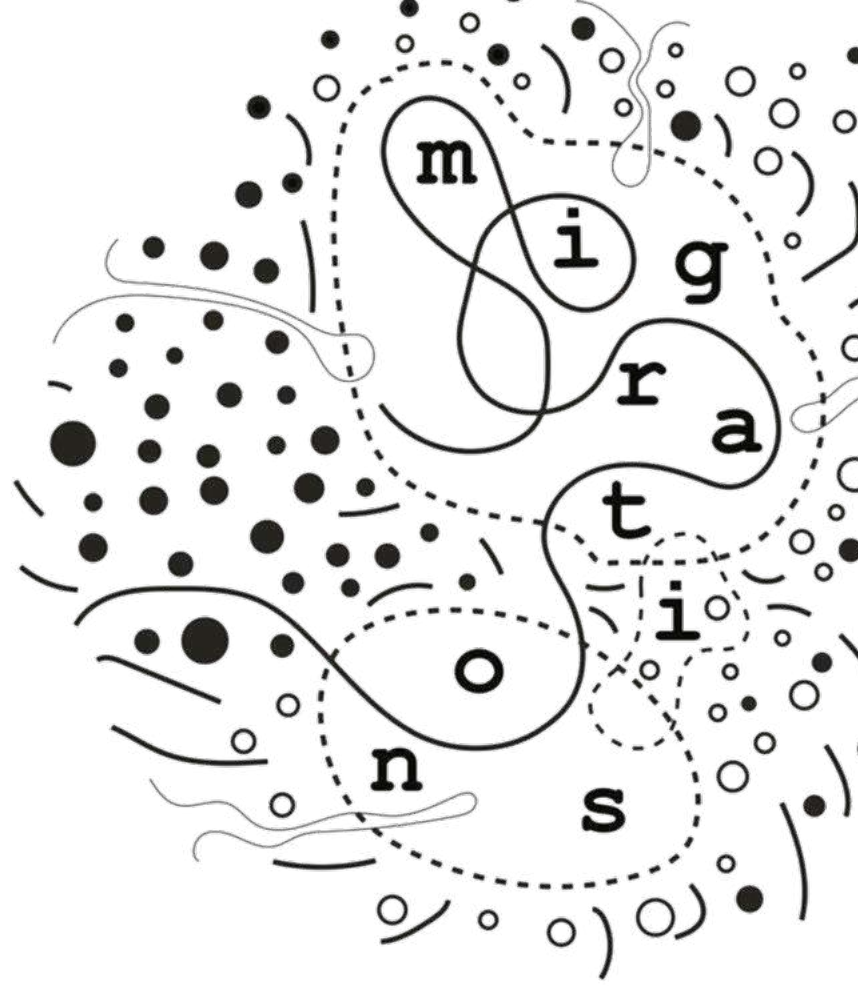


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Religious Flows and Shaping Cultural Milieu in Central Asia: Artistic Expressions of Solar Cult (III-I Millennia BCE)

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ABSTRACT

This paper¹ discusses the solar symbolism in Central Asian art, based on the concept of “religious semiosphere”. It traces the oldest layers of a “religious semiosphere”, or interconnected beliefs that existed in Central Asia during the III-I millennia BCE, through the way of their artistic representations and expressive symbolism. The aim is to analyze a symbolic representation of the solar cult and its co-existence with other religious beliefs, such as totemism and shamanism, and an evolution of the artistic forms of this representation.

Among the artifacts found in the region, the following types of iconographies are highlighted and discussed: the “sun-head” people, the sun-animals, the circle signs, and the solar symbolism among the Xiongnu/Hunnu. These iconographies refer to various forms of expressive symbolism - the rock art and material artifacts from the burial mounds and royal burials, including statuettes, silver and bronze standards, remnants of the horses. Following the analysis of the iconographies, the paper concludes that as one of the oldest beliefs, the solar cult survived the time and found itself either simultaneously or later in other religious symbolic representations of the sacred through signs, images, symbols.

KEYWORDS

Religious Semiosphere; Solar Symbolism; Solar Cult; Central Asia.

Introduction

Throughout the end of the Bronze Age and during the Iron Age, various civilizations (Mohendjo Daro and Harappa, Ancient Chinese, Ancient Egyptian, Hittites, etc.) appeared, followed by a certain apotheosis or an “axial period” of human spiritual development happened around 500 BCE, between 800-200 BCE (Jaspers 2021 [1953]). The appearance of major spiritual searches within Chinese, Greek, Indian, Jewish, and Persian philosophical and religious traditions was paralleled with expanded geospatial social and political organizations both in the East and West (Greek, Han, Kushan, Macedonian, Maurya, Saka, Persian, Xiongnu/Hunnu, other empires). Various and plural forms of artistic expressions and styles could also be attributed to this time. On the vast Eurasian space, the zoomorphic/animal/Saka/Scythian style developed and flourished for almost a millennium.^[2] Religious flows and exchanges had significantly shaped the cultural milieu of “pre-historic” and ancient Central Asia.

