutality and malevolence attributed to Ares, the Greek god of war.

CIRAM report ref. 0723-OA-825R-2, dated 26 July 2023: the obtained result is after calibration (2σ, 95,4 % confidence):
775–782 (1,0 % probability)
880–994 (95,4 % probability)

20. Figure of an Owl

6th – 10th century

Kama River Basin, Perm Krai, Cis-Urals Russia

Bronze

14,5 cm high

The owl's left ear and the edges bordering the ear at both sides were missing but have now been restored.

Before us, we have a large bronze figure of an owl. Although it is not a hybrid creature depicting a combination of an owl and an anthropomorphic figure, as in the case of legend number five entitled "Figure of an Owl-Man," the symbolism centered around the owl motif runs parallel to that of the owl-man figure.

This example serves to demonstrate that beliefs, expressed in specific motifs, continue to be passed on over many generations and centuries. There could be a difference of up to one thousand years in age between this piece and the Owl-Man figures mentioned in legend number five.





21. “Holy Family” Plaque

6th–8th century

South Keltma River, Cherdyn District, Perm Krai, Cis-Urals Russia

Bronze

6 cm wide x 10.2 cm high

Boris Erenburg

In the heartland of the Urals and Siberia, a trio of profound significance reigns. This mystical trinity and its association with numbers 3, 5, and 7 was cherished and considered sacred by ancient inhabitants. Behold the “Holy Family of Christianity” in the plaque, embodied as a trinity of the mother, father, and the divine-human progeny, an emblem of equilibrium. The trio represents a tapestry of order and stability woven through the ages and is a motif that recurs in amulets fashioned in the region’s animal style. In this faith, the Earth serves as an intermediary, a bridge between realms, the celestial father, terrestrial mother, and god-human. Within this sacred triad lies great spiritual significance, the central human hero in particular.

One of the many names attributed to this heroic figure is “Ali-khum” (the Southern Man), a name that evokes his probable Iranian heritage. The name “Alvi” (Ali or Alvali) occurs between the ninth and tenth centuries among peoples who lived along the Kama, Vishera, and Ob rivers, signifying that the deity was revered by these tribes.

While the names of ancient gods have been lost over the centuries, one name has been resilient – the Radiant Boy, Urta, Mir-Susne-Khum, Mos-Khum, Tarpug, or As-Ty-Iki. It is the principal deity gracing this plaque. Through the northern trade routes, Uralic nomads traversed from north to south, carrying not only material goods, such as weaponry and silverware from Iran and Byzantium, but also myths. These sagas of the southern realm found eager ears in the north, shaping narratives of a distant Iranian pantheon of gods and heroes. This mythic resonance found expression in animal style artifacts. Certain myths migrated through the Upper Kama region to Siberia, persisting through centuries among the Trans-Ural peoples and still being documented by ethnographers well into the 20th century.

An entity of many names, the Radiant Boy, or As-Ty-Iki, was revered in the form of seven infants among the Ob Ugric tribes of the 19th century. It was believed his origins lay beyond the Ural Mountains, in the realm of the Trans-Urals.

The Khanty people believe, according to one saying, that, “Many gods walk with legs and wings, yet only Alvi [Urta] can elongate the soul of a little girl [or boy].” This deity’s influence extends life and bestows fortune upon human endeavors. In Mansi folklore, the Radiant Boy emerges as the Earth’s architect, sculpting the landscape from his own mucus.

Within this enigmatic tableau, we glimpse the vestiges of ancient veneration, honoring the convergence of spirit and myth encapsulated in timeless bronze. The echoes of millennia resound, an ode to the trinity that transcends time and belief, a testament to humanity’s unending quest to understand the earthly and divine realms.

22. Figure of the “Hero” Surrounded by Moose

6th–8th century

Voykar River Basin, Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, West Siberia, Russia

Bronze

4.2 cm wide x 4.8 cm high

Boris Erenburg

This intricate figure is adorned with the likeness of an ancient hero who once traversed the expanses of the Urals and Siberia, lost in the annals of time. Across various traditions, this heroic figure bore a variety of names, some of which linger within the tapestry of folklore, meticulously documented by ethnographers. While the names of many ancient gods have been lost over the centuries, one name has been resilient – the Radiant Boy, Urta, Mir-Susne-Khum, Mos-Khum, Tarpug, or As-Ty-Iki.

The Radiant Boy conjures echoes of Zarathustra’s birth narrative. As Mircea Eliade recounts in “A History of Religious Ideas,” “Three days prior to Zarathustra’s birth, the village shone with such brilliance that the Spithamids fled, mistaking it for fire. Upon their return, they discovered an infant radiating light. As the legend goes, Zarathustra entered the world amidst laughter.”

In the realm of myths, the Radiant Boy displayed exceptional wisdom and strength from a young age. He shattered not only wooden cradles but also copper and iron ones, and he offered sage counsel to his celestial father. Embarking on an existence filled with extraordinary feats, he pursued and killed a six-legged moose, severing two of its limbs and draping its hide across the firmament to form the constellation Ursa Major. This celestial act anointed him as the guardian of moose hunting. Throughout Mansi mythology and within select plaques fashioned in the animal style, his exploits traversed otherworldly domains. He interacted with the daughters of the sun, moon, and water kings. A retinue of celestial moose, a consistent motif, envelopes him within these artistic renditions, often adorned with other animals, lush flora, and celestial emblems of the sun and moon. Among Permian bestial images, the Radiant Boy’s presence is depicted as a youthful figure among four divine entities—his celestial parents—within the “Holy Family” cycle.

Through masterful strokes of artistry, the tale of the Radiant Boy is told. Etched upon this metallic canvas for all eternity is a symphony woven from his celestial lineage and earthly valor. It is a narrative that bridges epochs, between the realms of gods and mortals, transcending the boundaries between mundane and mythical, history and imagination. In this depiction of the Radiant Boy, we see the intricate dance between humanity and the cosmos.





23. Winged Moose-man

6th – 8th century

South Keltma River, Cherdyn District, Perm Krai, Cis-Urals Russia

Bronze

8.1 cm high

Boris Erenburg

Human forms with characteristics of herbivorous hoofed animals have been traditionally revered as guardian spirits in mythology. In ancient Mesopotamia, winged human-animal hybrids like shedu and lamassu were seen as protectors of both homes and humans. The strategic placement of shedu statues at house entrances were meant to repel disease spirits, counteract curses, and thwart theft. Incantations chanted by Babylonian priests, invoking the shedu and lamassu, underscored their role in maintaining health, peace, and expelling malevolent entities.

In the medieval Permian region and Komi Republic, the Moose-man was another domestic guardian. These humanoid moose figurines are thought by researchers to have once served as household guardian spirits. Distinguished by a moose head, a human body, and often wings and hooves, the Moose-man design sometimes includes a human head adorned with an elongated raven nose beneath the moose's head. It conjures the image of a figure draped in a moose skin cape crowned by an animal's head. Notably, the moose's head is always portrayed without antlers, in the animal's winter state.

The figure of the winged bird-human hybrid occupies a unique space between the celestial and terrestrial realms, assuming the role of a patron for humanity and an intermediary bridging the gap between mortals and celestial deities. The figure's portrayal by artisans originates from their belief in three distinct worlds: the divine domain of gods, the human-animal realm on earth, and the subterranean realm inhabited by spirits of the afterlife. It's noteworthy that the spirits were not categorized as benevolent or malevolent, they were instead venerated and appeased through offerings across these three spheres.

