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THE SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE HORSE IN THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF CENTRAL ASIAN PEOPLES

Annotation

Drawing on archaeological evidence and written sources, this article investigates the symbolic meanings of horse imagery in the religious beliefs and rituals of the inhabitants of ancient Turan. It examines the horse’s functions as a cosmological symbol associated with the Sun, a sacrificial animal, a companion to the deceased in the afterlife, and an expression of social status. Herodotus’s accounts of the Massagetae, horse-related funerary finds from Central Asia, and selected comparative examples from other parts of Eurasia are considered with attention to their historical contexts and characteristics as sources.

Key words: Ancient Turan, horse imagery, symbolic functions, religious beliefs, Massagetae, solar symbolism, funerary customs, sacrificial practices, sacred status, comparative study.

СИМВОЛИЧЕСКОЕ ЗНАЧЕНИЕ КОНЯ В РЕЛИГИОЗНЫХ ВЕРОВАНИЯХ НАРОДОВ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ

Аннотация

В данной статье на основе археологических материалов и письменных источников исследуются символические значения образа коня в религиозных верованиях и обрядах населения древнего Турана. Рассматриваются функции коня как космологического символа, связанного с Солнцем, жертвенного животного, спутника умершего в загробном мире, а также показателя социального статуса. Сведения Геродота о массагетах, археологические находки, связанные с погребальными обрядами с участием коней на территории Центральной Азии, и отдельные сравнительные примеры из других регионов Евразии анализируются с учётом их исторического контекста и источниковедческих особенностей.

Ключевые слова: Древний Туран, образ коня, символические функции, религиозные верования, массагеты, солярная символика, погребальные обряды, жертвоприношения, сакральный статус, сравнительное исследование.

MARKAZIY OSIYO XALQLARINING DINIY E’TIQODLARIDA OTNING RAMZIY AHAMIYATI

Annotatsiya

Mazkur maqolada arxeologik materiallar va yozma manbalar asosida qadimgi Turon aholisi diniy e’tiqodlari va marosimlarida ot obrazining ramziy ma’nolari tadqiq etiladi. Otning Quyosh bilan bog‘liq kosmologik ramz, qurbonlik hayvoni, marhumning narigi dunyodagi hamrohi hamda ijtimoiy mavqe ko‘rsatkichi sifatidagi vazifalari ko‘rib chiqiladi. Gerodotning massagetlar haqidagi ma’lumotlari, Markaziy Osiyo hududidan topilgan ot bilan bog‘liq dafn marosimlariga oid arxeologik topilmalar hamda Yevrosiyoning boshqa hududlariga taalluqli ayrim qiyosiy misollar ularning tarixiy konteksti va manbashunoslik xususiyatlarini hisobga olgan holda tahlil qilinadi.

Kalit so‘zlar: Qadimgi Turon, ot obrazi, ramziy vazifalar, diniy e’tiqodlar, massagetlar, Quyosh ramziyligi, dafn marosimlari, qurbonlik amaliyotlari, muqaddaslik maqomi, qiyosiy tadqiqot.

Introduction. In the religious worldview of ancient societies, animals occupied an important place as integral components of nature, economic resources, and objects of symbolic thought. The relationship between an animal’s practical importance and the religious meanings attributed to it is particularly evident in horse imagery. Facilitating human mobility, warfare, and long-distance travel, the horse also appeared in certain rituals as a sacrificial animal and in funerary practices as a symbol associated with the deceased. The central research question concerns the meanings conveyed by the horse within ritual settings, rather than merely establishing its presence or the development of horse breeding. A horse, a part of its body, or an item of bridle equipment deposited in a grave may not carry the same symbolic meaning. Interpreting their functions requires consideration of the location of the find, other objects within the burial assemblage, and relevant written evidence.

Literature review. Scholarship on the subject can be divided into archaeological, historical, and ethnographic strands. Studies of the Aral Sea region and the lower reaches of the Syr Darya provide an important historical context for examining regional funerary traditions [1]. O.V.Obelchenko’s study of ancient Sogd offers a basis for analysing evidence relating to oasis culture [3]. G.Ya.Drevsyanskaya’s work on the Aktam cemetery in the Piskent area and F. E. Toshboyev’s research on the Chayonli burial mounds are particularly relevant to the investigation of local funerary practices [4].

