

D. Korol

WELCOMING THE HERO: ICONOGRAPHIC PARALLEL BETWEEN PONTIC REGION AND SCANDINAVIA

Article is dedicated to the review of cult and mythological parallels in some outlook ideas of peoples of ancient North-Pontic and North-Germanian regions using the burial stones' images. Belonging of scenes with images of a 'rider' and a 'female welcoming deity' on the plates of the Pontic peoples of I – III AD to the Iranian ideology of steppe nomads is confirmed (materials of V–I cent. BC). Some comparisons with a similar tradition in Gotland burial steles ornamentation of Vendel period are made with the attempt of its interpretation.

Interpretation of images depicted by the representatives of the ancient cultures is a real scientific problem. The distance between our societies is sometimes so enormous, that one can hardly imagine for what purpose either picture or sculpture was done.

In fact, until the forties, the most logically grounded conception was the 'naturalistic' one. According to it, ancient people just depicted their everyday surrounding [1]. Still, this method is inappropriate.

Actually, there should be a sense to analyze the subjects of (the *traditional art in a complex way*, using mythological, archeological, ethnographical, anthropological, psychological aspects and so on [2]. Only complex approach can help in understanding the ancient art and mythology in general.

In this paper we should like to observe (and explain) one motive of the archaic funeral art in two remote regions of Europe, namely Scandinavia and North Pontic region. It is a welcoming scene with a rider and the female deity - a complicated multi-object composition, which represent itself some kind of a *code*, some symbolism, common to the world outlook of the peoples of both regions.

For a long time scholars' attention is drawn with the diffusion of the numerous tombstones in Scandinavia of VII - XI ct AD - to the point, the so-called *bildstennar* - «Picture-Stones» with images of sacral-mythological nature. They were spread in the Scandinavian region from the V century A. D. (especially on the isle of Gotland). It is notable that from the end of VII century A. D. depictive canon transforms deeply. There appear complicated image compositions made in the style of the carpet ornaments like Oseberg, appear [3].

While ornaments on axe-like steles of 400-600 A. D. could be associated with Northern Bronze Age images, fungiform stones of Vendel period (600-800) and of the Viking Age develop the motives, which could be compared with the Eddie subjects. Some scholars consider it to be a sort of pictographic *kennings* (some special poetic forms of tangled metaphors; the North Aesopian language of the *scalds*) [4].

However, in spite of the considerable composition variety one can distinguish some kind of special *canon*. In particular, there existed a division into two clear-cut zones. «Upper zone» was arranged in the «cap» of a fungiform stele and contained scenes, which could be associated with *Valhalla* (*Garda Bote*, *Alskog Tjangvide I*, etc.) (Fig. f-g). «Lower zone» usually contained images and symbols of «chthonic» character (*Hel's yard*, *Gunnar dying in the snake-pit*, *giants*, *norns* etc.). In the upper part of the «lower zone», we can usually see a sailing vessel - the former Sun Boat of the early steles, fairly associated by the scholars with the «Ship of Death» [5] (*Hunninge*).

But the subject of our investigation appears in particular in the «upper zone». Namely *Valhalla*, the chamber of fallen warriors, could be seen on some steles in the shape of a shining round marquee-like building. But these cases are rare enough. The much more spread depictive motif is a Rider (usually associated with *Oóin*).

Sometimes one can see that rider with a spear (*Hablingbo K.*, *Garda Bote*, *Klinte Ksp.*), or with the vessel in his hand (*Ardre VIII*, *Alskog Tjangvide I*). Sometimes a wolf or a dog runs in front of him. In addition, a female figure with a horn usually stands facing him (Fig. e-h) (Approximately