The house guardian includes aspects from all three dimensions. Intriguingly, the wings and split hooves visible on numerous Moose-men correspond with archetypal beings found in diverse cultures. These being include: winged entities, fauns and satyrs with hooves, woodland spirits, and various pagan deities originating from local practices. What sets the Permian Moose-man apart from other artistic representations is its unique synthesis of elements from Christianity: the wings of a guardian angel juxtaposed with the hooves of a devil. While both the devil and guardian angel deal with the human soul, their domains differ. By contrast, the Permian Moose-man functions in both paradigms, capable of salvation and retribution.

The Moose-man is often depicted riding a lizard and rendered with imagery connected to journeys into alternate realms. Scholars believe its primary role was to help humans transition to a higher plane of existence after death. This celestial realm, depicted as the sky adorned with the constellation of the Great Moose (later the Great Bear, Ursa Major), is the ethereal home of the celestial moose, where souls of the departed found re-embodiment. This transition from soul to body was depicted by substituting a human head with an animal's head. Many depictions of the Moose-man show it cradling a human head or accompanying a human riding on a lizard with a moose head. This belief in the transition of souls to new bodies resonates within Siberian funeral customs, where transformation and transition are symbolized with animal skins. A common practice among Khants and Mansi is to inter the deceased within a moose skin. The portrayal of the Moose-man alongside a lizard, escorting a naked deceased human, and guiding them in a moose's head, illustrates this deity's role as an intermediary on a journey to the beyond.

24. Bronze Figure of a Deity with a Moose Head on Top

9th–10th century

Near Ust' Yazva, Perm Krai, Cis-Urals Russia

Bronze

10 cm high

Boris Erenburg

The bronze figure of a female deity adorned with a moose head exemplifies Ural-Siberian bronze casting techniques from the 9th to 10th centuries CE. This sculpture stands as a unique, three-dimensional representation within the Ural-Siberian tradition, deviating from the prevalent forms of flat figures, plaques, and hollow pendants. It's possible that this particular piece once served as the finial ornament on top of a staff or scepter, adding to its cultural significance.

In the annals of Akkadian mythology, a prominent she-demon named Lamashtu reigned. Lamashtu often was depicted with dogs and pigs suckling at her breasts. Iconographic portrayals from the 7th to 9th centuries BCE depicted her with ears pointing upwards and sporting lion-like fangs. She stood astride a donkey figure, grasping serpents tightly with both hands. Among her symbols were a donkey and a boat, in which she navigated the river of the underworld.

Lamashtu embodied a nocturnal apparition, a demoness known for preying on pregnant women and ambushing unsuspecting men in their slumber. This myth extended to Lilith, Adam's first wife, in the biblical narrative. Rejecting subservience to her husband, Lilith was banished from paradise and transformed into a fearsome demon. The name "Lilith," often translated as "night creature," appears in the Book of Isaiah (Isaiah 34:13, 14). References to Lilith also appear in Syrian magical texts and in incantations on magical bowls held in institutions like the British Museum and the Louvre. On an inscription of a spell from the 8th to 7th centuries BCE in Arslan-Tash (Northern Syria) are the words: "Flying in the dark places—depart swiftly, Lilith."

Over time, numerous ancient deities sought refuge in the Ural forests, including relatives of this famed Akkadian demoness. A long lineage of female demonesses persists to this day in the figures of two old female cannibals: the Russian Baba Yaga and the Ugric Kirp-nyulup-imi. They are characterized by elongated drooping breasts and a propensity for attacking sleeping men. Both deities inhabit the fringes of the forest, embodying ancestral traits reminiscent of the ancient Lamashtu.

Kirp-nyulup-imi resides near a vast Ural river within a larch cabin. Her name means "woman with a duck's beak." A medieval bronze figure from the Perm region represents her as an elderly woman sporting an extended duck-like nose, covered in a hood crowned by a moose's head. For the Ugrians, the moose represents winter and the cold chthonic underworld, symbolized by shedding of the moose's antlers. This particular deity is depicted in bronze with motifs that show its malevolent nature.

The demoness or goddess sustains herself with meat, especially rabbit, and approaches hapless male travelers. She ferries travelers across the river on her boat or raft and gives them rabbit meat for sustenance, lulls them into slumber, and delivers death by propelling a rabbit skull into their temples. There are instances where the demoness swallows men whole, followed by a cavernous yawn. This female deity, depicted by a resolute old woman, combines the roles of Charon the ferryman, the demoness Lamashtu, and the iconic Russian Baba Yaga.





25. Figure of a Deity in a Funeral Mask

10th–12th century

Usol'skiy District, Perm Krai, Cis-Urals Russia

Bronze

8 cm high

Boris Erenburg

With the passage of centuries, the names of ancient deities may be lost to us, yet their visual legacy endures, awaiting our contemplative gaze. Behold this ancient deity. Could it be the embodiment of a subterranean divinity, a potential emissary from the realm beyond life? An ancestral spirit? Its face is cloaked in a funeral mask, reminiscent of solemn rituals from nomadic burial customs. Silver masks once adorned departed faces, an homage to the enigma of death and the afterlife. With limbs outstretched, mirroring the arrangement of bodies prepared for burial, the figure serves as a poignant testament to the unbroken thread of life.

An omen of celestial mysteries, an inverted crescent moon graces the figure's knees, while another adorns its mouth. These are symbols of an ethereal realm concealed from mortal sight. Similar lunar symbols reverberate through the ages, a tribute to an enduring belief in the moon's power and influence.

Throughout the intricate tapestry of diverse, ancient mythologies, planetary revolutions and rotations signified the liminal threshold between life and otherworldly realms. The cosmos was seen as a portal between the upper and nether worlds, and a mystical artifact was seen as holding the power to beckon forth denizens from other dimensions.

Among the Ural Siberian cultures, the relationship between sacred objects and states of existence had profound implications, a transformative alchemy captured within the artistry of metalwork. The metamorphoses of human to beast, the seen to the unseen, and life to the afterlife, were all represented in the intricate designs they created in metal figures and objects.

Venture now on an odyssey to the underworld. Invert this object and you can see the deity's feet evolve into avian heads, their beaks entwined in a mystical ballet, while serpentine necks extend from its legs. A symphony of birds, borne on ancient winds, bears the departed souls to realms beyond. In the realm of shadows and dreams, this visual metamorphosis offers a glimpse into the enigmatic planes of existence.

26. Plaque with a Face, Flanked by Two Birds

9th – 10th century

Near Ust-Shchuger, Komi Republic, Cis-Urals Russia

Bronze

10.5 cm wide x 11.4 cm high

Boris Erenburg

Depicted on this ancient plaque is the face of a deity, perhaps an emissary from the depths of the underworld or a spectral ancestor. A mask partially obscures the visage, with openings for the eyes. Rooted in antiquity, this practice of representing deities echoes across ancient beliefs that have persisted through time. The Urals and Siberia believed in the soul's cyclic journey, where departed essences reincarnate into newborn bodies, a belief also shared by ancient Iranian tribes.

These ethereal essences, called "frawashis", that are the souls of the departed, journey back to the mortal realm under the guidance of the grand goddess, Ardivisura Anahita. With the power to restore them to life, she steers them to the wombs of the living. Among the Ugrian pantheon, this revered duty is the responsibility of the goddess Kaltas. This eternal cycle of souls is found in the burial customs of these nomadic clans. A silver mask, a symbol of departure, gently rests upon the face of the deceased, while a gleaming solar disc, an emblem of homecoming, graces the chest.

Framed by the graceful curvature of two cranes, their necks extended, avian guardians ferry the departed's essence, entrusted by the ancient Ural-Siberian goddess, to the embrace of a woman's womb.

Above the face, a majestic, winged sentinel bridges the lower and the upper realms. In the realm of subterranean spirits, the crane dwells in the marshlands and soars aloft on autumn winds, tracing the celestial path of birds. As a symbol of the divine pantheon, the crane stands as a descendant and sacred embodiment of the goddess. In supplication, mortal humans beseech the goddess for salvation, seeking to rescue the souls lost in the beyond.

