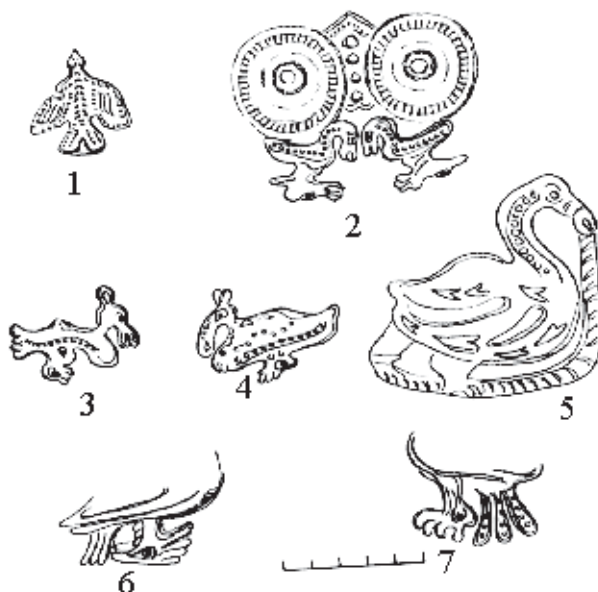


THE MYTH OF THE NORTHERN SUB-URALS

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All peoples have passed the mythological stage in their history, but there are almost no data for the reconstruction of mythic-ritual cycles of the Komis. There is no further development of the well-known myth about the origin of the World in other texts. Only few mythological fragments of folklore texts do not have any semantic or associative unity. The unrealistic art of the Early Middle Ages – the Perm Animal Style – is usually connected with the ancient mythology and rituals, namely with the ancient Komi mythology¹. But the semantic identity of legendary personages on the bronze plaques is to be proved. The attempts to identify the bronze *sulde* with the Komi legendary hero Pera, or the bronze man-elk with the Lappish hero Mandash, are based on superficial coincidences.

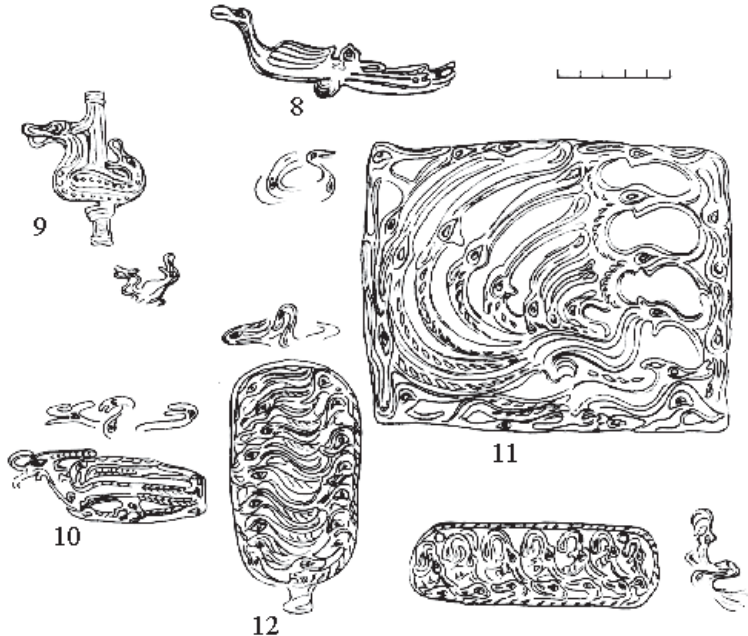
If we admit that the Komi have no mythological cycle, a very serious historical conclusion should be drawn: the Komi people was formed late enough. It included heterogeneous components, and Christianity made the unconsolidated people forget their unwritten myths completely. Such conclusion is in opposition with the historical and archaeological facts.



So let us try to reconstruct the mythological cycle through the inner connections between fragments of different folklore genres: legends, epics, songs and iconography². First we should establish combinations of images in the scenes and topics within one and the same genre, then we should determine the ‘trajectories’ of the plot and after that we should try to determine simultaneously the general semiotic logic of the combinations of personages and their movements in several different genres. It is possible to see certain scenes and personages on bronze plaques, because there is considerable amount of compositions (more than 600), while the common personages in them are not numerous (not more than 10).

Let us examine the plaques, using folklore texts. Two large disks (fig. 2) resemble the Eggs of the Origin of Life, four slits between them marking the points where the eggs fell. The typical images of the birds in profile (Yen and Omol?) consist of a beast-shaped detail, a paw-wing in the form of the beast’s head with a feather shaped nose (fig. 2-7).

According to the myth, 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



and Falsehood, Day and Night.

