

THE IMPORTANCE OF MOOSE TO THE PEOPLE IN THE NORTHERN SUB-URALS DURING THE BRONZE AND EARLY IRON AGES¹

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ABSTRACT: Moose (Eurasian Elk) are often found at ancient archaeological sites in the Northern Sub-Urals. Moose were an important component of the hunters' lifestyle as a source of food. Their skins were used for clothing and footwear and to make various household items. Skins were also used to make tents. Moose influenced the life and well being of these ancient hunters and were prolific in their myths and legends. Hunters believed the sun was a gigantic moose "running" over the entire horizon during the day. This investigation is devoted to the interpretation of some moose images and objects, dating to the Bronze and early Iron Age, collected from archaeological sites in the Northern Sub-Urals. The analysis of these images and objects indicated that in ancient times the peoples of this region originally personified the universe as a gigantic moose "mother". Later, a Tree-of-the-World concept was added to this image. This concept was the foundation for the organization and structure of people's lifestyles in the Northern Sub-Urals.

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Moose were given a special and important place in the culture of the people of the taiga and forest-taiga boundary because of its size and strength. It was commonly worshipped and as such its image was manifested in a variety of different forms. Sculptural representations of moose were made out of stone, antler, bone, wood, and bronze. The image was also carved in silver, bronze, bone, on pendants, and in stone. The predominance of moose in these ancient representations indicates that many of the concepts of the universe that were held by the Northern Sub-Urals' peoples were connected with moose.

BUILDINGS

Moose were ritually sacrificed during the building of homes and forts. Archaeological excavations from the early

Bronze and early Iron Ages documented that moose heads were placed as "building sacrifices". Some of these can be seen at the Bujskoje hill-fort on the Vjatka River (author's excavations during 1976, 1978-1981) and in Majdanskoje at the Mazarskoje I settlements on the Middle Volga River (Nikitin 1980). Moose heads were also placed above the entrance or on the roofs of ancient buildings (Nikitin 1980). Decorations on the roof ridges often took the form of moose heads or antlers. These were common in later excavations where the dwelling or rampart was shaped as if it was growing out of the moose's head and crowned with a similar head or the image of another moose. The dwelling represented the Tree-of-the-World concept in which moose played an important role. Moose, however, were also depicted in another

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major theme - that of the role of adversary, or of life and death.

“The building sacrifice” and roof ridge decorations could represent a sacrificial ritual (Bajburin 1983). In this region, during the Eneolith, the floors of the dwellings were powdered with red ochre. Ochre was a symbol of blood and life that was used to sanctify the dwelling. It represented the life of the dwelling and corresponded to their vision of the world. Traces of ochre were found within the walls of dwellings excavated at the Vomyn’jag I site (Ashihmina 1988).

COMBS

In the basin of the Vjatka River, there were numerous objects made of metal, bone, and stone that were decorated by images of moose. Of particular interest, are the bone combs found at the Bujscœ hill-fort during excavations in 1978 and 1979 (personal observation). As combs are used in the hair, they are typically symbols of fertility, strength, and health. This symbolism is evident in the folktales of many different peoples in the Northern Sub-Urals. For example, a thick forest appears at the place where a thrown comb touches the earth. In Russian erotic short stories, a comb often corresponds to a phallus. The same idea is implied by the ritual of combing the bride’s hair and by presenting the bride with a comb. The comb itself is present during childbirth and during burial rituals. The ritual of combing the hair is also associated with water spirits, mermaids, and other representatives of the Lower World (Uspensky 1982). The combs from the Bujscœ hill-fort are decorated with a stylized moose head and the Tree-of-the World (Fig. 1a and Fig. 1b).

The moose heads are turned towards the edge and the ears are either oval or pointed with stylized, curling antlers. These curls probably represent the sun and reflect

its movement across the sky. According to the direction of the curls depicted on the comb, it is possible to define the parts of the world on the comb. The curls that are turning counterclockwise symbolize the sun’s movement to the East. The curls that are turning clockwise symbolize the sun’s movement to the West.

The comb can be divided into the four cardinal points, with the North being behind the tree in the center and the South in front of it. The East-West concept can also represent the parts of the day such as “morning-evening” and the seasons of the year “spring-autumn”, whereas the “North-South” corresponds to “day-night” and “winter-summer”. The half-moon above the tree in Fig. 1a indicates that the North personifies the night.

