



THE DEPICTION OF PROTECTIVE TOTEMS IN THE MYTHO-EPIC CONCEPTIONS OF THE ANCIENT TURKIC PEOPLES

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Elyor ALIMQULOV

*Senior Lecturer, International
Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan*

E-mail: boshrooo@mail.ru

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Abstract. *This article examines the imagery of protective totems in the mytho-epic conceptions of the ancient Turkic peoples of Central Asia. Drawing on archaeological finds, wall paintings, metalwork, ceramics, and ossuaries from Sogdiana, Bactria, Khwarazm, and the Fergana Valley, it traces how totemic animals and birds – above all the Senmurv and Simurgh, the Humo bird, the sphinx, and the serpent (Ophiolatry) and the triton – functioned as “guardians” and “protectors.” The study shows how these symbols were linked to particular stars and planets, to the Tree of Life, and to ideas of fertility and prosperity, and how, as tribes migrated and religions changed, local cult images merged with incoming ones, losing some features and acquiring others. It is argued that these ancient symbolic images preserved their hidden essence across centuries and creeds.*

Keywords: *ancient Turkic peoples, mytho-epic conceptions, totem, Senmurv, Simurgh, Humo, sphinx, Ophiolatry (serpent worship), triton, Tree of Life, Central Asia, Sogdian art.*

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the centuries, the role of animals and birds was incomparable in the life of the Turkic peoples who lived on the basis of a nomadic steppe culture in Central Asia. Because of the very nature of their way of life, nomadic societies created works of art not so much in architecture as in the fields of handicraft. Felt-making, gold embroidery, craftwork, leatherwork, and weaving are among the distinctive products of the culture of the peoples of Central Asia. Religious beliefs of a totemic character occupied a firm place in the life of these peoples, and in their conceptions these totems performed the function of a “protector” or “guardian.”

The Senmurv, the Simurgh, and the Humo Bird

Analyses carried out in the course of the research show that various totem-animals were linked with particular constellations of stars and planets, and as a result a symbol distinctive to each environment took shape. The Senmurv bird in the Avesta may be cited as an example of this. In the Rigveda, the sacred book of Hinduism, this bird is mentioned as having brought the saving Soma down to earth. The body of the Senmurv bird was depicted in the form of animal-bird-serpent, signifying the united symbol of the elements of earth, sky, and water. In particular, on the wall paintings of Samarkand the Senmurv is depicted with the head of a dog, the wings of a bird, and a scaly tail like that of a fish. There also exist a Senmurv image on a ceramic vessel from the ancient Fazli site of Kashkadarya, a ceramic depiction of the Senmurv found near Samarkand and now kept in a Kiev museum, and a well-preserved Senmurv symbol kept in one of the museums of Russia.

Among the peoples of the region, the Senmurv symbol may be encountered, as a totem of the creation of the world, in legends connected with the Tree of Life. An example of this is the image of the Senmurv embodying the symbolic meaning of peace and prosperity, depicted on the medieval Oqtepa medallion-amulet. Researchers note that, from the period of the development of Islam, the place of the Senmurv was taken by the Simurgh, depicted sitting upon a tree laden with ripe fruit. After the Mongol invasion, the Simurgh of our land was harmonized with the Phoenix bird (feng, feng-huang) sitting upon a tree brought from the East.

The protective function of the totem is expressed among various peoples in legends about heroes being raised up to the heavens upon a great bird. Such symbols appear in the Avesta in Kobus's flight to the heavens with the help of eagles that lifted his throne, and in the "Shahnama" in the flight of Kaykawus seated upon eagles, as well as in the bronze casket of Samarkand belonging to the 11th–12th centuries and in a 15th-century Samarkand miniature depicting the Simurgh carrying Zal up to the heavens.

In his studies, V. Shishkin calls the image of a woman wrapped in bird feathers, seated upon the top of a tree in a partially preserved painting in the Northern Hall of Varakhsha, a "woman-bird." Since the Simurgh scattered the seeds of prosperity and peace from the Tree of Life to the earth, the bird in this depiction may be conjectured to be the "Humo" bird or the "Simurgh."