The periods preceding the “axial age” of human history, though are less known, are significant. They could shed light on the process of origin/development of religious beliefs, their symbolization, and a sacred and artistic representation.

In the “prehistory” of humankind when people depended on nature for their survival, the cosmos and nature dictated the rhythms of life and activities of social groups. These rhythms of regular changes repeating daily and seasonally again and again, for social groups provided predictability, stability, and regularity embedded in ritual. Therefore, the inseparability between a person and nature logically implied the deification of nature and space through certain rituals.

The daily movement of the celestial sphere’s objects - the sun, the moon, stars, and planets – and their significance for the survival of social groups was equated with the regular rhythm of time and stability. Being endowed with an exceptional meaning, these celestial bodies, therefore, received their symbolic representation as sacred, benevolent, protective symbols in people's social and economic life.

One may assume the solar, lunar cults to be among those major beliefs that impacted people's religious systems. The paper's hypothesis is that irrespectively of its ancient "primordial" roots, the solar cult didn't disappear at later periods, rather it was modified, co-existed with other beliefs, and acquired a new meaning of the sacred. This new meaning could be found in solar symbolic representations "inscribed" along with symbols of other beliefs in artistic works. What were the symbols and forms of this survival – these are the questions will be discussed in this paper.

Therefore, the paper aims to trace the solar symbols in the artifacts relating to the religious symbolization in Central Asian art throughout III-I millennia BCE, and to discuss this continuity. In a broader sense, numerous artifacts, particularly related to the field of the sacred, could speak about the specificity of religious beliefs, and cross-religious and cross-cultural interactions in the region.

The research on artistic representation of the solar cult in ancient Central Asia, whether as such, or in relation to other beliefs, is still a rather underdeveloped theme. Broadly, the solar cult has been partially touched upon within the larger themes, particularly, relating to the rock art. The theme of the rock art of Central Asia, Siberia, Mongolia, northern Eurasia has been a focus of extensive research, the earliest of which was made as early as in the middle of XX century by A.P. Okladnikov, followed by his research school, who explored the rock art, deer stones of Siberia, Sayano-Altai, Trans-Baikal regions, Mongolia (Okladnikov 1954; same 1974; same 1981; same 1989; Okladnikov and Zaporozhskaya 1970; Okladnikov and Mazin 1976; Okladnikov and Mazin 1979). The scholar from Tuva M.H. Mannai-ool significantly contributed towards highlighting the traditional culture of the Tuvan people throughout the Saka/Scythian period (or so-called Uyük culture), in which he discussed, particularly, such forms as deer stones, and legends of local and Siberian people relating to the cosmic universe (Mannai-ool 1970).

A. Rogozhinsky and V. Novozhenov are among the leading contemporary scholars on rock art in Central Asia, who found, and classified the existing and recently discovered artifacts and made their typology

(Rogozhinskiy 2009; same 2019; Rogozhinskii and Novozhenov 2018; Bedelbayeva, Novozhenov and Novozhenova 2015; Lapshina 2012, etc).

The solar cult has been generally discussed within another broader theme, i.e., of the Xiongnu/Hunnu and their steppe empire. For the last three decades there appeared special volumes summarizing and detailing the knowledge on the Xiongnu/Hunnu (Giscard 2013, Eregzen 2011, Xiongnu Archaeology 2011, Encyclopaedia Xiongnu 2013), deer stone culture (Turbat, Gantulga, others 2021), the ancient bronzes of Ordos region, north Eurasian steppe (Bunker 1997; Bunker 2002; Leus 2019, etc).

The research on specific monuments – *kherek-sur* mounds and deer stones – though not much extensive, is of the interest for the theme due to the fact, that these monuments, particularly those found in Tuva, Mongolia, could be viewed as the symbols of the sun reflecting its key feature – the movement (Kilunovskaya and Semenov 2019). The theme of the symbolism of the zoomorphic/animal/Saka/Scythian style that included the traits of various beliefs including the solar cult, recently became a subject of a focused research (Yerekesheva 2021).

Therefore, the special analysis on the symbolic representation of the solar cult in relation to the art of the region, is yet to be made. This article is an attempt to partially fill in this gap. The author understands certain limitations of this attempt. First, the need to stock and inventory most available artifacts requires extensive research and could be implemented within the larger research project. Second, there is a need to discuss in greater details the typology of the symbolical representation of the solar cult in general, and in Central Asia, in particular. In this paper, this typology is based on the artistic forms and traditions of the solar representation based on the available artifacts found in the region. Among them, I propose the following types: the “sun-head” people, the sun-animals, the circle signs, the solar cult among the Xiongnu/Hunnu. The iconography of the “sun-head” people refers to the rock art, of the sun-animals – to the rock art and material artifacts from the burial mounds and royal burials, whereas the circles’ sign – mainly to the artifacts from burial mounds and royal burials.