Among written sources, Herodotus’s account of the Massagetae is of particular importance [6]. Depictions of horses in the Avesta provide opportunities for comparison with ancient Iranian religious traditions [7]. A museum publication on the Pazyryk sites is used to compare funerary practices across the Eurasian steppes [8]. L.P.Potapov’s research provides comparative material for examining the beliefs and epic conceptions of later periods [9].

Research methodology. The analysis employs source-critical, historical-comparative, and contextual-semiotic approaches. Source criticism serves to establish the provenance and evidentiary potential of the information. The historical-comparative approach compares local evidence with examples from other regions. Contextual-semiotic analysis interprets the possible meanings of the horse, its body parts, and its equipment within the ritual setting.

Analysis and Results. The horse’s speed, strength, and ability to move alongside humans are important characteristics for explaining its acquisition of symbolic meaning in religious beliefs. However, its economic significance alone does not establish the existence of horse worship. Horse keeping, the use of horses for military purposes, and their inclusion in particular rituals constitute distinct evidentiary situations.

Assessing the horse’s sacred status requires identifying contexts that extend beyond its ordinary uses. Such indicators include the dedication of a sacrifice to a particular deity, the deliberate positioning of a horse within a burial complex, or its portrayal with supernatural attributes in a religious text.

From this perspective, the horse’s symbolic function can be understood as the transformation of its practical characteristics into ritual or mythological meanings. Its mobility may be associated with journeys and transitions, its strength with power, and its companionship with humans with beliefs concerning the accompaniment of the deceased. These associations, however, require separate justification in each source.

An important written account linking the horse with the Sun appears in Herodotus’s Histories. In Book I, section 216, the author states that the Massagetae venerated the Sun and sacrificed horses to it. The ritual is explained through the correspondence between the horse’s swiftness and the speed attributed to the Sun [6]. The analytical significance of this account lies in its explanation of the choice of sacrificial animal. Here, the horse is portrayed as a creature whose qualities correspond to a particular attribute of divine power, rather than simply as a generic sacrificial offering. Speed thus becomes a sign expressing a religious relationship, extending beyond its role as a physical quality in everyday life. At the same time, Herodotus’s account is a report transmitted by an outside author. It cannot be treated as a general principle representing the beliefs of all the peoples of Turan. The account illuminates a ritual attributed to the Massagetae and its explanation by an ancient author.

A comparative example is provided by the Mihr Yasht of the Avesta. Verses 124–125 describe Mithra’s chariot and the four white horses that draw it. The horses are endowed with supernatural attributes, including immortality and nourishment on celestial food [7]. This depiction illustrates the horse’s function as a means of divine movement. However, it is not justified to combine this portrayal associated with Mithra and Herodotus’s account concerning the Sun as evidence of a single religious system. They serve as comparative examples demonstrating how the horse’s speed and mobility could acquire sacred significance in different religious settings.

In Herodotus’s account, the horse’s cosmological and sacrificial functions intersect. The former concerns what the horse represents, while the latter concerns the role it performs in the ritual. The horse is selected as a symbol corresponding to the Sun’s swiftness and simultaneously becomes a sacrificial offering dedicated to it. Analytically, such a ritual can be understood as the human presentation of a valued animal to a divine power. However, unless the source specifies the precise purpose of the sacrifice – whether protection, victory, prosperity, or another intended outcome – that purpose cannot be conclusively determined.

The presence of horse remains in a grave likewise does not automatically indicate that a sacrifice took place. Evidence such as signs of the animal’s killing, the condition and arrangement of its bones, and their relationship to the human burial must be examined. Thus, although “horse sacrifice” and “horse-related burial” may overlap in certain cases, they require separate analysis. The inclusion of horses in funerary rites suggests that their role in human life may have been extended to beliefs concerning existence after death. According to this interpretation, the horse, which enabled travel during life, was envisaged as a companion accompanying the deceased on the journey to another world.

Publications concerning the funerary materials from Aktam and Chayonli are important for the analysis of local practices [4]. In the submitted article, these sites are cited as examples of the inclusion of horse body parts and equipment in burials. The principal criteria for identifying their symbolic functions should be the structure of each grave, the positioning of the finds, and their relationship to other grave goods.