The mythology and representation of cranes as carriers of transmuted souls resonates through time. Simultaneously, the narrative of storks heralding new life is woven through the annals of human understanding. The radiant Selkup shaman's vestment, adorned with attributes of ancient deities like metallic lizards on the footwear, teal ducks on the chest, cranes on the shoulders, and twin eagles on the crown, reminds us of this mythology.





27. Burial Mask

8th – 11th century
Cherdynsky District, Perm Krai, Cis-Urals Russia
Silver and gold
13.2 cm high

Kassou Grusenmeyer

The fine silver mask before us is uniquely adorned with details in pure gold.¹ Gold lines, welded onto the silver, encircle the eyes and mouth, and an embellishment extends from the lower lip.

The use of lustrous metals endowed the mask with a magical aura, making it seem almost alive. Amplifying this radiance was the magical-religious dimension of silver and gold, mined from the very heart of Mother Earth. In the process of extracting these noble metals from ores, the four elements of the physical world—fire, air, water, and earth—played pivotal roles. For the ancients, engaging with these principal components meant operating at a nearly divine level. The final product was, thus, practically sacred. The metals had to be preferred materials of the gods.

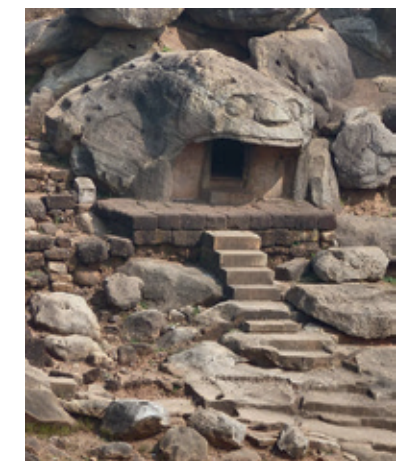
In the Permian tradition, burial masks were placed on the faces of the deceased, while disks were positioned over the chest, covering the heart. Since no other corporeal region holds a greater significance in relation to life, the positioning is not accidental, but full of symbolism.

Burial masks served multiple purposes. Not only did they bestow social prestige on the departed, but they also marked the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead, standing as instruments that were highly symbolic in the reincarnation journey.² As alluded to in the legend of the silver eye cover featured in this catalogue (entry 31), the paramount desire in the burial ritual was for the departing soul to experience new life in the otherworld, in other words, to reincarnate in the afterlife and return to this world reborn. Symbolic markers of this desire, as just mentioned, included the use of shiny metals. Additionally, the piercing of the mouth and eyes, as well as the motif hanging from the lower lip, were significant. Allow us to explain.

PORTALS TO THE OTHERWORLD

The tradition of burial masks is prevalent throughout the entire Ural region, with additional occurrences found sporadically across Northern Eurasia.³ A standard practice of piercing masks with eye and mouth openings has been observed. The notion of crafting a mask without these piercings, and instead

Figs. 1 a-b. Two views of Bagha Gumpha (the tiger cave), Udayagiri Caves, near the city of Bhubaneswar in Odisha (Orissa), East India, possibly 2nd century BC.



¹ Microscopic XRF analysis was conducted by Bart Vekemans (XMI research group, Department of Analytical Chemistry, Ghent University; July 7, 2023) for the chemical investigation of specific positions on the mask. E.g., the narrow contour of the right eye seems consisting of pure gold, whereas the local sampling of the forehead showed an alloy of 97% silver/3% copper.

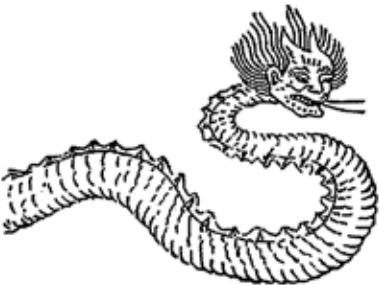
² Fodor 2014:120.

³ Fodor (2014, throughout) three groups known for their burial mask tradition are the Iron Age inhabitants of the Minusinsk Basin, the Medieval peoples of the Ural-Kama region, and the ancient Hungarians.

Fig. 2. Bronze you 卣 vessel, probably Hunan province, South China, Shang dynasty (ca. 1100–1050 BC), ca. 35 cm high, Sumitomo collection (Kakkokan, Kyoto).



Fig. 3. Depiction of Zhulong 烛龙 in an edition of the Shan Hai Jing 山海经, “Classic of Mountains and Seas”, a late Zhou-early Han text 4th–2nd century BC (source: Wikipedia).



using repoussé chiseled eyes and mouths that were closed, seemingly wasn’t an option that could be considered. The consistent adoption of this practice hints at an underlying significance, likely rooted in the belief that the soul of the departed lingered in the head for a while; namely, the soul was thought to wander and then come back, but ultimately, at a certain moment, would journey to the afterlife through these openings in the mask.⁴

The perforations should thus be understood as pathways between the front and back sides of the mask, representing a bridge between the worlds of the dead and the living. All over the world there are clear indications that an open mouth was seen as a passage between two worlds. Multiple examples can be cited. For instance, Nelson I Wu explains how the Bagha Gumpha (tiger cave) in Odisha (Orissa) in east India is entered through the open mouth of a beast, interpreting the crossing as a passage from one world to another (fig. 1).⁵ The distinguished sinologist K. C. Chang turns to a small number of Chinese bronzes from the late Shang and possibly early Western Chou Dynasties (ca. 11th–8th centuries BC) which show a man hugging a tiger-like animal while “his head is placed under the open mouth of the animal” (fig. 2).⁶ Chang interprets the scene as shamanistic. Instrumental in the communication between heaven and earth were “shamans and shamanesses,” who were helped by animals to cross from earth to heaven. His view was that “the gaping mouth of the beast may be an archetypal symbol separating one world (such as the world of the dead) from another (such as the world of the living).”⁷

A third example comes from the Batak culture of north Sumatra. A description of their High God *Baganding Tua* as a serpent with open jaws goes as follows: “In Sihotang Baganding Tua is described as a motionless, gigantic serpent whose always-open jaws are so big they can serve as an entrance for an elephant or a deer. There the local people believe that when animals grow old and wish to die, they willingly enter the mouth of Baganding Tua. Paradoxically the realm of death, which is inside the body of Baganding Tua Saranggean Pardosi, is also the source of life, fertility, health and prosperity, ...”⁸

BREATHING AIR AND SEEING LIGHT

In addition to serving as symbolic conduits for the soul temporarily housed in the head, the open mouth and eyes might also draw significance from their inherent functions: the ability to breathe and see, respectively.

The essential act of allowing air or breath to funnel through the mouth to the soul dwelling in the head might symbolically represent the infusion of life back into the deceased. The shiny gold, symbolic of the sunlight, which in itself represents the rebirth of life every morning, accentuates the mouth. The divine material alludes to a godly presence that breathes life into the deceased. Isn’t it written in the second chapter of Genesis in the Bible that God fashions a human being, a man into whose nostrils God breathes life?⁹

Similarly, the holes of the eyes are indicative of letting light into the darkness, while the ethereal shimmer and reflective qualities of the silver and gold provide the deceased with the ability to “see” and navigate his or her way in the afterworld. Just as the Bible citation offered an illustrative insight, so too can we draw a parallel from Chinese mythology to shed light on this concept. In the *Shan Hai Jing* 山海经 (Classic of Mountains and Seas, a late Zhou-early Han text 4th–2nd century BC) *Zhulong* 烛龙 is described as a giant red solar dragon and god that was composed of a human’s face and a snake’s body (fig. 3). It created day and night by opening and closing its eyes, while his breath, tunneled through his snake body and human mouth, produced winds.