The four moose are shown in one plane. It is unusual that the heads of the central pair face away from the tree. It is possible that this pair is a part of the ritual scene and, together with the second pair, represent the “keepers” or guards of the four parts of the world. In the most archaic classification systems, it is common that an animal is used to depict or correspond to a part of the world (Semeka 1977).

The fact that these combs are composed of three parts is also of interest. The upper part contains the ritual scene and is separated from the teeth by three straight lines. It is likely that this represents a ritual similar to that observed in Priajan Tungus. They worship the moose head and had a ritual that they observed when they cooked it. The head was divided into nine pieces in a definite order: first the lower part of the head was cut off, the tongue was removed, and the jaw was torn into pieces, each of which was again torn into two halves (Pekarsky and Tzvetcov 1912). In general, whole combs that depicted moose heads could represent the way that ancient peoples in the Northern Sub-Urals thought of

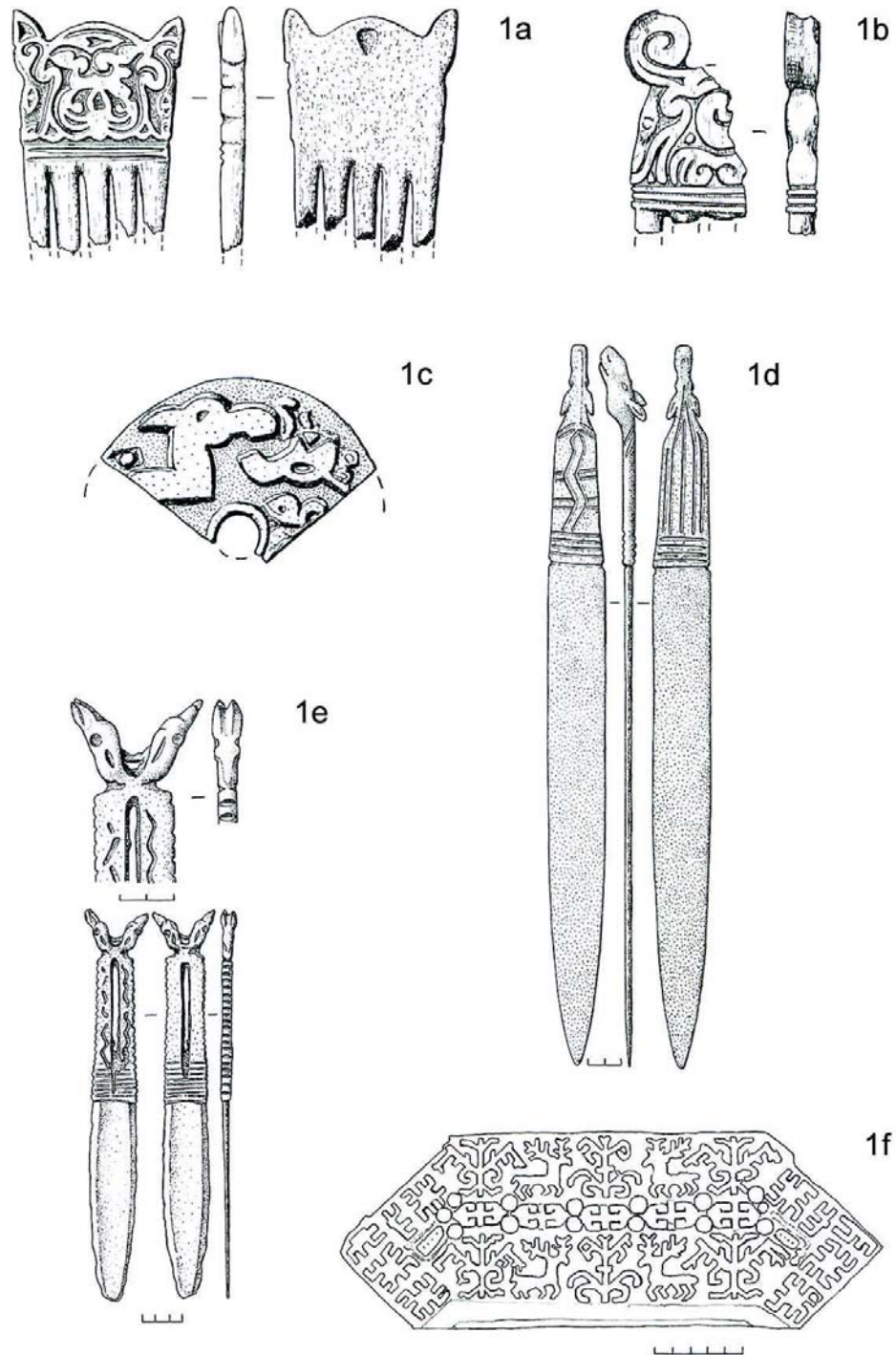


Fig. 1. Findings of objects with moose images on archaeological monuments of the Northern Sub-Urals. 1a, b, c – Bujskoje hillfort, basin of the Middle Vjatka river; d – Sejminsky burial place, the Oka river (Bader 1970, p. 116, Fig. 50); e – find from the vicinity of Perm' city (Studzittsskaja 1969, p. 227-229); f – woman's headdress belonging to a woman on the Upper Volga river (Maslova 1951, p. 44, fig. 2). Materials: 1a, b – bone; c – stone; d, e, – bronze; f – wool, silk and gold embroidery on canvas.

their world. Later, this image evolved to become the image of a Tree-of-the-World.

SPINDLE WHORLS

In Kama settlements, ornamented round spindle whorls are thought to reflect the calendar and certain mythological images. The circle is found in the Tree-of-the-World image with the sun or its symbols often a stereotyped concept. Since spindle whorls are connected with the circle, as well as the Tree-of-the-World, both the time and seasonal cycles are also reflected in them such that the movement of the sun during a day and a year links motion in time and space in a circular pattern (Toporov and Mejlah 1982).

The spindle whorls represent the vertical and horizontal spheres of the world and the directions of the four parts of the world can be represented by the crossed branches or the silhouette of moose heads (Fig. 1c). At the center, where they cross, is a wooden core, which describes the vertical axis. The spindle whorl motion symbolizes the sun's motion through the daily and yearly cycle.

TREE-OF-THE-WORLD