Geographically Central Asia is understood here as a geographical-cultural rather than a geopolitical space. The space of the region follows the given natural geography and includes territories of modern Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan (so called “Middle Asia”); Xingjian-Uighur Autonomous Region and Inner Mongolia of China; Northern Afghanistan; Mongolia; Southern Siberia; Northern parts of India and Pakistan.^[3]

Methodology

The relations between culture and religion are perhaps one of the oldest and steady phenomena in the history and art of humankind. In the reciprocal process of their interplay, both culture and religion influence each other, interact, and create certain “*cultural-religious homeostasis*”, similar to the biological field, as a process of maintaining an organism’s stable internal environment by adapting it to external changes. Equally, both culture and religion undergo the process of adapting to each other, the net result of which is the creation of new patterns and forms of expressive symbolism. This flexibility creates, anticipates, or reflects an idea of the sacred and its various cultural patterns. At the same time, it allows this or that cultural patterns to be spread, advanced, and further expanded geographically and chronologically. (Yerekesheva 2023)

Specificity of the culture is that it operates on the symbolic level - ‘a cultural life exists only in symbols ... cultural reality is in its essence symbolic reality’ (Tillich 1958:10). Therefore, in religion as a part of culture (Parsons 1985), symbolic representation plays a significant role too. The religious element of “*cultural-religious homeostasis*” implies the general characteristics of the sacred; whereas different historical periods and geographical locations could reveal its various and plural manifestations. The multiplicity of the forms of the symbolic representations and their co-existence irrespectively of time is a phenomenon that in semiotics is known as *semiosphere*, a semiotic space (Lotman [1984] 2005:208).

According to this theory proposed by Yuri Lotman, “Since all levels of the semiosphere — from human personality to the individual text to the

global semiotic unity — are a seemingly inter-connected group of semiospheres, each of them is simultaneously both participant in the dialogue (as part of the semiosphere) and the space of dialogue (the semiosphere as a whole)” (Lotman [1984] 2005:225).

The semiosphere approach to culture and religion may imply that their respective various elements could be viewed as both participants of the dialogue and their space and environment at the same time. In other words, it could be proposed that in “religious semiosphere” various religious beliefs and traditions, as participants of the dialogue, could interact and influence each other either directly or indirectly - as an integral part of the religious and broader cultural environment and milieu, or as established traditional patterns and a subconscious echo of the past. Therefore, the indirect way of the influence presumes diachronic perspective or imprint caused by the most archaic and “primordial” religious beliefs on all those that emerged later.

Theoretically speaking, in this paper, I will make an attempt to trace the oldest layers of “religious semiosphere”, or interconnected beliefs that existed in Central Asia during the III-I millennia BCE, through the way of their artistic representations and expressive symbolism. In doing this, I will focus on the solar cult (1) to show its symbolic representation and “survival” even in the later periods and its co-existence with other religious beliefs such as totemism and shamanism, and (2) to trace an evolution of the artistic forms of this representation.

Solar Symbolism

The following typology of symbolical representation of the solar cult in the region will be discussed further: the “sun-head” people, the sun-animals, the circle signs, the solar cult among the Xiongnu/Hunnu.

The “Sun-Head” People

Chronologically the first known representations of the solar symbolism and cosmogony could be attributed back to the Neolithic (c. VII millennium BCE) era, when the ancient rock art petroglyphs and signs dotted the landscapes throughout Eurasian continent. In later periods, during the Bronze Age and

Iron Age (III-I millennia BCE), solar symbolism could be found as a part of archaeological complexes, sculptural compositions, discovered on the territory of modern Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia (Siberia, Altai, Tuva), in northwestern and northern China, Mongolia, northern Afghanistan, Turkey (Afghanistan 2007; L'Asie des steppes 2001). Among them are remarkable and in many ways unique examples - *khereksury* mounds, deer stones, ritual standards and objects (incense burners, sacrificial altars), artifacts of decorative and applied art and jewellery, in particular, made in the so-called animal/zoomorphic style also known as Saka/Scythian/Siberian (Yerekesheva 2021).

One of the oldest and most significant forms of ancient expressive symbolism is rock art (images and signs, petroglyphs), which is, perhaps, a universal expression of human creative spirit and a form of the deification of nature. Found almost in all continents, this type of creativity could be considered as typologically regular. The “stone books” (Okladnikov 1989:40) should be viewed as a part of a wider background and context that included certain sacred locations and acts of sacrifice and other rituals that took place in these special sanctuaries. From this perspective, rock art was not just an engraved image and sign, rather it was a representation of the belief systems of people, a “primordial” reflection of views, ideas, rituals. Rock drawings and inscriptions were carved on stones of various heights and lengths, which stretched for several meters or were part of rectangular or round areas, located in the mountains, in open spaces along the banks of rivers, or in forests and taiga. Wonderful examples of rock art are important artifacts and material evidence that help us to decipher the ideas, religious views and rituals of people of the distant past. (Yerekesheva 2023)

Among the various objects carved on the rocks (such as people, shaman masks, animals, religious rituals, hunting scenes, dances, erotic scenes, etc.), solar-lunar-astral (or celestial) symbolism stands out as one of the most archaic and perhaps basic ideas and religious beliefs of people. The images of heavenly symbols have their own stylistic specifics and depend on the region - Central Asia, Siberia, Mongolia, Western and Northern China.