The powerful interplay between divine, shiny silver, and the fundamental functions of the mouth and eyes—breath and sight—is illustrated in the discovery of a trepanned skull where small silver slabs were placed within the cavities of the mouth and eyes (fig. 4).

Interpreting the motif that extends from the lower lip requires a flexible approach, much like the case with the silver mask adorned with a solar diagram on its backside (see entry 30). Unlike the geometric, diamond-shape motif of that mask, the motif on this mask has a distinctive figurative quality. Inspired by the idea of breath or wind, one might discern the silhouette of a flying bird. This, in turn, alludes once again to the idea of a passage. When the detail is viewed upside-down—reflecting the mirrored status of the otherworld¹⁰—an even more speculative interpretation emerges. This reversed perspective suggests a spirit’s face, which we might lyrically dub “the face of breath.” A similar face can be observed from a plaque of an elongated face standing atop a pike, featured in another entry of this catalogue (fig. 5). Be it a flying bird, the face of breath, or a spirit’s face, every instance seems to function as a vehicle transporting breath, life, or a departing soul.

Fig. 4. Trepanned skull with silver plates in mouth and eyes cavities. Tomb 7, Bashalom, Hungary. 10th century.



⁴ Fodor 2014: 123.

⁵ Wu 1963: 25. In addition to the Tiger Cave, Wu cites two other instances of open-mouth entrances in passing: the Serpent Cave (Sarpa Gumpha), located at the same site as the Tiger Cave, and the serpent entrance of Temple XXII in Copan, Honduras.”

⁶ Chang 1983: 60 ff.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 73.

⁸ Angerler 2016: 304–305.

⁹ Genesis 2: 7 “Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” Peculiarly, in this second chapter of Genesis, God is fashioning a human being for the second time.

¹⁰ Eliade 1964: 205 “The people of North Asia conceive the otherworld as an inverted image of this world. Everything takes place as it does here, but in reverse. When it is day on earth, it is night in the beyond...; this is why objects offered on the grave for the use of the dead are turned upside down, unless, that is, they are broken, for what is broken here below is whole in the otherworld and vice versa.”

Fig. 5



This legend could end at this point. We believe we have touched upon some of the potential interpretations of the mask, highlighting the central themes of breath, life, and rebirth in the afterlife as consistent threads throughout.

However, hereafter we include a long passage from an unpublished paper by the author, titled “A Battambang (Cambodia) Artifact, its Presumed Symbolism and Function: A Study of the Universe of the ‘Open-Mouth Icon’”, dated June—July 2019. This passage further illustrates the symbolism of the open mouth motif that we have just discussed, but in the context of a distinctly different cultural zone, that of Melanesia, and a different medium, that of gateways in architectural settings. We’ll explore how the entrances of eravo men’s houses served not just as doorways but also as symbolic gateways from this earthly realm to a spiritual otherworld, and how this interacted with the concepts of regeneration, fertility, and rebirth.

Serge Schoffel (2017), in a discussion on the art of the Papuan Gulf, highlights various objects, including the Era River drums that seemingly culminate in a snake head (fig. 6). He recognizes that these drums belong to a category of “cylindrical and hollow objects whose upper extremities terminate in the two extensions which form an open mouth. The openings of these drums, which are sometimes crenellated, clearly suggest a muzzle or an open-mouth...”¹¹ Cleverly seen, Schoffel gathers that an eravo men’s house from the Elema people (fig. 7) falls into the same category because “its majestic entry is a giant mouth through which one accedes to the interior of a body which contains the community’s secret elements, the guarantors of its harmony and energy.”¹²

Indeed, the entrance of the eravo men’s house did resemble a mouth. It did not necessarily imitate a snake’s mouth, but its zoomorphic appearance was imaginable. In fact, ceremonial buildings as the eravo men’s house and other architectural constructions in the larger region of New Guinea were traditionally seen as living organisms. In the words of Douglas Fraser “Many New Guinea peoples... maintain that their houses or ceremonial edifices actually incarnate the form of monsters or animals whose presence is important to the community. Yet of all the people in New Guinea who view their houses as zoomorphic or anthropomorphic forms, only the latmul and their immediate neighbors produce gable masks. The latmul, in fact, compare the men’s house (with its decorative leaf thatch) to a woman’s fibre skirt and the huge face mask is thought of as a face of a house. The house itself is regarded as a female being...” Fraser adds on p. 644 that the latmul architectural masks “appear to swallow the individual—the interior of the house being referred to as its belly.”¹²

¹¹ Schoffel 2017: 67.

¹² Fraser 1972: 637. Feldman 2016:60 dissects an omo sebua, a big house and the residence of a high-ranking royal from South Nias, Indonesia, in a similar anthropomorphic anatomy: “The entire house can symbolically represent the figure of an ancestor. The legs are the pillars, the torso and head are the dwelling level, and the roof structure is the headgear.”

The concept of the inner space as a “belly” is aptly exemplified by the ravi ceremonial houses of the Namau people in the Purari delta of the Papuan Gulf. A.C. Haddon, in his 1919 publication, described these immense structures as measuring up to 60 meters in length and reaching heights of 24 meters (fig. 8). Their massive, elongated, hollow, and shaft-like organic forms seemed reminiscent of creatures like caterpillars, snakes, or possibly centipedes, given the multiple stilts supporting the upper structure.¹³ These ravis were completely isolated from the external environment, featuring only a singular entrance at the front (fig. 9). Within, in the most secluded section, several kopiravis found their place in a dim setting (fig. 10). These kopiravis were hollow, basketwork effigies with expansive jaws and four wooden legs, symbolizing sacred spirits hidden away from women and uninitiated young men. Within this sanctuary, known as the Holy of Holies (maivaki), the kopiravis played central roles in various rites. In one particular ritual, the remains of headhunted victims were inserted through the gaping maws of the kopiravis. After a night replete with dancing and singing in the ravi’s anterior section, these remains were retrieved the subsequent morning. As detailed by Haddon, “the genitalia of both sexes were cut off, dropped through the floor into the mud below the building, and stamped into the ground with poles. The bodies were cut up with bull-roarers, cooked, and eaten.”¹⁴

The symbolism of the path taken by the dead bodies is paramount to our understanding. Bodies entered the *ravi* men’s house, traversed its lengthy corridor, and eventually arrived in the shadowy inner sanctum. Once landed at the “belly” of the sanctuary, the corpses passed through another symbolic gateway when swallowed by the *kopiravi*. Several open-mouth passages are navigated before reaching the final destination; call it a tomb, the afterlife realm, the earth’s navel,¹⁵ or the Underworld. In this space, the night was spent in company of ancestor-spirit-divinities. By morning, that is, by sunrise or the rebirth of the sun, the *kopiravi* regurgitated the corpse, setting the stage for its preparation, serving as life-giving food for the local clan members. The backward course out of the *kopiravi*’s mouth was the enactment of ritual rebirth.¹⁶ On the other hand, the genitalia, ready to fertilize and germinate, were

¹³ See Lévi-Strauss 1994 (originally published 1975): 8, “Furthermore, everything in the house points to the fact that the dwelling is believed to be the carcass of a still larger animal, which one enters through the door, its gaping mouth.”

¹⁴ Haddon 1919: 178.

¹⁵ Eliade 1954: 16 “The summit of the cosmic mountain is not only the highest point of the earth; it is also the earth’s navel [omphalos], the point at which the Creation began.” Quaritch Wales 1957: 38 “The omphalos was regarded as ‘the centre of the earth.’”; p. 41 “...it is there with a solemn magical intent to ensure, to induce, the renewal of life, reincarnation.”