The Tree-of-the-World determined the horizontal space of the circle in a year and the vertical space of the circle in a day (Toporov and Mejlah 1982). There are references to the sun's circular motion within the language of the Komi, for example, the expression "time kills" literally means "the sun pushes" ("shondice jetke").

The cycling concept of time is expressed in many images and is based on the sun's movement from East to West. A bronze casting, excavated from the Gljadenov settlement, Pozhegdin II, in the Middle Vychegda basin, and dated to the third and fourth centuries A.D. is an excellent example of the Concept-of-the-World (Vaskul 1989). In this casting, the Mistress of the Universe is a moose with twins on her back.

A snake is at the base with water coming out of it. The moose head symbolizes both a newly born moon and the sun, and the onset of a new day. In this, the moose represents reincarnation - dying and rising again. All the details are composed and located in such a way that as a whole they reflect a Concept-of-the-World with four parts, each corresponding to a part of the world. All dualisms are represented: the sun and moon, top and bottom, right and left, positive and negative, and life and death. This casting is an excellent illustration of a space and time fusion and their indivisible unity.

A bronze object from the hearth, in an early Ananjin dwelling of Borganjel, a settlement in the middle branch of the Nivshera River, represents the Tree-of-Life concept (Ashihmina, unpublished data 1985). This bronze object, created by flat casting, depicts the stem of the Tree as curved. This curve also includes a crawling snake and is depicted as a deep furrow. The crown of the Tree is bent and represents a new moon with its points facing upward. Parallel to the moon are smaller branches in a crescent form. The points on these branches are pointing downwards. On the lower edge of the crescent, there are four small projections and four hollows on one side. On the Tree stem, there are three projections and three hollows.

The Tree-of-Life is one of the variations on the Tree-of-the-World and is a mythological representation of life. In the concept, there are three zones: upper (the crown), middle (the stem), and lower (the crawling snake). Each corresponds to the three vertical spheres of the Universe: upper, middle, and lower worlds. Sometimes, the image of the Tree-of-Life has a negative interpretation as the opposition to life (Toporov 1980). The reason for this is evident in the myths of the broken moon or about being consumed by inhabitants of a

lower world. Such myths are well known among the Abkhazians (Ivanov 1980), the Hittites (Ivanov 1980), and the Selkups (Prokofjeva 1976), wherein a cruel god, a representative of the lower world, tears or eats up the moon. Myths surrounding the moon, which falls to earth, are also prominent among the Khets (Ivanov 1977).