The images of the sun are done in various forms and styles: (1) the sun as a part of larger compositions, which also include figures of people performing rituals and dances, and animal figures; (2) the sun, which is “carried” by animals (deer, elk, horses, bulls) on their horns; (3) so-called “sun heads”, or people with sun instead of their heads. The images of the so-called “sun-heads”, or people with the sun instead of a head are one of the most striking types of representation of the sun found in Central Asia. (Fig. 1) These various representations are associated with the rituals and religious beliefs of people, being an important source for understanding the religious life in ancient times.



Fig. 1. On the left: “Sun-Head People” in Tamgaly-Tas Site, Almaty Region, Kazakhstan. Source: After (Rogozhinskiy 2019). Photo courtesy: V.A. Novozhenov. On the right: “Sun-Head People” in Saimaluu-Tash Site, Kyrgyzstan. Source: After (Petrov 2011). Photo: Ushakov and Tenkova, www.photo.kg

The visualization and depiction of the sun in the form of “sun-head” people was most common in certain parts of Central Asia, within which, in turn, one can note various stylistic, iconographic traditions of depiction. Particularly, scholars distinguish 3 such iconographic styles: (1) southern (Saimaluu-Tash in Kyrgyzstan and Sakhaba in the Ferghana Valley); (2) northern (the place of Baikonur in the southwestern part of the steppe zone of the Kazakh Sary-arka region); and (3) along the corridor of the Chu-Ili Mountain range (Tamgaly-Tas in Almaty region, no earlier than XIV-XIII BCE), which could be the result of a syncretic mutual influence of the other two and

was rather specific and unique than universal, and widespread (Rogozhinskiy 2019).

Though there are other 8 places where carved figures of “sun-head” people are found on rocks, mainly in Kazakhstan (Karakyr, Akkainar, Kuljabasy, Baikonur and Eshkiolmes, Bayanzhurek) and Kyrgyzstan (Saimaluu-Tash, Chilisay and Ornok) (Rogozhinskiy 2009:60), however, images of “sun-head” people, reminiscent of images on Tamgaly-Tas, have not yet been found (Rogozhinskiy 2019), what makes this site a unique one.

In Kyrgyzstan there are other places and monuments with stone-inscribed petroglyphs found on an 80-kilometer stretch between Cholpon-Ata near Lake Issyk-Kul and Balykchy (II millennium BCE - VIII century CE), which can be called an open-air temple, a sanctuary where cults and religious rituals took place (Petroglyphs of Cholpon-Ata, n.d).

The “sun-head” people depicted on the rocks may reflect the original ideas about the importance of the sun for the survival of people, its worship, and related ceremonies and rituals. Accordingly, the figures of “sun-head” people (semi-anthropomorphic and semi-sun) can be considered as a symbol of the sun as an object of worship. According to some authors, the “sun-head” people could be intermediaries between the worlds of gods and people, i.e., shamans (Bedelbayeva, Novozhenov and Novozhenova 2015:71).

Therefore, these most ancient representations of the sun were associated with the solar cult. They also reveal the important role that some categories of people, perhaps, the shamans, played during the rites related to the sun-deification. It is possible that images of these people, or shamans, were inscribed on the stones to attribute their significance during the rituals that took place at these sacred places. One could conclude that deification of the sun (as well as later – of some categories of animals) was among the oldest (back to neolithic era) religious beliefs that had own symbolic representation. The symbolism of the sun as we trace in the rock art reveals the pristine clear natural forms and lines, geometrically circular in form and with depiction of sun rays. This “children-like” natural and primordial basic representation and image of the sun could also be attributed to those periods of humankind's development when its union with nature and cosmos was

perceived as a natural course of life, as life's regularity, harmony and, hence, beauty. This view survived the time and, as an echo of the past, found its way later in Greek philosophy, both in Pythagorean school and in the adoration of the "most harmonic" figure – a circle – by Plato. From the modern perspective, those were periods of the height and maximum power of ecological thinking and living.

Celestial objects, including the sun, embodied nature's might, regularities, order, balance, harmony, and became synonyms of power, eternity and stability. Their adoration and deification had been associated with rituals. Symbolic representation in creative expressionism of art was a part of this worship, and the keyway towards their appease. The rock art and some artifacts could give us a glimpse on what these rituals and religious life in general might looked like.

The Animal-Sun

The images of the sun, moon, stars, and their inclusion in other scenes - worshipping and hunting - show the importance of solar, lunar and astral symbolism as part of the daily and religious life of people. The existence and survival of people depended on the environment in which animals played a significant role too. Thus, animals also acquired an important and sacred dimension and, in addition, were associated with the power of the sun and other elements of the cosmic universe. Solar-lunar-astral symbolic images carved on the rocks were intermingled with the images of numerous animals, usually elk and deer (as in Siberia and East Asia), or horse, bull, stag (in Central Asia), which were deified by local hunters as an object of worshipping, and as a representation of the sun.