In the ancient Egyptian civilization, special attention was paid to this image. In the Pyramid Texts this symbol was called “Ba” in its state of rising up from the human soul, and upon reaching its destination a transformation was observed in its form, expressing the radiant “akh.” This image was considered the soul of the deity Osiris (the Sun). Parallel to Egyptian culture, special attention was likewise paid to this symbol in the ancient Indian civilization. In ancient Indian legends this figure was famous under the name Kinnara as a celestial musician, and was depicted on seals and coins together with his spouse Kinnari. In the antique culture of China this image is found in the Buddha caves of the Mogao site, while in Central Asia this figure found its expression in the Humo bird (Mathieu, 1956).

On a vessel found at Jarqo‘ton, belonging to the state of Bactria, there is depicted a bird on a pot used by the population in everyday customs. On the ornaments of an 11th–12th-century copper platter of Fergana the Humo appears in the form of a woman-bird, and on the Samarkand snuff-gourds that have survived to our day the Humo bird is depicted together with a horse, the Sun, and the stars. A person upon whom the shadow of the Humo bird has fallen is called “humoyun” and, attaining happiness and felicity, lives a royal life, says V. Shishkin in his investigations (Shishkin, 1963:211-212).

In the studies, legends connected with the Humo bird have been analyzed. According to the legends, the Humo bird brings the seed of the grapevine to the savior who rescued it from a serpent, and from it wine is created. The Simurgh bird, which brings from the Tree of Life the seed of sustaining life on earth, of the renewal of nature, and of the fertility of agriculture and the harvest, is associated with this (Suleymanov, 2000:206).

Human-Animal Hybrids and the Sphinx

In various examples of mythological and cult objects, all winged creatures possess divine qualities, and as a result of the syncretization of two images a new image is embodied. Among the human-bird category, for instance, one may cite the depictions of the sirin – a bird with a human head – and of the angel (genius) – a human with bird’s wings. In Muslim countries, the woman-bird with a multicolored shimmering tail guarding the Tree of Life is rendered in a very ornate manner. Such symbols found their reflection on the Samarkand bronze trays and pots of the 10th–12th centuries, on a 6th–8th-century ossuary of Samarkand, and on ceramic objects of the 8th–10th centuries.

Apart from the depictions of protective birds carrying people aloft, there exist symbols called sphinxes in such forms as human-lion, human-tiger, human-wolf, and the

like. Symbols of this form appeared in ancient Egyptian culture and, in the Middle Ages, in the Muslim world and the countries of Europe. The Egyptian sphinx was depicted as a creature with a lion's body and a man's head, while the Greek sphinx was depicted with a woman's head and breast and with wings. In the ancient legends and beliefs of Central Asia there exist sphinxes in male and female forms: at first a lion-bodied sphinx appears in the wall paintings of the Khalchayan palace, and as time passed, later, in the 12th–13th centuries, the image of the woman-sphinx is embodied in the regions of Samarkand and Fergana. Such symbols in the form of woman-animal, like the woman-bird, signify the meaning of enchantment.

Small porcelain figurines of the sphinx were also placed in the grave with the deceased; in ancient Egypt they served the function of guardians and protectors against evil forces.

The sphinx performing the function of a protector has also been observed in our region. As examples one may cite a 6th–8th-century ceramic figurine of a sphinx from Samarkand and the depiction of a sphinx on a gold token among the objects of the Amu Darya (Oxus) treasure.

The custom, characteristic of the region, of decorating the portals of fortresses in a saw-toothed manner was seen precisely as a symbolic expression of the crown upon the head of this sphinx. Indeed, such crowned deities were venerated as patrons of the city.

These symbols were used mainly as amulets that protect from evil and bring prosperity. On the inscriptions engraved on an 11th–12th-century bronze tray and a bronze mirror found in ancient Termez, there is likewise depicted a sphinx asking strength and might, peace, and wealth for its owner.