¹⁶ Schuster/Carpenter 1996 *Patterns that Connect*, pp. 166–167 on cannibalism in Brazil: “When the captive proclaimed his ‘honor’ at being dismembered & eaten, this was not only an expression of bravado, but also reflected the knowledge, or at least some vague memory, that in this grim drama he was impersonating the ultimate ancestor and thus virtually a god or God himself, whose body was to be consumed in a primitive communion. This idea may be read between

Figs. 6. Drums from the Era River area, Papuan Gulf, Papua-New Guinea, 19th century, 94/96/74 cm high; Jolika collection, Marcia and John Friede, Rye, USA (Schoffel 2017:93).



Fig. 7. Eravo men’s house from the Elema people, Orokol Bay, Papua New Guinea (original photo by J.P. Thomson in 1892; republished by S. Schoffel 1917:93).



Fig. 8. Kaimari village seen from the air, Purari River Delta in 1922; note the three enormous shaft shaped *ravis* (photograph by Frank Hurley, 1922; published in Hurley 1924).



Fig. 9. The great *ravi* at Kaimari village, Papuan Gulf 1923 or before (photograph by Frank Hurley; published in Anderson 1923: frontispiece).



Fig. 10. The gloomy “belly” room at the remote end of the great Kau *ravi* of Kaimari village, bordering the Papuan Gulf, accommodating sacred *kopiravi* (photograph by Frank Hurley, ca. 1921; published in Hurley 1924, republished in Schoffel 2017:92).



returned to mother earth, enhancing the mana and sexual prowess of its clan members, while the act of cannibalism assimilated the victim’s life force.¹⁷ Given the latmul’s perception of their men’s houses as feminine entities, we might consider the “belly” of the house as its “womb.” Similarly, the devouring “mouth” of the *kopiravi* could be likened to a generative “vagina.”¹⁸

The openings or “open mouths” in this passage simulate gates that lead in, or out, to different realms, dominated by daunting spirits. Corpses are channeled in and out of an Underworld tomb-womb by the grace of concealed divinities.

The human mouth is the gate that centers such fundamental human activities as consumption, speech, breath, and romance; it thereby acts *de facto* as the passage to the soul. In the same way, the open-mouth icon acts as a gate to the cycle of life and death, with the soul or spirit as its main passenger.

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the lines of a remarkable speech made by a captive warrior before execution. In accordance with a formula customary on such occasions, he taunted his tormentors by claiming they would eat their own relatives & ancestors, since he had earlier eaten of these when they fell captive to his own people.”

¹⁷ Speiser 1996 (1923): 215–220, *Ethnology of Vanuatu*, writing on cannibalism: p. 216 “In anthropophagy of this type the religious element plays only a minor role; however, the idea of a transfer of mana is implicit in the fact that these men eat the genitals of the dead in order to enhance their own sexual power, or the genitals or the breasts of women, and that they want more than anything else to eat the flesh of great warriors or other men with powerful mana so as to make their mana part of themselves.”

¹⁸ Schoffel 2017: 67 ff., develops a similar idea when he discusses oval shaped *gope* boards, which he identifies as both a mouth and a vagina that can either swallow or give birth. Sellato 1989: 45 in a chapter called “The Tomb-Womb Jar” likewise remarks how in Borneo burial jars “are symbols of the female sexual organs and, in a tomb-and-womb symbolism, the body buried in the foetal position in a jar awaits rebirth.”

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28. Figure of a Winged Bear

6th–10th century
Upper Kama River Basin, Perm Krai, Cis-Urals Russia
Bronze
15.3 cm high

Boris Erenburg

Before you stands an exceptional figure: “the Northern Griffin.” The face of this winged creature conjures the image of both a predatory bird and a bear, a powerful fusion of traits. Adorning its breastplate are two additional faces, a human and a bear.

Behold the enigma of Sheleb, the winged bear, a mystical embodiment of the beliefs of Siberian peoples, alongside other mystical beings like the bat demon and devil-bear. The winged bear is a potent and perilous spirit in Siberian mythology. The Selkup people asserted that Sheleb had seven or nine wings, enabling it to navigate the dimensions of other worlds. In antiquity, this formidable being was known to have multiple faces with myriad powers.

First among its different faces and identities is one with a Satanic look, a lord of the underworld that ceaselessly demands offerings to placate its insatiable cravings.

Another face, a jeweled bird with iron wings, symbolizes aerial dominion. The face of a bear symbolizes the deity’s primal and earthbound nature, combining the strength and mystery of earthly existence.

Upon the Permian plaques, these three faces find rare convergence, melding into a singular bronze object. It is not uncommon for some artworks to have only two of these faces—the union of bird and bear or human and bear. In the tapestry of medieval craftsmanship, artisans occasionally intertwined the identities of bird and bear. From the front emerged the noble eagle, whose profile veiled the impassive bear, thus a composite sky and earth.

These artifacts, more than mere metal and artistry, offer a portal into the psyche of ancient civilizations, unlocking their beliefs and enigmatic interpretations. They are chronicles of interconnected worlds that invite us to bridge the chasm between imagination and history, between the realms of the corporeal and the ethereal.

29. Bird with an Anthropomorphic Face on its Chest, Carrying Human Souls

6th – 10th century
Upper Kama River Basin, Perm Krai, Cis-Urals Russia
Bronze
10.5 cm wide x 6.4 cm high

Boris Erenburg

In the captivating narratives of ancient legends that once echoed through the vast landscapes of the Urals and Siberia, gods frequently descended upon humanity in the sacred forms of birds. These stories offer a remarkable fusion of the mythical and the natural, harkening back to an era when the divine mingled with the mortal realm.

Among these ancestral tales, the ability of humans to transform into birds emerges as a fascinating theme, finding its resonance in the artistic expressions of the time. Nomadic cultures meticulously crafted bronze bird figures, often adorning them with ancestral faces on their chests. These birds, epitomizing the concept of flight and transcendence, became vessels for the essence of human souls, serving as messengers of the gods—creatures sometimes adorned with a single head, at times even three, fluttering between the realms of existence.

The legends spun intricate narratives of these avian emissaries, entrusted with the sacred duty of transporting departed souls to the afterlife. Often portrayed as winged entities with human-like visages, these spiritual bird-beings bridged the gap between mortality and the divine.

Nevertheless, a particular avian figure remains an enigma—an entity bearing a human countenance on its chest and cradling three anthropomorphic forms, possibly human souls, within its talons. The scarcity of direct records compels us to embark on a journey through the labyrinthine corridors of other mythological tales from antiquity, seeking to illuminate the nature of this mystical being.

One such whisper from the past introduces us to Minley.

Minley was considered the winged son of the supreme god, Num. It had seven wings on each side. On the orders of its father god, it would flap its wings, sending winds to cover the world. The image of Minley was carved out of wood by the Nenets people and placed on a pole that rose above a traditional dwelling, called a chum. The bird resembled a weathervane from the side.

The Selkup people told tales of a flying devil in the form of a bird with iron wings called Minley or Lab-ira, an old eagle. Its mouth was like a huge hole. It lived even before the Great Flood. When Minley flapped its wings, a storm would follow. When it spread its wings, a solar eclipse would occur. Minley eradicated the disease known as tsinga, scurvy. It tore it into pieces with its fearsome beak and swallowed it. Minley was believed to be an omnipresent spirit, knowing all that has been and all that will be.

Another bird-like deity was the Patiangi. It has a round head with a hawk-like beak, short neck, and long, colorful tail. Patiangis' bodies are bare, but they have wings made of shimmering iron and the feathers on their wings are as sharp as knives. Even dogs fear Patiangis; they won't bark and fearfully tuck in their tails. Killing a Patiangi is forbidden, and as noted by ethnographer and writer Andrey Golovnev, doing so means instant death for the perpetrator.