Rock paintings of the IV-III millennia BCE in Siberia testify to the exceptionally high role of the elk as the sun, which passes through the sky and the universe from one end of the firmament to the other and then disappears into the waters of the underworld in order to reappear the next morning in the sky (Okladnikov 1989:46). According to the existing beliefs, this journey through the sky was made on special solar boats, where the sun was

symbolically depicted in the form of an elk or stag (sometimes they were accompanied by other figures of animals and shamans).^[4]

The beliefs of the sun boats found in Siberia, Egypt could be paralleled with the ideas and respective images of the sun chariot in a later period, as in case of Trundholm sun chariot from Denmark (Trundholm). This could speak about typological regularity, though localized in various regions of the world based on local geography and cultural patterns.

The association of the sun with some animals may represent a certain stage in the religious beliefs of people of Central Asia, Siberia, the Amur region. For them their life and survival depended both on celestial objects, such as the sun, and on large and strong animals that lived in the mountains, steppes, rivers or taiga and forests. Thus, for different geographical areas, various animals, such as stag and elk, as well as horse and bull, played an important role similar to the sun and, accordingly, they acquired a sacred character. As a result, new forms of syncretic religious beliefs began to emerge in these regions, where these animals became associated with the sun.

For example, the Tungus people greatly revered the white or sacred stag *Amgun*, who was associated with the sun and was considered the guardian and protector of both animals and people. According to (Okladnikov and Mazin 1979:62-63), “it was not allowed to ride on it, only shrines were transported in its bags, it lived to a natural death ... If this stag disappeared, they did not look for it. Before and after migration, he was fumigated. In the caravan, he went first or second”. L. Steinberg, for example, identifies the following categories of sacred stag among the Tungus - wild males, all males under the age of 1 year, then white stag, which everyone considered the real representatives of the sun on Earth (Cited in: Okladnikov and Mazin 1979:62-63). Interestingly, among the Orochs of Siberia, not only the sun, but also the stars, star constellations, planets, rainbows, dawns, and even the entire cosmic universe were depicted as a large eight-legged elk, uniting the three worlds - the upper one or the world (where good spirits live), the middle world (inhabited by people), and the underworld (evil, bad, or malignant spirits).

Stag, elk, horse, bull were revered as the personifications of the sun, so the rituals of sun worship were intertwined with the worship of a particular animal, whose zoomorphic images, it was believed, could protect from adversity and evil. Thus, consequently, religious beliefs became syncretic - the sun, the direct protector and object of worship, became less exposed and more abstract, while the figures of particular animal came to the fore to more profoundly acquire the role of the protector of people and social groups. In the field of religious beliefs, this transformation was associated with totemism, animism, zoomorphic cults, and shamanism.

The images of so-called stag-sun, elk-sun, horse-sun and bull-sun, i.e., animals depicted with elements of solar symbolism attributed to this process and are found across the Eurasian continent – in Siberia, Mongolia, northern China, Central Asia, Western Asia. (Fig. 2) This may indicate the typological regularities of the development of religious beliefs that underwent similar stages from solely solar worshipping towards further amalgamation with zoomorphic cults.



Fig. 2. On the left: Bronze Ceremonial Standard, Alacahöyük, Turkey, 2nd half of III millennium BCE. Source: The Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, Ankara, Turkey. Photo: Bjørn C. Tørrissen, CC BY-SA 3.0, On the right: Sun on the “Horned” Horse, Saimaluu-Tash, Kyrgyzstan. Source: After (Petrov 2011). Photo: Ushakov and Tenkova

The bronze ceremonial standard from a royal burial place Alacahöyük discovered in the central part of modern Turkey (Fig. 2, left) show well the transformation of these religious ideas. This is an example of how the previous “pure” solar standards made in the round or square form, were subsequently combined into more syncretic images with the inclusion of a deer-sun, a bull-sun (Yerekesheva 2023).

In this unique standard, the sun is symbolically depicted twice: as a circle carried on the big horns of the bull (not depicted), and as the figures of a stag, accompanied by two bulls and posted inside the solar circle. The whole arrangement represents the local manifestation of the solar boats/sun chariots. The incorporation of the sun-animals in the solar deification highlights the transformation towards more syncretic beliefs, where the sun as an object of deification is still there. However, it shares the space with other elements of adoration as well, i.e., with sacred sun-animals.

The mentioned above typological regularities could be supported by the analogous depiction of some sun-animals such as deer/stag in other parts of the continent. In Siberia, Transbaikal, Tuva, Mongolia numerous engravings were found on so-called deer-stones of galloping deer with a sphere on their horns. According to (Okladnikov 1954:207-220) these animals are represented as if soaring through the sky with the characteristic symbols of the sun — disks. Okladnikov even coined a special term for them — the Deer/Stag-Golden Antlers — symbols of the sun. Similar findings were later found at Mount Xianglushan in northeastern China, where rock carvings of deer with a disc over their horns represented local versions of the deer-sun, “a zoomorphic deity or celestial companion of the sun god.” (Zabiyako and Van Jiangling 2017:75).