Rider and the Welcoming Goddess

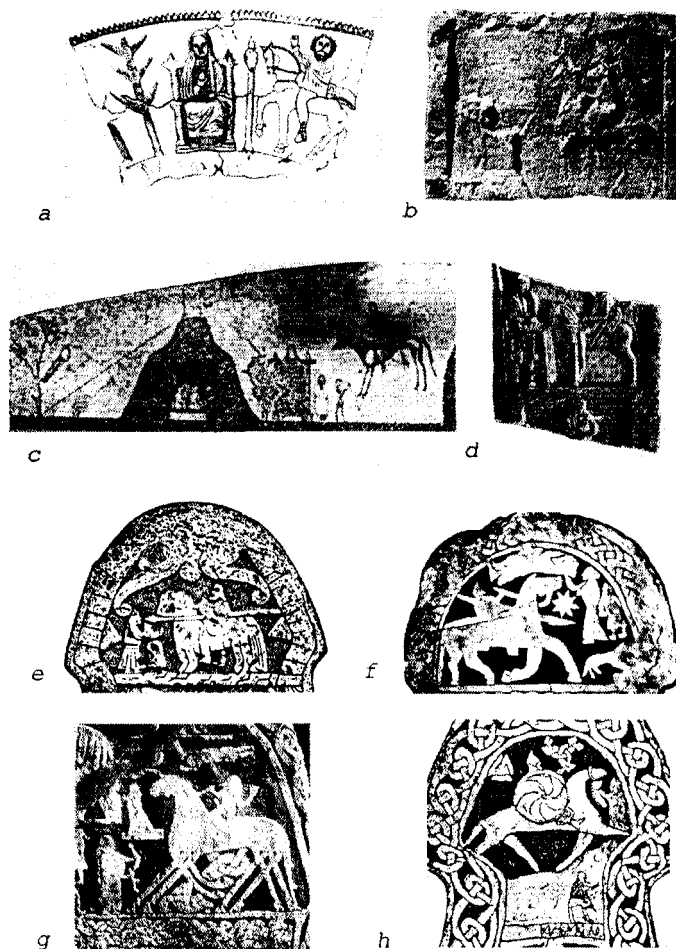


Fig. a: Silver drinking-horn binding. IV - beg. III B. C. (Merdjany viii. Cuban)

Fig. b: Dedicatory relief. II A. D. («Chaika»-site. Eupatoria. Crimea)

Fig. c: Anfesterium catacomb painting. II A. D. (Kerch, Crimea)

Fig. d: Two-tier stele from Bospor. II A. D. (Kerch, Crimea)

Fig. e: Gravestone from Hablingbo K. 700-800 A. D. (Gotland)

Fig. f: Gravestone from Garda Bote. 700-800 A. D. (Gotland)

Fig. g: Gravestone from Alskog Tjångvide I. 700-800 A. D. (Gotland)

Fig. h: Gravestone from Lillbjärs II. 700-800 A. D. (Gotland)

12-15 Gotland memorial stones with this motive survived). Fighting warriors in the background are usually correlated with the *einherii*. Correspondingly, the female figure should be a Valkyrie with a brimmer of mead extended. It seems that such motive should have been a part of the mentioned canon. [6].

Hilda Roderick Ellis-Davidson mentions Balkan memorial stones with similar scenes depicted. She makes a conclusion that this motive was taken only in the times of Vikings during their invasion into this region and that it «would not have been used so widely in the North to commemorate the distin-

guished dead had it not corresponded to a concept in their own world picture» [7].

We cannot agree with such position. First of all, it should be mentioned, that some direct parallels to such scene exist in Eddie myths:

- *Freyja/Frigg meets her returning partner Odin with a brimmer;*

- *Modgudr, the female guardian of Hel meets Hermod, coming for Baldr;*

— *Sigurd drinks the sacred mead from the horn of Valkyrie;*

- *The meeting of Helgi and his beloved Valkyrie under the burial mound...*

Other examples could be mentioned as well. All of them could have been for an artist a source of identification with the dead konungr, for whom a memorial stone was raised.

In general, scholars usually point out that the rider's figure represents here a heroed dead king, who stands out as the Ooin's *einherie* and Oóin himself at the same time. The female figure in front of him is on the one hand the *valkyrie* welcoming the hero with the mead, and goddess Freya/Frigg on the other hand [8].

If we need some parallels in the archaic European art before the Vendel period, we can really take the Balkans and the Crimea as the regions of the latest images. In fact, the motive of the prancing Hero is a popular Thracian image. But the image of welcoming goddess was not spread enough here.

Pontic region possesses a large amount of the Greek and Roman canonical scenes on grave plates. But when we meet both welcoming female figure and the rider (with the brimmer), it is usually a case of barbarian steppe symbolism. This concerns the costume of the characters as well as to their parallels with the Scythian Art.