On the Borganjel bronze, the role of a chaotic character is manifested in the snake. It has gnawed through part of the lower crescent moon, on the concave side where there are traces of teeth described by four projections and four holes on one side, and three projections and three holes on the other side of the Tree stem. The old moon does not exist any longer and gives way to a young moon. It has the features of a man's face and the snake is crawling up to it, indicating that the cycle will be repeated. In Komi folklore, there are no legends about the broken moon. But, from the analogy presented, it is supposed that such a myth might have existed in the legends of the people of the Northern Sub-Urals.

In Evenk mythology, among the spirits and masters of the Lower World is a mythological creature - "khalir" resembling a moose or reindeer, and having the antlers of a moose and the tail of a fish. Its role is to guard a shaman's mythological river, along which the shaman and his spirits travel to the Lower or Upper Worlds of the universe. Since the mythological river connects all three worlds of the universe, the "guard" of this river, "khalir", possesses attributes of each. Moose antlers are a cosmic symbol of the Earth and the fish tail is a cosmic symbol of water (Anisimov 1959).

Other myths explain that during this ritual, an Evenk shaman called for his spirits - creatures that were half human and half non-human. The people thought that when the shaman died, the animal counterpart went to the "Lower World". Similarly, the creature was thought to have this duality.

Among shaman spirits of double nature, the image of the mythological mother-animal is also prevalent. In some cases, this was presented as the image of a mother-moose, but also mother-wild reindeer, mother-bear, mother-bird, etc. have been observed (Anisimov 1958). Because the creature observed in the object has a nature that is half human and half moose, it can be connected with a shaman cult. Therefore, this could also be interpreted as an image of a shaman and his spirits travelling along some mythological river, where the snake represents the water.

In the mythology of the majority of Siberian peoples, there are close links between the cosmological images of the moose and the mammoth. The hunters believed that the mammoth originated from old, wild reindeer. As the old, wild reindeer ages, it lays down in a bog where it eventually turns into a mammoth. The mammoth disappears under the Earth and wanders throughout the Lower World, splitting the banks of the river (Anisimov 1959). The mammoth is the creator of the Earth shape in the folklore of the Dolgans. The mammoth goes down to the Lower World after the Earth is created and takes all his offspring with him (Anisimov 1959). Komi legends also include mammoths as the creators of relief or contours and rivers. "In the old times there lived the mammoth. The earth could not carry it because it was very heavy. Where he stomped there appeared a furrow and water began to flow giving birth to a stream. And where he went to and through there appeared a river" (Rochev 1984).

The Nenetz god Num made the Earth smooth, but the mammoth went along it and spoiled it. All the places where he dug became mountains and the places where he pressed became lakes. Num got very angry at the mammoth and sent him underground to the Lower World.

In Evenk legends, representatives of

the Lower World also possessed characteristic features of the cosmological image of Khely (Shely, Sely), a mammoth, and Djabdar (Dzjabdar), a mythological snake. The Evenk connected these symbols with the creation of the mountains and rivers in the Middle World and they were considered to be the creators of the World. In the beginning, the Middle World did not exist and there was water all around. Man had no land to live on. The mammoth, Khely, decided to help man. With his "horns", he dug out enough earth for all the people. The snake, Djabdar, helped the mammoth to smooth the clods of the earth. In the places where the Djabdar crawled, there appeared rivers and where the clods were left unsmoothed, mountains appeared, and where the mammoth stomped or lay down to create deep holes, they became lakes (Anisimov 1959). One of the legends of Evenks-Orochons speaks about the origins of mountains, rivers, and lakes. They were created as a result of the fight between the mammoth and snake (Mazin 1984). In the myths of different peoples, the mammoth communicates not only with the representatives of the Lower World (fish, pangolin, snake), but also with symbols of the Middle World such as moose, reindeer, horse, bear, and the Upper World, such as birds (Toporov 1980).