Similar patterns of images of the solar disk carried on the horns of animals, particularly, “horned” horses, were found in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan too - in Saimaluu-Tash in Kyrgyzstan (Fig. 2, right), in Central and Eastern Kazakhstan.

In Central and Eastern Kazakhstan many burial mounds, rock art monuments, and petroglyphs were discovered, including images of horses

dating back to the first half — third quarter of the II millennium BCE (Bedelbayeva, Novozhenov and Novozhenova 2015:47).

On one of the vertical stone slabs found in Central Kazakhstan, of which most of them are turned to the east, there is a depiction of a horse with large backward-curved horns (Fig. 3, left). The horse is filled with dynamism and inner energy and is part of a large stone triptych. According to scholars, this image refers to the early nomadic period, when the “horned” horse was a symbol of the sun and sky, and the “simple” horse (without horns) was considered the main element of the economic life of the steppes of antiquity (Bedelbayeva, Novozhenov and Novozhenova 2015:49, 51).



Fig. 3. On the left: Image of a “horned” horse, Konyrzhon, Karkaraly district (Central Kazakhstan), first half - third quarter of the II millennium BCE. Source: Photo author and courtesy Victor A. Novozhenov. On the right: Smart Decoration of the “Horned” Horse from Berel-11 Burial Mound, Eastern Kazakhstan, Saka Period, IV-III BCE. Source: Photo and reconstruction Krym Altynbekov. Photo courtesy Napil Bazylkhan.

The image of the “horned” horse on a rock found in Central Kazakhstan corresponds to the remnants of horses found in the Berel-II mound (Fig. 3, right) in the Kazakhstan Altai (Eastern Kazakhstan), in the Pazyryk mounds in the Russian Altai, and in the Chu-Ili ridge (Ankeldy site in the Zhambyl region of South Kazakhstan) (Bedelbayeva, Novozhenov and Novozhenova 2015:98-99).

All these symbols of the sun represented in the “horned” horse can be interpreted as a further development of the idea of the sun, but in a different subcultural and geographical context of Central Asia. It is possible to assume that the original image of the sun on the horns of a stag and an elk, widespread in Siberia, or of a bull and stag found in Anatolia (Turkey), was also a characteristic of the steppe zone of Central Asia, where this solar symbolism acquired local dimension. In other words, the same perception and representation of the sun associated with the elk and stags, animals with long and large horns, received its further transformation. As a result, the image of a horse — an animal without horns — got a new iconography, opening the way to a completely different figurative perception of a horse - as an animal with long horns on which the sun is rested. This representation was based on a similar idea and worship of the sun, to which the deifying of a certain animal was added through personifying it with the sun and attributing to it the qualities of a solar deity. Thus, in the steppe zone of Central Asia, the horse began to be considered a symbol of the sun, a sacred animal, whereas the features and stylistic forms associated with the traditions from other geographical spaces were inherited as a substantial part of its iconography. (Yerekesheva 2023)

As noted above, religious ideas implied a dual perception of the horse - on the one hand, as a deity and a sacred animal or a horse-sun. On the other hand, the horse, as an important element of economic life, was associated with a nomadic way of life, and therefore, as in the case of white one-year-old elks and stag from Siberia, it was considered an indispensable assistant.

In the Kazakh steppe environment, the sacralization of the horse had its own features: a young golden-red stallion and a white horse were considered sacred. It seems the colors were chosen to enhance the parallels with the sun, particularly the golden, red, orange colors that also implied an active energy and power.

The horse from the Berel-II mound, with large, curved horns and a mask, covered by a bright blanket decorated with painted gold plates, buried together with the ruler or leader of local tribes is evidence to this. According to archaeologist Z. Samashev, who explored this mound, horned horse was

considered the personification of people's beliefs about the three worlds and resembled the horns of argali or mountain goats (Tayna 2019).

Mentioned above artifacts speak about a continuing and enduring tradition of religious beliefs associated with the high role of the deification of the sun, but in a more syncretic and complementary form. Within the framework of these belief systems, the sun was personified with a certain animal — in the case of the steppe zone of Central Asia, it was a horse.

Circle Signs as Solar Symbols

The other way of how the sun was symbolized were the circle signs, spiral shapes and wavy lines that marked the bodies of animals. This representation, highly symbolic and laconic at the same time, is an important stage of solar symbolism and its further amalgamation with other symbols. At this stage, the sun was depicted more graphically and schematically rather than figuratively, in smaller rather than bigger sizes. Though as if shrunken, the symbols still reflected the might and power associated with the sun. The solar symbol endowed a particular animal with its sacredness, and as a special marker, it highlighted the animal's sacred and privileged status. Below are given some images of sun animals, on the body of which solar symbols are clearly shown in the form of two or three spherical circles as if nested in each other.

A wide geographical range of found artifacts - sculptures and figurines of animals with solar symbols on the body - should be noted. They were found in Alacahoyuk, Turkey (Fig. 4, left), Jetysu/Semirechye in Southern Kazakhstan (Fig. 4, middle), China (Fig. 4 right), Mongolia. This may indicate extensive migration flows and movements of various tribes across the Eurasian continent that took place over many centuries and millennia. At the same time, this could equally speak about typological patterns associated with the development of religious beliefs that experienced similar stages and acquired similar regularities.