The presence of a horse or its equipment in a burial permits several interpretations. These elements may relate to the deceased’s means of transport, military activities, possessions, or companion in the afterlife. Such meanings are not mutually exclusive: social status and religious beliefs may have been expressed together within a single ritual.

Accordingly, the horse’s function as a guide to the afterlife is treated as one possible interpretation of the archaeological evidence. Defining it as the sole meaning of all burials involving horses would oversimplify the diversity of the evidence.

The inclusion of individual horse body parts or bridle equipment in burials, alongside instances involving entire animals, raises the question of symbolic representation. Where the whole animal was absent, a body part or an object associated with its use may have represented the horse’s ritual role. From a semiotic perspective, this can be explained through the principle of “the part representing the whole.” Horse equipment may have functioned as a sign evoking the animal itself, the human practice of riding, or a particular status of the deceased. However, this interpretation must also be tested against the archaeological context. An isolated bone may represent food remains, later disturbance, or another process. Conclusions concerning symbolic representation therefore require confirmation that the object was deliberately deposited and belonged to the burial assemblage. This approach allows the horse’s symbolic function to be understood beyond the physical presence of the animal itself. The animal, its body parts, and its equipment could participate in the ritual as signs operating at different levels.

Horse-related grave goods may express the deceased’s social standing alongside religious meanings. Establishing this requires comparison of the number of horses, the quality of their equipment, decorative elements, and other characteristics of the grave.

The Pazyryk burial complexes provide an important comparative example within Eurasia. A Hermitage publication records horses buried with decorated equipment, leather masks covering the heads of some horses, and ceremonial ornaments from the First Pazyryk Barrow [8]. These materials indicate that the horses were specially prepared for the funerary rite. Such preparation suggests that the animals’ ritual role differed from their everyday functions. Elaborate equipment can be interpreted as a set of signs in which the deceased’s prestige and the religious significance of the ceremony intersected.

The Pazyryk materials do not constitute direct evidence of funerary practices in Turan. They provide an external comparison that helps explain the ceremonial adornment of horses and their potential to convey status. Additional historical evidence is required before similar features can be interpreted as expressions of shared beliefs or the results of direct cultural influence.

The horse’s associations with companionship, strength, and status also appear in later folkloric and epic traditions. In Alpomish and the Go‘ro‘g‘li cycle, the horse plays an important role in the hero’s activities. However, presenting this epic image as a direct continuation of ancient

funerary practices requires evidence establishing historical connections.

L.P.Potapov’s study of the horse in the beliefs and epics of the Sayan–Altai peoples provides important comparative material for examining symbolic conceptions of later periods [9]. Such materials help interpret ancient evidence, but they must be assessed as independent sources because they belong to different periods and regions. From this perspective, the subsequent cultural life of horse imagery is examined in terms of functional similarities and reinterpretation. The recurrence of meanings associated with movement, companionship, and power does not establish the existence of a single, continuous cult. The analysis identifies five symbolic functions of the horse: a cosmological symbol, a sacrificial offering, a companion to the deceased, a marker of social status, and ritual representation through a body part or an item of equipment. These functions differ in their evidentiary foundations. The horse’s association with the Sun is explicitly stated in Herodotus’s account. Horses drawing Mithra’s chariot constitute an explicit depiction in a religious text.

Conclusion and Recommendations. Written and archaeological materials relating to ancient Turan indicate that the horse’s practical importance intersected with religious and ritual conceptions. In Herodotus’s account, its swiftness explains its selection as a sacrifice dedicated to the Sun; funerary materials, meanwhile, provide a basis for investigating the meanings associated with the deceased through the horse, its body parts, and its equipment.

Identifying the horse’s symbolic functions requires distinguishing the evidentiary capacities of religious texts, accounts by outside authors, and material finds. Eurasian comparisons assist in interpreting local evidence but do not, in themselves, establish historical continuity or direct influence. The multiplicity of meanings attributed to the horse in religious beliefs can be explained through the reinterpretation of its speed, strength, and companionship with humans in different rituals. Future research integrating detailed descriptions of local burial complexes, osteological findings, and the spatial arrangement of objects will strengthen the evidentiary basis of these interpretations.

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