Children who get lost or die in the forest become Patiangis. Stillborn infants and toothless babies who don't survive their first year can also transform into these iron-winged beings. Once they become Patiangis, their bodies are sealed within tree stumps or hollows and sent to the forest's master, Machil' Lozu. Patiangi come to individuals who are not destined to live long. Their arrival is not accidental. It was believed that little children would become Patiangis if parents failed to provide an amulet in their cradle, such as an iron knife, the lower jawbone of a deer, or a small bell.

Speaking Cultures: Traditions of the Samoyedic and Ugrian Peoples." Yekaterinburg: Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 1995. p. 607.





30. Burial Mask

8th – 11th century
Upper Kama River Basin, Perm Krai, Cis-Urals Russia
Silver
20.6 cm high

Kassou Grusenmeyer

Before us lies a life-sized, silver burial mask. Unlike the smaller masks from the same culture, often crafted from wood or textiles, this mask's material and size suggest it was meant for a person of high stature. What sets this mask apart, however, are the unique engravings on its reverse side. The care and detailed craftsmanship throughout further emphasize the prominence of the individual it was meant for.

The mask's front side is adorned with bulging repoussé dots, which accentuate the eyes and eyebrows. Seven distinct lines fan out across the forehead. Around the mask's edge, small perforations suggest it was once attached to a textile face or body covering. Large piercings on the mask delineate the openings for the eyes, nose, and mouth. Two notably larger holes near the temples likely held earrings. One such earring reportedly discovered with the mask accompanies it (fig. 1). While the dating of the mask aligns with periods traditionally acknowledged in academic studies, its age is further validated by the silver earring, which is distinctly fashioned in the style of medieval Volga Bulgar jewelry, typically dated between the 9th and 13th centuries.

On the back side, there are two sets of engravings. One is a mandala-type diagram that may represent an eight-pointed solar motif. This motif is engraved in lines that are formed by short, hatched lines engraved over baselines that shape the outline. A second set surrounds the diagram. It consists of a concentric circle design and zoomorphs traced in a loose graffiti style (figs. 2–4). As was pointed out by André Verstandig, the “solar” design can be linked to Central Asian origins, possibly even originating from Iran, as can be seen in an example that dates to the 12th century, reproduced in figure 5.

The vast Siberian region and the Steppes to its south boast a notable presence of imported metal artworks, particularly from West Asia (e.g. Sassanian) and Southern Europe (e.g. Greek). Given the prevalence of such artifacts, many of which likely made their way to the region through fur trade with nomadic tribes, there's uncertainty regarding whether the mask was crafted from a repurposed fragment of an imported silver vessel engraved with the solar motif.

The uncertainty is further underscored by the inconsistent flow of the engraving lines. These inconsistencies are most pronounced around the mouth holes, particularly the rightmost one. While some lines near the nose have faded, this wear could result from the hammering process used to give shape to the mask. One detail hinting at a local origin for the engraving is the freehand style of the figurative designs. These designs, which are unmistakably of local subjects and closely align in style with the baselines outlining the diagram.

Fig. 1. Ear pendant. Volga Bulgar (present-day Tatarstan and Chuvashia regions in Russia). Medieval period, 9th–13th century. Silver. 6,1 cm high.



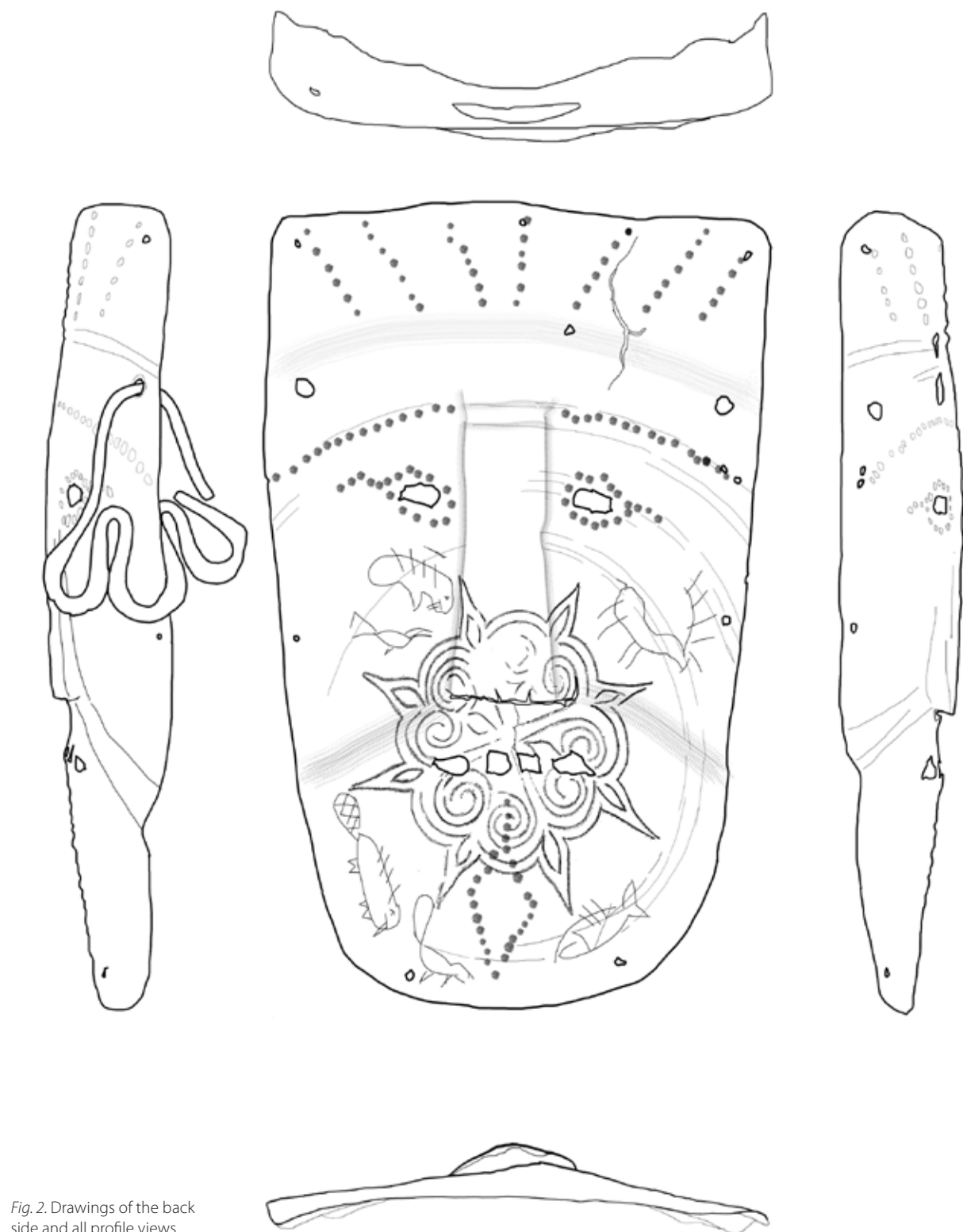


Fig. 2. Drawings of the back side and all profile views.

An intriguing observation arises from the placement of the engraved motifs: they adorn the inside of the mask, apparently only to be “enjoyed” by the deceased individual. Concealing such meticulous craftsmanship, which undoubtedly required significant time and focus, suggests that the motifs held a primarily symbolic significance. This interpretation gains strength from the solar motif and the concentric circles that center around the nose and mouth openings. This could potentially allude to the desire for reincarnation. As discussed in the context of a silver eye cover in this catalogue (entry 31), reincarnation meant life in the afterlife and a subsequent rebirth in this world. Arguably, our most palpable connection to life is the breath we draw. The engravings might convey a wish for the deceased to experience rebirth or to savor the essence of life—breath—in the afterlife.