Fig. 4. On the left: Bull Statuette, Alacahoyuk, Turkey, Second Half of the III Millennium BCE. Source: After (MAC, The Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, n.d.:66).

In the middle: Statuette of Bronze Bull, Central Asia, Semirechye, VI-III BCE. Cast, chasing. 4x2,8x5 cm. Inventory Number: CA-3185. Source: © The State Hermitage Museum, Russia. Photo by Vladimir Terebenin.

On the right: Statuette of “Golden Monster”, Xi’an, Shaanxi History Museum, China, c. II BCE – I CE, Length: 11cm, Height: 11.5cm. Source: Shaanxi History Museum, China. Photo by Jesse, CC BY-SA 4.0

Chronologically, these representations were widely spread too – from the III millennium BCE (in Alacahoyuk) through the Saka period, VI-III (or VIII-VI) BCE (in Semirechye), to the Xiongnu/Hunnu period, II BCE-I CE (in Shaanxi, China). This range could speak about the steady and profound tradition of syncretic religious beliefs that for almost three millennia, survived the time and showed its vitality. By the I millennium CE the representation of the sun in its “pure” form was rather marginalized and became an integral part of other religious traditions (well traced in the Saka/Zoomorphic style).

Solar Symbolism of the Xiongnu/Hunnu

It was during the Xiongnu/Hunnu period only that the solar representation in its “primordial” natural form continued showing its vitality. This could be attributed to the specificity of the religious beliefs of the Xiongnu/Hunnu tribes – for this first steppe empire the worship of the sun and moon was the official religion. As the daily religious ritual of Xiongnu emperor Shanyui

indicates, he “prostrated every morning before the rising of the sun and every evening before the rising of the moon.” (Giscard 2001:149)

The above statuette of “Golden Monster” (Fig. 4 right) is a very representative one that could give a glimpse of these religious beliefs. In fact, this is a statuette of a golden elk, the animal widely spread in Siberia, Trans-Baikal region. This exquisite work relating to the Xiongnu/Hunnu period, depicts a sacred animal, an elk-sun, on the body of which multiple circles as solar symbols are spread all over. Magnificent horns/antlers follow the previous tradition when the sun was “carried” on the horns of the animals that represented or “substituted” the sun, as was in case of “the solar boat” tradition. The antlers are the masterpiece in themselves – several heads of gryphons carved there attribute to the zoomorphic cults and strengthen the feeling of the majestic character of this sun-elk. The gold material intensifies this attitude of sacredness as symbolizing the solar deity and particular animal as the representation of the sun and an object of deification. From religious beliefs perspective, solar cults and totemic worship, i.e., adoration of the sun, a deification of a particular elk-sun as an important totem are vividly presented and intertwined here.

The sun and moon (crescent) sheet decorations found on the covers of the coffins in Xiognu burial place in Gol Mod (Fig. 5 left), as well as in other mounds such as Egiin Gol in Mongolia are bright illustrations, indicating the deification ritual based on the natural rhythms of cyclic time.

Another artistic expression of the solar symbolism related to the Xiognu period, are the artifacts found few years ago in Ala-Tey 1 and Terezine burial mounds in Tuva (Russia). Among them are samples of the previously unknown belt openwork plaques “with an ornament in the form of six rays diverging from the center to a rectangular frame” (Fig. 5, middle) with total number exceeding 100 pieces (Leus 2019:54). Solar symbolism is presented here in a classic form of rays of the sun.

This type of plaques is paralleled with another piece found at the same Terezine site. The round shaped form of the bronze belt plaque (Fig. 5, right) is a direct reference to the solar symbolism. The symmetric composition of four paired heads of gryphons (that stylistically are almost

identical to the “golden monster” statuette discussed above) harmoniously structures the space of plaque making it almost weightless, light and transparent. This effect is reinforced with the refined depiction of the gryphons’ heads what reveals the 9 hole-circles and produce an effect of the weightlessness, exquisiteness and subtlety. The idea that stylistically this piece relates to the Saka/Scythian zoomorphic art but with the elements of new cultural patterns (Leus 2019:60) is worth supporting.