We can see the tandem Duck-Beast in the complicated dynamic compositions in round work (fig. 2-8) and cast in open-work (fig. 9-12, etc.), dynamic expression manifesting itself in low relief. A zoomorphic wing can be of the size of the Duck (fig. 8) or much bigger than all the other figures (fig. 9-12). The size and form of zoomorphic wings depend on the pose and direction of the Duck. The myth does not contain any description of *Chozh* the Duck as a combination of a beast and a bird. But generally myths do not describe the appearance of the initial instance. It is 'invisible', 'immeasurable'. In this myth the term 'duck' is purely conventional, because in the Komi language *Chozh* means 'uncle, relative, ancestor'. 'Stationary' (not flying) figures of birds cast in the round are duck-shaped. Dynamic figures of birds cast in low relief or in open-work look as if we see them in flight from different points of view: the heads seem more round or more stretched forward, their necks seem shorter or longer. The viewer can associate the figures with certain biological species, but in fact they do not exactly resemble real birds.

In Komi bronze plaques the tails of the birds (ducks, skins, etc.) are presented as done over again, unfinished or made of leftovers. They are only fragments of the Bird-ancestor. In Komi songs birds indicate life/death, the male/female origin. In allegories and jokes we can find some hints at a possible reversion to Chaos. This is possible, if the Bird unites with the half-man, half-beast. For example, Kortkeros the man goes across the bridge (the ogre is going from the World of Chaos to the Land of people) to feed the Swallow with seeds (to marry her). The song contains a warning, that it would be bad for all the people. This warning can be interpreted as an indication of a possibility of disappearance of people, return to the Chaos without human beings, because of the revival of the primordial Beast-Bird. According to the legend, the primordial Duck *Chozh* crashed and became the Earth. Yet the Duck obtained human appearance and started creating the World.

There are oval contours on the breasts of the bronze bird figures (fig. 13). Human faces are placed there, too. Around human faces we can see heads of elks and other zoomorphic figures, formerly we saw them on fields of wings (fig. 15-16, etc.).

The front view shows every feather of the wing, formed in zoomorphic contours (fig. 15, 16, 20). The first feather, nearest to the breast (with human face) is formed as a bird, the second – as an elk, the third and the fourth feather have contours of beasts difficult to identify (the same as on wings of birds in profile – fig. 8-12). Figures on the feathers between wings and tail resemble reptiles. Pangolins (gigantic reptiles) are depicted on the tails of bronze birds (lower than human faces). The snake-shaped and horse-shaped figures are



depicted above reptiles (and lower than human faces).

All the compositions in Perm Animal Style represent different combinations of wings (feathers), breasts and tail contours. These compositions are fragments of the whole Bird, more detailed or more generalised, their frames depend on what part of the Bird they depict: oval, round or wing-shaped (fig. 18-45, etc.). All the compositions with human-shaped figures (the so-called *sulde*) can be depicted in profile. Zoomorphic wings are background for these scenes (fig.



25-42).

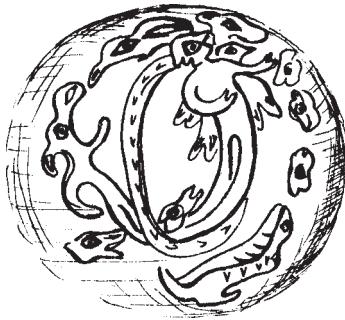
These personages are given in different attitudes, from different points of



view. If we draw the bronze figures in one and the same scale and superpose them (graphically on paper, on the screen of a computer or in video), we shall reveal one basic scene, common for all the compositions – a kind of ‘universal sphere’, on the surface and inside of which all the personages will be placed. It is quite enough to turn or focus this ‘sphere’, in order to see any composition cast in the early Middle Ages in the reach of the Vycheгда or the Pechora. These compositions (fig. 18-44) remind us of the well-known information from foreign travellers in the 10th-15th centuries: there was a greatly honoured idol in the Sub-Ural land, called the Golden Woman. It was an old woman with a child on her knees. The child in its turn had another child – the Golden Woman’s grandson. The grandson was holding her great-grandson, and so on and so forth. The Golden Woman was said to contain Future in herself.

The same principle is realised in bronze compositions: the closer we examine the figure (if it is depicted larger), the greater amount of figures we shall see

‘inside’ it. Constant turnings and ‘approachings’ give us new combinations. Having reconstructed ‘the sphere’ – the sum of all the images in bronze³, we can imagine the technological process, which provided the exactness of the combinations of figures in different attitudes. One composition was recast from the impressions of several others in an earth-hole: the semi-spherical form of the earth-bases provided a ‘round dance’ of figures. Figures necessary from the point of view of inner logic of a new composition were kept on the mould, while the unnecessary figures were removed either at once or later by means of cutting them out of the cast image. To avoid mistakes, ancient masters must have known the sense of the ideal ‘sphere’ with all its personages.