The depth of this sentiment is accentuated by the magic of the solar diagram and its concentric patterns, which, as emphasized, are depicted on the flip side of the mask. Reflecting the duality of existence, the flip side symbolizes life in the otherworld, where the intricately drawn patterns would thus breathe life into the departed.

The solar motif, after all, is an emblem that can be linked to Numi-Torum, the supreme god of the Mansi and Khanty, associated with the sky. One of his attributes is the sun, the reason why he is sometimes called Sāngki Torum, “Torum the Bright.”¹ The sun is the ultimate source of life, allowing plants to grow and, indirectly, sustaining animals and humans. As a motif, it is aptly symbolic for breath and, subsequently, for the deceased person to continue “to live,” potentially causing the reincarnation of the soul.

Within the diagram, four pairs of opposing spirals can be discerned. As described elsewhere in this publication in the legend of “The Clawed Goddess, Creator of the Universe,” spirals epitomize “the archetypal image of creation or dynamic par excellence.” A pair of opposing spirals heightens this symbolism, embodying dualities like life/death and growth/decline, thereby empowering the underlying theme of reincarnation. The dotted lines radiating up across the forehead might represent sun rays. Their number—seven—might allude to the seven sons of Numi-Torum, the seven heavens, or the seventh heaven where he resides in a radiant golden sanctuary. The concentric circles could be interpreted as a cosmic, mandala-like attribute. In the grand design, they envelop the solar motif, underscoring the central cosmic position of Numi Torum, highlighting the significance of the sun, and expressing the profound wish for reincarnation.

The solar diagram is surrounded by engraved zoomorphic illustrations, each positioned at cardinal directions. These depict a deer, fish, beavers, and the duo of a seal and a bird. Setting aside the possibility that they might function as

Fig. 3



Fig. 4



¹ On this issue of re-use, see Margolis 2019: 60–61.

Fig. 5. Small plate, Iran (Khorosan), 12th century, brass type of alloy, 18,5 cm diameter x 2,9 cm high, State Museum of Cultural History of Uzbekistan, inv. n° A-176–26.



Fig. 6. Anthropomorphic figure (fragment). Kulai culture, early Iron Age, 5th–3rd century BC. Ob’ River basin, West Siberia, Russia. Bronze. 14 cm high.



astronomical symbols, we lean towards interpreting them as representations of animals that were typically hunted in different seasons, providing food for the soul in the otherworld.² The deliberate symbolism of transitioning through the seasons could hint at the idea of a full annual cycle. This, in turn, alludes to the cyclical nature of life, suggesting the soul’s perpetual journey through various phases, potentially pointing towards the same concept of reincarnation as encountered with the notion of breath, discussed above.

A final design warranting attention is the diamond-shaped motif that appears to hang from the lower lip; however, its meaning remains elusive. This design is recurrent in Siberian art. For instance, it can be observed on a bronze figure from the Iron Age Kulai culture (fig. 6). The motif is also present on figures engraved on both the front and reverse sides of a silver disk (fig. 7). Traditionally, such disks were placed on the chests of the deceased, and they share both a temporal and geographic context with the burial mask under discussion. On one side of the disk, three figures are depicted alongside a snake-like creature. Two of these figures have pointed heads, which are interpreted as a characteristic of a giant creature known in Ugrian mythology as “Menkv.” The third figure possesses a rounded head, similar to the lone figure on the reverse side of the disk, which is flanked by two fish and two snake-like creatures. The significance of these animals, whether suggesting hunting prey or totemic symbols, remains speculative. Within this context, pointed heads typically represent male figures, while rounded heads, especially when juxtaposed against pointed heads, denote female figures.³

All four figures, both male and female, display the diamond-shaped motif pending from the lower lip, mirroring the design found on our silver mask. Offering a sensible interpretation of this motif is challenging and inevitably speculative. This quandary evokes the longstanding scholarly debates surrounding the protruding long tongue motif, prevalent across cultures from the classical world, Mesoamerican societies, to the Pacific Northwest

² Deer, in many cultures, are associated with the changing of seasons and the cycle of life. As they grow new antlers in spring, they become emblematic of rebirth and nature’s renewal after winter. Fish, abundant during the warm months, might represent summer, while beavers, known for their industrious nature and dam-building abilities, could symbolize the autumnal phase of preparation for the upcoming cold. The pairing of the seal and bird introduces a unique interpretation. The seal, adapted to icy terrains and proficient in enduring harsh winters, might signify the winter season. However, its association with a bird, often seen as a symbol of freedom, transition, or migration, suggests a transitional phase: possibly the cusp between winter and spring when seals remain active amidst the ice, and the skies begin to see the return of migratory birds. This union might represent the continuous interplay between harshness and hope, stagnation and movement.

³ Garkusha, Novikov, and Baulo, 2022: 130; see also the legend on a large wooden effigy by Erenburg in this publication (see entry 32). This observation runs counter with a hypothesis developed recently by Bronckers (2023: 70–71). In his analysis, he suggests that within the Perm art context, a pattern of lines on the chin, which appears to depict a beard, typically indicates the female gender of the depicted individual.

Coast Native American cultures, and the indigenous groups of Indonesia and New Guinea. While the long tongue has been interpreted in various ways— as a sign of the underworld, a fertility symbol, an apotropaic gesture, etc.— it could, within the Perm art context, align with any of these interpretations. Nevertheless, given that the motif hangs from the mouth, we propose an interpretation consistent with the solar diagram on the reverse side of the silver mask. This would suggest the motif as a life-giving symbol linked with breath. The motif’s downward orientation might further allude to connections with the underworld and the realm of the dead.

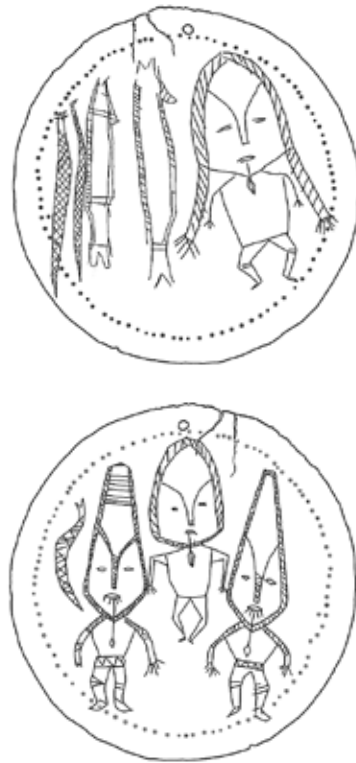
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Fig. 7 Burial disk. 1st half of 1st millennium. Ob’ River basin, West Siberia, Russia. Silver. 14 cm diameter.



31. Burial Eye Cover

8th – 10th century (C14 dating)
Upper Kama River Basin, Perm Krai, Cis-Urals Russia
Silver, silk (?)
12.4 cm wide x 5 cm high

Kassou Grusenmeyer

In ancient Perm, silver burial masks were fashioned for the empowerment of the departing soul. As outlined in this catalogue’s legends of two distinct masks, the impact, role and symbolic might that these masks held was unexpectedly profound. Specifically, we probe the symbolic significance of the masks’ mouth and eye openings, interpreting them as gateways to another realm; eventually facilitating rebirth.