On the scythian plate from *Merdjany* (IV - III B. C.) one can see again the sitting female figure, holding some round vessel and the aged Scythian rider with a brimmer before her. We can state that similarity of the *Merdjany* image to the painting on the *Anfesterium catacomb* in Bospor (II A. D.) is also obvious enough (Fig. c).

The *Chaika relief* from Eupatoria, for example (Fig. b), has very similar composition to the steles of Bospor (Fig. d). We can see the horse-rider and the female figure welcoming him. But exactly on the *Chaika relief* that female figure is standing but not sitting like on the most compositions of Crimea and Scythian region. It is hard to claim but it seems very possible, that she holds some round thing in her hands. It could be either vessel or the hand mirror.

A. Ivanova proves that female figure sitting in the armchair or a throne is a «supreme Scythian Goddess», whose image became usual for the Bospor art from the IV century B. C. [9]. The same is usually stated concerning all mentioned Scythian monuments of art.

But in general, scholars' interpretations are different enough. Some wrote that in all cases of Scythian Art we have the images of Scythian deities. Some wrote about adoration of a heroed nobleman with the supreme female deity. But in general these scenes are related to memorial afterlife

symbolism which is connected as with heroisation of noble deadman, as with female goddess' adoration (see, for ex. works of E. Popova [10]).

The 'Rider' is usually described as a dead chieftain during his after-death 'Trip'. His horse is the necessary element in cross-world mediation (which is well illustrated both in Indo-European folklore and in the mortuary rituals as well) [11].

V. Olkhovskiy made an interesting analysis of the post-mortuary trip and particularly the trip on horseback within Scythian ideology. There exists a way of the Forefather, cultural hero of the Age of Myths, and dead man associated with him in the real funeral rite should metaphorically repeat it [12]. As well as the riding hero on the monuments of art is also departing onto his last, afterlife trip [13].

D. S. Rayevskiy compared the figures of the Rider and the Drinking warrior with such Scythian sun-hero as Kolaxay, and the Scythian rulers should have repeated ritually his mythical biography in their own life [14].

S. S. Bessonova wrote about the eschatological meaning of this scene. In addition, all its symbolism of marriage and future feast should have had the chthonic, afterdead meaning [15]. Therefore, we should pay some special attention on usual marriage symbolism both in the mortuary rituals and in the rites of investiture. Soviet scholars gave some reasonable interpretations of Scythian, Iranian and Near East goddesses exactly in connection with this. Yet, other Indo-European ritual systems also contain such a connection of funerals and wedding [16].

The goddess on the images described appears to guard the entrance to the Other World. The ruling and protecting the Afterlife Realm could be the one of her functions. Moreover, there exist the interpretations of the mirrors within ancient symbolism as the models of the Other World [17]. The Celermess mirror is a vivid example of this.

According to the analysis of Bessonova, Ivanova and some other scholars, the welcoming goddess on the North-Pontic steles should be some kind of a peculiar combination of Scythian Argimpasa with Iranian Anahita and Anatolian Kybele. She not only guards the entrance to her realm in the Other World, but also meets those who arrive there. And the Rider's joining to her should be the *eschatological variant of the sacral marriage* and the *way of obtaining the sacred sovereignty* through it.

Accordingly, we can also interpret in such way the Scandinavian motive as well.

Specifically, valkyries were mentioned in Old Norse mythology to be the brides and sisters of dead heroes. Goddess Freya was mentioned in the Snorri's Edda as a fertility goddess, but also as a supreme *Valkyrie* and the deity of virginity, fate and sorcery at the same time. She was a 'welcomer of the slain'. One half of all dead heroes became of her possession, and Odin took the other one. According to the «*Poetic Edda*», Freya distributed places in afterlife feast among the dead heroes.

In general, it seems she was a kind of an analogue to the pre-Greek goddess Pothnia, the Mistress of Beasts, who was separated for some time into independent images of Athena, Artemis and the Aphrodite. It is also reasonable to compare both Freya and Pothnia with undivided Iranian divine mistress Anahita. Therefore, she also could be compared with a mentioned Scythian Argimpasa. All of them had once a significant power upon fertility on the one hand and on the Realm of Dead on the other hand.

The brimmer in the Rider's hand should contain some holy beverage of the eternal life. Different parallels in both Indo-European mythology and ethnography exist to this point. In fact, motive of the Sacred Mead literally runs through the whole Eddic mythology [18].