The image of a mammoth as a gigantic bird is known among the Ob Ugres, Selkups, and Evenks (Toporov 1982). These images can be found in the materials ca. sixth century A.D. Some items found in Podcheremsky, a complex of burial mounds in the Northern Sub-Urals (Ashihmina 1988) and West Siberia, include bronze pendants made of a combined figure of a duck and moose where the head is of a moose cow and the body of a duck.

On the Borganjel' object, we distinguish two images of moose. One image depicts the snake cutting the lower half-moon and touching the upper one, which seems to

divide them into two parts. But this can also be viewed as joining them into one unit: there is a short segment to the right of the snake's head that runs parallel to it and connects both half moons. The moose heads are separated by a triangular hole located between the snake head and the antler of the moose. The twin cult is also present.

DAGGERS

The creation of the Middle World is reflected on the handle of the bronze dagger from the Seiminsky burial ground in the Oka River basin and dated to the Bronze Age (Fig. 1d). The end of the handle depicts a moose head. One of its sides is decorated by the outline of an eight-legged snake crawling after an elk mammoth. The symbol of the eight-legged snake reflects the twin cult.

One more reflection of the same myth is represented on a stray find of a bronze dagger found in the vicinity of Perm' and belonging to the same time (Fig. 1e). The tip of the handle is molded in the form of two sculptures of cow moose heads, with their muzzles toward the handle, and joined by a crosspiece. Along the edge of the blade, the wavy lines could represent snakes. The twin cult is evident in this casting too.

THE WORLD

Analysis of these materials leads to the conclusion that the ancient inhabitants of the Northern Sub-Urals believed that the Universe was a gigantic animal. This concept of the World could be based on the fact that moose occupied such an important and central place in the lifestyles of the ancient hunters. This is tied to their beliefs regarding their existence and their customs. It is reflected in their artifacts and language. This in its turn is well supported by the presence in the Komi language of two names for the moose: "yera", which means strength

and might and “lola”, which means soul and life. The people recognized their dependence on nature so strongly that the image of the World included many features that made it difficult to separate man from nature (Gurevich 1984).

Due to the changes that took place in the economy of the population of the North Sub-Urals, the image of the moose gradually gives way to the image of the horse, but it is not substituted completely. The ritual of decorating roof ridges with moose heads and antlers remained prominent in the North for a long time.

In embroidery and knitting, the “moose-reindeer” near the Tree-of-the-World is evident (Fig. 1f). The Komi people have a proverb, “Yerayd yddzud, no i sije kon’jas’le”, which translates to be “Moose is great, but also stumbles”.

The role of an animal in the mythology of the inhabitants was defined by the importance those animals had during the early stages of community development. Ethnographical materials from Siberia show that the Universe itself was thought of as a living being and was associated with different images of animals. Orochi imagined the universe as an eight-legged moose cow often depicted in the well-known picture by shaman Savely Khatunka. The earth was also thought by Nganassan to be a cow moose or wild deer with its head turned to the west - it follows the sun. For the Evenk people of Podkamennaja Tunguska River basin, the mistress of the Universe is the mother of animals and people simultaneously. It is quite common for hunters to imagine the sun as a gigantic moose, covering the whole of the horizon during the day.

LANGUAGE

For the Evenk people of the Podkamennaja Tunguska River basin, the mistress of the Universe, “enintyn” which means belonging to the Universe, their

mother, is at the same time the mother of animals and people. This mistress is pictured as a woman and an animal. The Evenk word “enin” has two meanings: mother and cow moose. In the Evenk language, there are a number of words with the root “en”, such as: “enin” - mother, cow moose; “enike” - grandmother; “eniken” - she-bear, “enty - vazhenka” with a calf; and “entyl” - parents (Anisimov 1959). Evidently, these words with similar roots have the meaning of mother, giving birth, and giving life.

In the Komi language, “yera” - elk; “en’yera” - cow moose; “en” - can be translated as mother; and, “En’a-nyla” - mother and daughter; “en’a-pia” - mother and son; “en’osh” - sow (Timushev and Kolegova 1961). Here we observe the same phenomenon and the usage of “en” in the meaning of mother, giving birth, and giving life. Gradually the new concept of the World as the Tree-of-the-World organizing and determining all the life cycles of man is based on the concept of the Universe represented as an animal.