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THE SPECIFICITY OF PRE-LITERARY AND EARLY-LITERARY CULTURES AND THE PROBLEM OF THEIR INTERPRETATION AS SYMBOLS OF HEAVENLY BODIES

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One of the difficulties of the interpretation of ancient signs is their presence in cultures where information is transmitted verbally. Information is transmitted directly and visual symbols are not numerous. The interpretation of signs of early-literary cultures is easier, thanks to their comparison with myths and rituals.

KEY WORDS Ancient astronomy, symbols of the heavenly bodies, Mesopotamian culture

Describing different representations among which there are ornamental motifs on wares, conventional signs on various objects (anthropomorphous figurines, seals-amulets, prestigious objects, etc.) and also trying to understand their symbolic meaning, archaeologists and historians of ancient art proceed from the resemblance of their appearance to the forms known to them from later traditions. Thus cruciform-shaped figures with additional projections are interpreted as a star, a circle with a central point or with rays as the sun (see, for example, the book by Masson and Sarianidi, 1973, ch. 3). However, the semantic meaning of more or less conventional motifs on monuments of pre-literary cultures and on the latest ones which are similar to them may turn out to be connected to a slight degree, or not to be connected at all. The main reason (besides the chronological one and the cultural gap) is their presence in cultures with different types of coding of the information and its transmission.

In societies where information is transmitted not verbally but by technical means, among which writing takes first place, heavenly bodies have their own clear definite symbols independent of the concrete context. In societies with a verbal type of communication where information is transmitted directly without mediators, visual symbols are not very numerous. They have a generalized form and a broad semantic meaning. Their meaning is defined more exactly or it is limited in the concrete situation that is clear to its participants. This situation gives symbols the necessary definite meaning.

For instance, a cruciform-shaped symbol resembling a four-pointed or eight-pointed star that was so widespread in the Anau culture in Central Asia throughout the Copper and Bronze Ages could represent a tree and an image of the world in geometrical form. The latter is also associated with a tree in the world centre. As ornamental motifs some of these symbols and their elements formed different compositions (Antonova, 1984).

In addition, it is likely that people of communities perceived this representation as a symbol of their unity and as such it was placed on different objects to mark them as "their own", i.e. having a definite place in the image of the world. In ancient people's opinion this symbol had to correspond to these objects to their functions.

There is another reason for doubts about the definite astral meaning of signs in non-literary cultures. People in non-differentiated integral communities with a verbal type of transmission of information address the phenomena of the surrounding world as "I" to "You": to the earth when giving presents to clefts and fields, to heavenly bodies when looking at the sky. Visual symbols, images, were necessary only in the case when one or another action had to be extended into time or a message should be sent to a distant address or a mythological personage.

The transition to the productive economy did not lead to a serious isolation from nature. The egalitarian slightly differentiated society had no need for the objectivation of many natural phenomena. Observing the heavenly bodies which was necessary, in particular, to regulate economic activity, some characteristic features of the dwelling-space as well as different elements of the house – windows, doors, beams, holes in the walls, etc., were of great importance. The use of these elements as primitive "instruments" made it possible to determine seasonal changes, periods of various work, and the dates of feasts. The border of the environment remained easily pellucid.

In the formation process of differentiated society and the emergence of social strata the society was aware of its structural complexity. There was a growing need for using symbols of the sky. It is symptomatic that rosettes having many rays (representing a star, the sun?) appear on Mesopotamian and Iranian seals not later than at the beginning of the IVth mill. BC in a clear definite attitude: above the image of a man bearing indications of a leader. The context of these images shows that "rosettes" are present in ritual scenes or actions of a symbolic nature.

Mesopotamian monuments are worthy of special interest in the study of the history of astronomy. The beginning of the information accumulated in the astronomical texts of MUL.APIN known from the records of the VIIth century BC can be referred, at least, to 2300 BC though there are some other viewpoints. There is no question that people had observed heavenly bodies long before many centuries of this hypothetical period as it was connected, in particular, with the productive economic formation in the VIII–VIIth mill. BC. It would be natural to expect that the symbols of the heavenly bodies and constellations could be depicted on such objects as seals, ritual vessels and others which were common in the IV–IIIth mill. BC. Attempts to find them have been made repeatedly in the past but they were mainly intuitive in character and not very convincing, in the first place due to the

difficulties of interpretation of early monuments. The situation is somewhat better with regard to the Akkadian and Babylonian period monuments. H. Frankfort wrote that on Akkadian seals (and even on the Early Dynastic ones) there occurs an anthropomorphous representation of a solar divinity. This deity is a participant of the composition where a four-legged animal, a lion or a lion-like monster, bull-man, plough, eagle, scorpion, and vessel, is present (Frankfort, 1939). H. Frankfort rightfully wrote that in this way a scene of ploughing was shown taking place on earth. In that case all participants and objects were associated with fertility and the presence of the solar deity among them does not necessarily mean that these scenes demonstrate the daily and yearly movement of the sun expressed in symbolical form. Nevertheless he considered it possible that some seals could also bear astral symbols and human beings and earthly objects were chosen as representations of heavenly bodies (Ibid.).