The main point is that the Scandinavian and North-Pontic compositions are too similar to be the common coincidence. We can see the same structure and the same characters. Their postures are different sometimes, but initial canons of both traditions seem to be very similar or even the same (compare the compositions of *Chaika relief* (Fig. b) and *Hablingbo K.* (Fig. e)). It can be seen even through some composition details.

There are some cases, for example, when female figure on Gotland stones holds not a horn but something like a plant (Fig. g). In Saxo's «*Gesta Danorum*» we can see some fragment, where some woman bearing the stalks of hemlock was a Hadding's conductor to the Realm of Death. And the female figure from *Pazyryk* carpet also welcomes hero holding some plant, as well as similar figures from Iranian signets and on some memorial stones of Bospore.

Merdjany plate contains the image of the seven-branched tree, which could be clearly associated with the «*Arbor Mundi*». The tree from the *Anfesterium catacomb* is more realistic, as well as the nomadic marquee. Yet, we should not claim about them as just an «everyday environment» on the «realistic picture». This composition is a par-

ticular example of the funeral art and falls into described pattern as well.

It is obvious, that all mythological motives, described above, trace back to the Indo-European tradition in general. Some of them are even a part of the Nostratic ideological heritage of Eurasia. Moreover, we should agree that these motives on the burial monuments are just some kind of mythological interpretation of the «*passage rites*», where such categories as «*Birth*», «*Marriage*» and «*Funerals*» are interconnected and cross-influence each other [21].

But anyway we cannot omit such moment, that not only the very similar characters are used in this eschatological myths for both traditions, but the pictorial canon of both cultures is common too much. In this situation we should say some words about chronology and cross-cultural contacts...

George Dumézil found many specific parallels in Eddic tradition and in the Nart epos of Alanes in the Northern Caucasus (future Osetians), that really traces back to the Scythes [22]. We can use for it the definition of «*North-Iranian mythological tradition*» - the part of Indo-Iranian world outlook of II - I mill. B.C.

Dumézil could find no adequate explanation to such specific parallels in North Iranian and North Germanic traditions [23]. Even nowadays it is impossible to explain this moment. But it is worth pointing, that such a problem exists and it would be useful to accent our attention on its aspects.

Iconographic motives can really migrate, as well as be adopted. But there should be the certain space of time, during which this motive dissolves in the other world-outlook, naturally joins an existing canon. The pictorial canon in ancient religious systems usually shapes for more than one or even two centuries. This means that general mythological transformation among North Germans should have taken place during IV - VI century A. D. The same we can state concerning memorial monuments and the pictorial tradition as well.

In fact, the fungiform steles of VIII - XI centuries in Gotland show us some substantially new edge of the mythological tradition of Scandinavians. It could be connected with the shaping of the final appearance of the Eddic ideology. Such a formation usually takes a period of some centuries.

The last point is that *there can be no adoption of alien elements into mythology of a specific traditional society, if it does not possess any corresponding symbols or motives*. The same situation takes place concerning the images of traditional art [24].

The idea is that there should have been prolonged cross-cultural contacts between North Germans and North Iranians somewhere between the III and VI century A. D. The close contacts that allowed some common ideology to be formed, which left some vivid traces in both outlook traditions. It seems to be possible to connect this moment with a problem of Germanarich State in the Pontic region. Many scholars consider such cul-

ture as Chernyahov to represent this phenomenon. At least some stratified system took place within that multinational society, and North Germans should have taken the leading position among North Iranians, Thracians, Slavs and some other Pontic peoples [25]. Therefore, it is worth looking at the Chernyahov society from some more multi-sided point.

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Король Д. О.

ПРИВІТАННЯ ГЕРОЯ: ІКОНОГРАФІЧНА ПАРАЛЕЛЬ МІЖ НАДЧОРНОМОР'ЯМ ТА СКАНДИНАВІЄЮ

Стаття присвячена розгляду культово-міфологічних паралелей давньоіранського та північно-германського світогляду на прикладі сюжетики поховальних стел. Підтверджується належність сюжетів із вершиком та жінкою на стелах Надчорноморської людності I–III ст. н. е. до іранського світогляду степовиків (матеріали V-I ст. до н. е.). Робляться порівняння зі схожою традицією в орнаментиці поховальних стел о. Готланд вендельської доби зі спробою інтерпретації цього моменту.