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This sense would become more vivid for us, if we consider that the content of all bronze images was the flight and turnings of Primordial Bird: the scene with different personages depends on the turn of her breast (with an anthropomorphic figure) and of her zoomorphic feathers and tail (with reptiles). A reconstructed sphere is a model of the Primordial Bird.

According to the initial myth Chozh became the Earth. According to the same myth Yen brought down six skies inhabited by creatures – antipodes, looking like human beings, reptiles, beasts living together. We suppose that pictures of their life together on Earth are reflected in Perm Animal Style.

In Komi tales, songs, riddles and proverbs we can see combinations of personages and their ‘trajectories’, which are explainable from the point of view of combinations of different parts of the Primordial Bird. In the tales the dog, depicted on the Bird’s feather remote from its breast with *sulde*, is an image of the faraway homeland, or an image of a ‘redone man’. God intended to give the dog a bow and arrows – they are depicted on some plaques on the feather with a dog’s head. The feather with an elk’s head is one of the nearest to *sulde* – in the tales the main character conceals himself in the elk’s fell so as to avoid sudden danger.

An elk, like other zoomorphic figures, does not have extremities of its own on the plaques. Sometimes it is depicted with four 'extremities' that are formed of other zoomorphic figures, e.g. of arthropods, depicted near the Bird's tail, and its body and tail of the figure of a horse depicted above the Bird's tail. – Here we can imagine the turn of Primordial Bird in its flight forward with its wing down. From this point of view, anthropomorphic figures are on the figure of an elk, which in its turn is a combination of many other figures. Other similar images appear during this flight. It looks as if human figures turn over and finally convert into something like fish or reptiles that should be on the tail of the Bird.



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Horsemen are not numerous in the Komi folklore. Pera-bogatyř goes to Moscow to the Tsar riding an elk. Due to the elk, he reaches the destination three days earlier than the troika of horses. Riding an elk is a miraculous fact. In the Komi tales we can find one crossing subject: 'human being is stronger than a horse'. According to Y. Rochev, a man stronger than a horse is often a werewolf.

On the plaque with a 'horseman', a bear is also depicted. A bear is sometimes depicted on round castings, under the bird, as if moving in the same direction. Bear is outside the Bird-Earth. In Komi tales the bear comes to the main character when the latter leaves his homeland. On this plaque (fig. 43) its appearance, perhaps, has the same sense: human figure is at the utmost point of the Primordial Bird's body. And Pera-bogatyř was rushing to strange lands, to Moscow. At this utmost point 'transformations' of *sulde* start. In the tales, characters can be swallowed by the Bear or Glot (pangolin), for if the flight continues in the same direction, Primordial Bird should turn over.

On the other flank of the figure, the image of the bird symbolises the same critical situation. In Komi songs birds lead the plot either to the wedding or to the land of the dead.

The subjects are so numerous that it is impossible to describe them here

even in short. Numerous digressions draw us to the conclusion that all the folklore subjects prove the hypothesis: images and subjects have one and the same cyclical basis – the complicated mythological image of the Primordial Bird Chozh.

The fact that cyclical connections can be found between materials belonging to different periods, from the Early Middle Ages (and according to the newest facts, Perm Animal Style is much more ancient, dating back to the beginning of the first millennium BC) to our days, can be explained by a profound, not yet destroyed, common tradition of the Komi people. No doubt these connections are based on folk-beliefs.

Literature

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²The following field work materials and publications are used: Mikushev, A. and Chistalyov, P. *Komi narodnye pesni. Vol. 1. Vychedga i Sysola*. Syktyvkar, 1966; *Vol. 3. Vym i Dora*. Syktyvkar, 1971; Plesovsky, F. Kosmogonicheskiye mify komi i udmurtov. In: *Etnografia i folklor komi*. Trudy IJLI KF TA SSSR, No. 13. Syktyvkar, 1972, pp. 32-45; Sidorov, A. Ideologiya drevnego naseleniya Komi kraja. In: *Op. cit.*, pp. 12-21.

³Chesnokova, N. *Klassifikatsiya i tipologizatsiya v izuchenii arheologicheskikh istochnikov (na materiyalah finno-ugorskogo izobrazitel'nogo iskusstva)*. Syktyvkar, 1988.

THE MUSIC IN THE NGANASAN SHAMAN RITUAL

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In the traditional culture of the Nganasans fixed norms of shamanism developed. The shaman's functions were connected with the treatment of diseases, hunting, reindeer-breeding, regulation of the relations inside the socium (predicting the future of the family members). After the Nganasans had chosen the settled way of living and lost their traditional organisation of life, the shaman practice became a relict phenomenon. Nowadays investigators can often observe imitations of the shaman ritual, but the true shaman tradition was pre-