He wrote with certainty about symbols of heavenly bodies and constellations represented on the Babylonian period seals. In his opinion the reason for their representation was the fact that personal seals were not only symbols of property but talismans as well. In this respect symbols of heavenly bodies could be associated with astrological notions. Comparing the hypothetical symbolis of constellations on the First Babylonian Dynasty seals with those of a later period Frankfort assumed that only two Zodiacal constellations – Cancer and Sagittarius – are not present on these seals. At that time symbols of constellations could be the following signs: Orion – a small human figurine; Taurus – a bull; Gemini – two fighting nude heroes or a hero and a bull-man; Leo – a lion; Virgo – a goddess with an ear. According to Frankfort Scorpio as well as Libra had a modern form. Capricorn was depicted as a goat-fish of the god Ea; Aquarius as a nude personage with a vessel; Pisces as the water goddess and a bird (Ibid.).

It is quite obvious that both historians of culture and astronomers could object to this kind of interpretation. The researchers of today dealing with Mesopotamian monuments of visual art more often give a general interpretation of their semantics. For instance the New Year festivals are considered the main theme on the Akkadian seals and they have a broader meaning – a cult representation of cosmological myths. The interpretation of the meaning of earlier images is even more complicated. In particular, various animals sometimes represented next to the figures of anthropomorphous or fantastic animals are in abundance or even prevail. Can astral symbols be among them? In this connection the availability of known compositions where, alongside animal figures and other creatures there were represented the pictures of the moon and seven points which according to a widespread belief are the crescent and the constellation Pleiades, can be indicative of an affirmative answer.

However, we have good grounds to think that representations of various objects of a ritual nature had a broad and diversified meaning which correlated with rituals and myth. On the whole their images are associated with earthly (at least by origin) phenomena and creatures. Wild and domestic animals, mythological creatures of the “master of animals” type, flows of water, plants, elements of landscape – they are all of earthly origin. In the course of time some of them could become symbols of heavenly bodies and entire constellations. Taylor pointed out that aborigines

of South Australia named the constellation Lyra "The Bird Lon" as they noticed that when it was setting at the same time as the sun was setting it was time to collect this bird's eggs (Taylor, 1939). The images on ritual objects belonging to the IV–IIIrd mill. BC could hardly be of a pure astronomical nature even if they had such a correlation. Notions of wide range were realized in them; the life of the society, people's activities, the activity of the elite. Everything was regarded in the light of a myth and correlated with a god's deeds and natural forces. In perceiving the objective world it is natural to understand what is happening on earth as corresponding to what is happening in heaven.

Small objects such as cylinder seals could carry representations of small scenes with a limited number of participants only. All this interpretation of separate motifs and entire compositions hampers. However, there are known objects permitting (and according to their place in a ritual) us to depict more detailed visual texts on them. They are vessels.

Among such vessels is a well-preserved exhibit at the British Museum (Figure 1). In different publications it is known to originate from the two settlements situated in the Diyala valley – Tell Khafajah or Tell Agrab. The vessel belongs to the whole series of objects which were common in the Early Dynastic Period (c. the middle of the IIIrd mill. BC.). The images engraved on this stone vessel can be divided into four groups. Two groups bear the images of a male creature in the centre. On the left side of the composition this personage is shown kneeling and leaning on the back of one of the two bulls. He is clothed in a skirt with a girdle and he holds two flows of water in his hands. There is a rosette with six petals above his left shoulder. Something that resembles the half-moon is above the rosette. On the sides of these images there is a horizontal wavy band partly adjoining the plants rising over the flow in the left hand of the anthropomorphous creature,

The central personage in the second composition differs from the first one not only in his standing position: his hair do is a little different. He is clothed in the same kind of skirt but he holds two spotted serpents with heads of feline beasts of prey. Under them with tails turned to each other there lie two cat-like beasts of prey resembling panthers or lionesses. This personage like the first one has the same kind of rosette above his shoulder but the symbol resembling the crescent is absent.

A large composition is on the right side: a lion attacking a bull. The latter is also attacked by a bird of prey. There is a scorpion figure on the left. Under the rear part of the lion figure, between the first and the last compositions, there is a small picture of a palm-tree and two creatures resembling bears with the paws close to their faces. There is a partly damaged figure above the bear on the right. Perhaps this figure is similar to the figure of a lying beast of prey having no mane which is shown in the second composition.