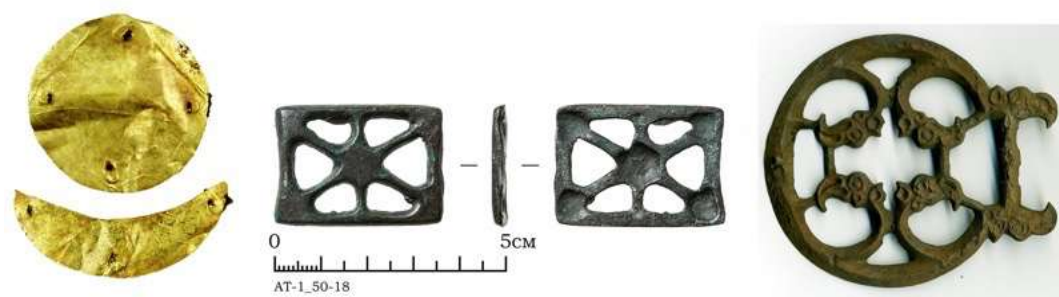


Fig. 5. On the left: Gold Sheet Decoration in the Form of the Sun and the Moon. Gol Mod Necropolis, Khairkhan, Arkhangai Province, Mongolia, gold, II BCE - I CE. Tomb-75, d 3 cm (Sun); Tomb-20, length 5,6 cm (Moon). Source: Institute of Archaeology, Academy of Sciences of Mongolia. Photo author and courtesy Gelegdorj Eregzen. In the middle: Six-Ray Belt Plaque, Ala-Tey 1, Tuva, Russia. Bronze, II-I centuries BCE. Source: Photo author and courtesy by Pavel Leus. On the right: Belt Plaque from Terezine T/8, Tuva, Russia. Bronze, II-I centuries BCE. Source: Photo author and courtesy by Pavel Leus.

In the context of the current theme, it should be added that zoomorphic style itself embraces various religious traditions such as totemism, fetishism, shamanism, within which the solar deification indirectly finds its place too. Bearing in mind that “the territory of Tuva became the link between the regions of Inner Asia and the Sayan-Altai and was in the sphere of influence of the Xiongnu and their cultural and artistic traditions” (Leus 2019:62), it was not surprising that the solar deification by the Xiongnu had an impact on the expressive traditions that unified the solar and zoomorphic symbolism together.

Conclusion

In the proposed “religious semiosphere” approach various religious beliefs and traditions interact among themselves, both as participants of the dialogue and as an integral part of the religious and broader cultural environment and milieu. In this interaction, they influence each other either directly, or indirectly, through the symbols inherited from the past. As a result of this molding, new symbolic and cultural patterns emerge.

The solar cult symbolization supports this approach and reveals a certain evolution of the stylistic symbolic representation of the sun in the artifacts found in Central Asia.

The oldest of them, found in rock art provide a glimpse of how the deification of the sun might look like in the distant past, around IV-III millennia BCE. Stylistically these symbolic representations follow the ancient beliefs about the ecological unity of the people and nature and cosmos, and represent the sun in the “pure”, pristine forms. At the same time, deification of the sun as seen in ancient “solar boats,” also speaks about the increasing role of certain animals as symbolic substitution of the sun, as its representatives, for which they were deified too. This deification was a part, a sacred element of the rituals conducted by special people, the shamans.

Therefore, the animal-sun concept could be viewed as an artistic symbolic representation of the totemic beliefs, that could be generally traced in the various images of the animals in the art. Perhaps, one of the biggest such representations extended for almost I millennium BCE, is the zoomorphic style.

However, totemic beliefs and shamanism in general, were not free from the previous religious traditions - the solar deification. Though less exposed and indirectly, solar deification, however, still profoundly and continuously influenced other religious traditions. This could be viewed in the symbolic representation of the sun, among which are: the images of numerous animals-sun (when the sun was personified with a certain animal - in the case of the steppe zone of Central Asia, it was a horse) on rocks, as silver and bronze standards, burials of the horses with “horns”, circles on the body of the “sacred” animals, and, as the highest octave of the solar

deification triumph, the realistic images of the sun and moon (crescent) and other artifacts of the Xiongnu/Hunnu.

Therefore, the “survival” of the solar cult, even in the later periods, its continuing and enduring legacy, co-existence with other religious beliefs such as totemism, shamanism, and evolution of the artistic forms of its symbolic representation (that lead to more sophisticated and new syncretic patterns) – all this supports the “religious semiosphere” concept and could be generally traced in the artifacts of various types. As a result, the art imbued in itself and expressed highly dynamic and flourishing cross-religious and cross-cultural interactions in the region.

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Endnotes

1. The article is based on the paper presented at the 35th CIHA World Congress on “Motion: Migrations”, São Paulo, Brazil, 17-22 January 2022; Session 9 – Transcending Borders: Reshaping Cultures through Ideas and Images; and on the author’s article “Solar signs and symbols in the art of ancient Central Asia” submitted to the “Atlas of the Symbols of the Turkic World” (forthcoming).
2. The lowest chronological period of the animal style could be referred to the IX BCE, based on the discoveries of the Arzhaan-1 and Arzhaan-2 royal mounds found in Tuva (Russia) in 1990s and 2002. K.V. Chugunov proposes the most possible dates of the Arzhaan-1 mound as between 807-772 BCE (Chugunov 2020:229-230), what significantly expands the previously adopted chronological frames of the animal style, i.e., V-II BCE. This also supports the ideas on the direction of its spread from the East towards West and South.
3. On detailed description of the space of Central Asia based in various definitions, including that of UNESCO, see (Yerekesheva 2013).
4. For the depiction of the sun boat on the rock at the Basynai river site in Eastern Siberia see: (Okladnikov and Mazin 1976:9).

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