On the tips of the sphinxes' tails the symbols of the Moon and the Sun are rendered, and the placement of these heavenly bodies signified that they would bring happiness and good fortune to the owner of the mirror. For this reason this belief has been in circulation in Muslim art for many centuries.

Serpent Worship (Ophiolatry) and the Triton

Ophiolatry (from the ancient Greek ophis – serpent, and latreia – worship), the belief of serpent worship, was characteristic of primitive and ancient peoples; in the religions of the ancient world the serpent, as a symbol of light and goodness in the process of the creation of the world, was considered a fetish of various deities as a symbol of the chthonic – the netherworld, the underground world (Ivanov, 1963:468; Belenitsky &

Marshak, 1973:123). In this regard, the serpent-shaped bracelet in the hand of the priestess beside the goddess depicted at Dalverzintepa takes on a symbolic meaning as a chthonic element. The depiction of a goddess leading the deceased by the hand to the judgment of the gods, on an ossuary in the Tashkent History Museum, also points to her chthonic essence. A serpent's body made of lead was found at Yerqo'rg'on, and in a wall painting in one of the towns of Sogdiana the goddess stands upon a dragon, with a pockmarked serpent set upon her headdress and, beside her, her guardian – a winged wolf – depicted.

In general, the serpent, like the dragon, was a companion of the water goddess, and its most important function was to ensure the fertility of the earth. As a symbol of fertility, the serpent was connected with the creative essence characteristic of the male.

The thin serpent depicted on a bowl belonging to the Qovunchi culture of the Shash (Tashkent) oasis may possibly also have been connected with the fire cult, since on two sides of the bases of certain fire-altars there are serpent depictions. A comparative example of this is such a base of the 4th–5th centuries found at Qizilqir in the Bukhara oasis (Suleymanov, 2000:280; Mukhamedjanov et al., 1983).

The frequent occurrence of appliqué serpent depictions on ceramic objects characteristic of the Jetyasar culture of the Aral region coincides with the period of the dominance of the Chionites; the tribes of the Syr Darya region penetrated into the oases of Sogdiana and Khwarazm and exerted a noticeable influence upon Bactria and Fergana. “While in the Nakhshab culture the influence of the Jetyasar culture predominates, in the material culture of Kesh, Samarkand, and Bukhara the influence of the Qovunchi culture is felt more strongly.”

For example, on a fragment of a ceramic vessel of the 8th–7th centuries BCE from present-day Surkhandarya, within Bactria, a serpent is depicted; this tradition is preserved, and after almost two thousand years, in the 9th–11th centuries, it is repeated in exactly the same state on a cauldron.

An amulet made of two serpent-shaped pieces of black chrysolite (a golden-green precious stone), belonging to the 3rd millennium BCE and found in the Sokh district of Fergana, is considered the most ancient serpent symbol on stone in our land.

After the invasion of Alexander of Macedon, under the influence of Hellenism in our region there appeared in the water cult the tritons – the symbolic depiction of the human-serpent totem; the wall paintings of Panjikent may serve as an example of this: the

water goddess, the patron of the city, is depicted surrounded by tritons, which, according to conjecture, were a symbol of the river.

Examples of tritons occur frequently in the art of ancient Greece and India, and among the Egyptian deities Isis and Serapis are depicted as serpent-legged figures. The figure of the triton was also widespread in Kushan art, and in Sogdiana there is a carved ceramic depiction of it. The human-fish figure also belongs to this category. The tritons, corresponding to local beliefs as the symbols of the rivers of Sogdiana and the companions of the water goddess, were merged in the conception of the population with the dragon or the serpent (Belenitsky, 1959:11-87; Suleymanov, 2000:289; Rempel, 1987:50).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the ancient cult symbols preserve their mysterious essence across centuries and religions and leave their trace in the process of the migration of vast masses of people over enormous distances. In the territory of Central Asia, as the tribes shifted from the north toward the southwest, the local ancient beliefs became intermingled with incoming religious conceptions, and a number of totem-animals and the goddesses and deities connected with them lost some of their particular features. And, at the same time, they came to acquire other signs and symbols.

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