This assumption rests on the ancient belief that the spirit of the departed lingers in the body after death. As Fodor writes: “According to our ancestors’ belief, common all around Northern Eurasia, human beings had two souls. One of them is the *body-soul* or *breath-soul* living inside the chest, that ceases to exist when the body dies. The other one is the free soul or *shadow soul* situated in the head, that stays in this world for a while following the death of the person, and only after a certain amount of time leaves to the grave, to the other world.”¹

The number of souls a person had could differ. In this catalogue, the belief in four or five souls, respectively for male and female individuals, is described. Along with the idea of the departing soul, a concept of reincarnation presumably also existed. Boris Erenburg attributes these beliefs, in part, to ancient Persian mythological influences. We reference an integral passage on this topic:

“10. Reincarnation of the dead

The belief in the cycle of souls, the embodiment of the soul of the deceased in the body of the newborn, also came to the Urals from the religion of the Iranian tribes. Fravashi (life force, souls of the dead) return to the world with the help of the great goddess Ardvisur Anahita, who sends them into the womb of pregnant women. In the Ugrian pantheon, this function is performed by the goddess Kaltaś. The cycle of souls among the Ugrian peoples can be seen on the famous “Nyrgynda” plate fashioned in the animal style (fig. 1). The cycle of souls is reflected in the burial rite of the people of Bjarmaland, where the silver mask on the face of the deceased is a sign of departure, and the silver sun disk on his chest is a sign of return.”²

¹ Fodor 2014: 129.

² Erenburg, *Animal Style*, 2014: 13.

“10. Реинкарнация умерших
Вера в круговорот душ, воплощение души покойного в теле новорожденного, тоже пришла на Урал из религии иранских племен.
Фравашы (жизненная сила, души умерших) возвращаются в мир с помощью великой богини Ардвисуры Анахиты, посылающей их в чрево рожениц. В пантеоне угров эту функцию выполняет богиня Калтась. Круговорот душ у бярмов мы можем увидеть

Fig. 1. Nyrgynda plate. 6th–8th centuries.
Udmurt Republic, Russia. Bronze. 18,2 cm wide x 10 cm high.



Numerous aspects of the burial tradition suggest a belief in reincarnation. While these won't be explored in this legend, it's evident that such a sentiment was pervasive across Northern Eurasia and held significant importance.

This mask has textile remnants at its outer edges. These fragments are evidence of the cords once used to secure the silver eye cover to the shroud that enveloped the corpse. A C14 analysis was conducted, securely revealing the ninth century as the mask's date of production.³

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на знаменитой “Ныргындинской” пластине звериного стиля. Круговорот душ отражен в погребальном обряде бьярмов где серебряная маска на лице покойного нечный диск на его груди знак возвращения — знак ухода, а серебряный солнечный диск на его груди — знак возвращения.
Можно еще отыскать немало иранских корней в зверином стиле Урала но это тема специальных работ.”

³ C14 report ref. 0723-OA-825R-3, dated 28 July 2023: the obtained result is after calibration (2 σ, 95,4 % confidence) 710–715 (0.6 % probability), 771–902 (94,5 % probability) & 914–975 (15,1 % probability).



ETHNOGRAPHICAL ERA

19th – 20th Centuries



32. Mansi Effigy

Late 19th – early 20th century

Ob' River Basin, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, West Siberia, Russia

Mansi people

Cedar wood

174 cm high

Boris Erenburg

Within the sanctuaries of the Mansi people in Siberia, wooden idols with pointed heads known as “menkvo” have been discovered. According to Ugrian mythology, these idols represent giants that were created by the god Numi Torum before the existence of humans. They resemble the Titans of Greek mythology, the Jotuns of Scandinavian folklore, the Fu-fu of Chinese legends, and other giants found in mythology around the world.

People offered sacrifices to these idols, with black horses the most prized. The Menkvo themselves paid homage to the supreme gods and protected the Mansi's sanctuaries.¹ These giants were very tall and strong, and they could transform themselves into animals. In folklore, some Menkvo helped humans, while others were hostile. Dangerous giants could be killed only by a copper bullet crafted from a cauldron's rim.² These wooden idols have features resembling ancient southern heroes characterized by pointed headgear resembling Sasanian helmets. Legends described the Menkvo as “iron-bodied” beings adorned in metallic armor.

The Menkvo are forest giants, the forest is their domain, and the rituals to carve them take place there.² Menkvo are classified as two types. The first type is of faces carved on Spruce trees; these are referred to as “menkvo-khuri”. The second type is of wooden idols with pointed heads, made primarily from coniferous wood, wrapped in white fabric. They are found facing south. Mansi guardians were assigned to care for sanctuaries and tasked with repairing or replacing the wooden figures every five to seven years. The compelling feature of Mansi sanctuaries, referred to as “sat menkvo” (seven Menkvo), consisted of seven wooden figures of varying heights with pointed heads. They were attached to horizontal poles fastened between two trees. Their sanctuaries resembled fortifications surrounding the ancient settlements of that time. According to some researchers, considering the position of the figures on a hillside, their attachment to poles, and the symbolism of the number seven, means they were associated with the seven stars of the Big Dipper. According to beliefs held by the Ob-Ugric people, Ursa Major was the constellation of the Heavenly Moose. Parallels in creation myths can be discerned between the Menkvo, East Indian depictions of the seven rishis (“Saptarishi” in Sanskrit), and the seven sages from Chinese traditions known as “Beidou” in Chinese. In legends, Menkvo originated in the north, so their faces are always turned south. The figures are intentionally placed in a leaning position, with their pointed heads serving as markers towards a singular point in the sky, the North Star.³

¹ Menkvo // Mansi Encyclopedia, 2001.

² Sat menkvo // Encyclopedia, 2001, pp. 128–129.

³ Yu. V. Tishkov, Sanctuary “Seven Menkvo”, Barnaul, 2015.



Effigy of a Shaman's Helper Spirit
Late 19th – 20th centuries
Central Siberia, Nanai people
Wood, glass, beads
47,5 cm high

GRUSENMEYER
WOLINER

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SABLON
17 RUE DES MINIMES • 1000 BRUSSELS • BELGIUM
INFO@GRUSENMEYER-WOLINER.COM

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Editor

Kassou Grusenmeyer

Legends

Boris Erenburg
André Verstandig
Kassou Grusenmeyer

Photography

Frédéric Dehaen

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Page 136 Perm Krai, Gremyachinsky ditrict, Zmeya (Snake) rock

Victor Melnik

Page 6 Perm Krai, Krasnovishersky district, view from Poludov Rock

Page 18 Perm Krai, Krasnovishersky district, view from the top of Poludov rock

PAGE 56 Perm Krai, Krasnovishersky district, river Vishera, Vetlan rock

Page 78 Perm Krai, Krasnovishersky district, Poludov rock

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Sheath
8th – 9th century
River Izhma, near Kartayol', Komi Republic, Cis-Urals Russia
Bronze, wood
34.5 cm long x 5.8 cm high

EURASIA

0 1000 km



ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

- | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Alaca Höyük | 19. Krasnoyarsk |
| 2. Babylon | 20. Kulaika |
| 3. Bagha Gumpha | 21. Laxon |
| 4. Bashalom | 22. Maykop |
| 5. Battambang | 23. Medvezhskaya |
| 6. Bohuslan | 24. Mohyla Ternivka |
| 7. Çatal Höyük | 25. Nyrgynda |
| 8. Cherdyn | 26. Oglakty |
| 9. Gaynsky | 27. Olympus |
| 10. Gilan | 28. Pazyryk |
| 11. Gol Mod | 29. Saldyar |
| 12. Hallstatt | 30. Sanxingdui |
| 13. Ignatievka cave | 31. Surgutsky |
| 14. Izhemsky | 32. Tsagaan Salaa |
| 15. Kelermes | 33. Ust-Poluy |
| 16. Khokhlach | 34. Volga Bulgar |
| 17. Kostromskaya Stanisa | 35. Vuktyl |
| 18. Krasnodar | 36. Zhiyi |

NOTE:

- The map shows only the geographical names and ethnic groups mentioned in this catalogue.
- Siberia officially begins east of the Urals (Trans-Urals), but traditionally, the northern territories west of the Urals (Cis-Urals) are considered to lie within the same culturally zone. Our map shows the extended version of Siberia, from Karelia in the west to Kamchatka in the east.