As compared with the second composition the first one is notable for its distinct representation of water flows. In all likelihood the personage carrying them belongs to the circle of the water deity of the Sumerian type Enki (Akkadian Ea). An anthropomorphous "demon" with two vessels with water pouring out of them, or a "giant" lying in a water flow is a personage represented on the Akkadian period seals.



Figure 1

In this combination the representation of bulls and plants is natural. The texts say that An, the god of heaven, was called a heavenly bull who revives vegetation. There was expressed an opinion that a well-known episode of the Gilgamesh epic indicated the symbolic association of bull with water, i.e. the scene of killing the bull who caused drought (Van Buren, 1946). This indication can be found on seals too: the well-known cylinder of Adda bears a picture of a bull under the water deity (Amiet, 1977).

If the first composition, as we think, is linked with the image of water and plants, the second one is associated with dying and heat. The lion is a constant rival of the bull. At times a lion is represented on seals as strong as a bull but frequently as attacking a bull. According to Amiet, the lion is a symbol of a baneful heat and on Akkadian seals it is shown standing next to the solar deity. A sword in the deity's hand demonstrates its terrible nature.

There is a temptation to suppose that the two main compositions illustrate two major seasonal of the Mesopotamian year – winter and summer. In Old Babylonian times, not so remote as the period to which the vessel under discussion belongs, the winter half of the year began in the VIth month, i.e. the present August–September and lasted till the XIIth month, i.e. February–March. Summer began in the first month (March–April) and was over in the VIth month (Djakonov, 1990). In the dispute of gods personifying these two halves of the year the winter is the main period of nature flourishing. This god let cattle breed, “wild animals gambol in a blooming steppe, birds build nests, date-palms and vines grow and grass and crops come up” (Ibid).

One cannot expect a precise coincidence with a calendar in a symbolic composition. But by general conception the first composition seems to indicate winter while the second one points to summer. In that case the attitude of a small composition with a palm-tree and bears can be explained: it is a symbol of ripening dates. The bears are shown licking their paws dirty with sweet juice of ripe dates (Frankfort, 1977). The time of the date crop is an “interseasonal period”, the V–VIth months (Djakonov, 1990). The author of the present contribution who is neither a historian of astronomy nor an assyriologist–philologist takes the liberty of filling in the gap between the monument of visual art and the information recorded in written sources. In his latest book, I. M. Djakonov revised the previous conclusions concerning calendars of different Mesopotamian towns. He analysed and summarized the information which had been accumulated by the present time (Djakonov, 1990). Of special interest to us is information on festivals as the object of our research is undoubtedly the ritual vessel. Let us dwell on some festivals which, we think, can have common meaning with images represented on the vessel.

The first composition is associated with winter, the time of vegetal growth and the growth of cultivated cereals, maling of bulls and cows, the flood of the Tigris and Euphrates. It was a period of gathering the main crops and indicative in this respect is the representation of sprouting plants in the upper part of the first composition.

The symbolism of the second composition with the images of the standing personage and the bull correlates with ritual ceremonies and customs held in the summer period. At this period in Ur the god Nanna's mourning – “crying over Nanna”

was taking place, and the god was identified with a bull. One can see possible parallel to these notions and, probably, to the ceremonies corresponding to them in the scene of the bull's killing. In the same period, after gathering crops campaigns were conducted as, in the view of I. M. Djakonov, it was the most suitable time for stealing fruits of labour. The attitude of the male personage in the second composition as well as the images of the beasts of prey correspond to the symbolism of this season.

Monuments of the visual art are the most significant source in the reconstruction of the Mesopotamian culture. They are mutually complementary with written records. The resemblance (comparison of the information contained in texts of various nature) seems to be of great importance. At the same time there may be some errors of the interpretation of visual data through written sources. This is obvious especially when these sources are insufficient or refer to later periods. And yet the interpretation of the images represented on the vessel in question seems to have prospects in terms of their possible connection with astral symbolism if we try to remember the names of heavenly bodies and constellations in the Sumerian language. These names refer to the visual images: the constellation Orion was called "the eagle"; Hydra, "the serpent"; Leo, "the lion" or "the big dog"; the star Regul (in the constellation Leo) "the king"; and Taurus "the Heavenly bull" (Bobrova and Militarev, 1993).

Turning to the first paragraphs of the article, to the geometrized symbols of the Anau culture it is necessary to dwell on their evolution throughout the Copper and Bronze Ages. This makes it possible to imagine how variations – the carriers of concrete meanings – start to emerge from the symbol of a broad content. Four- and eight-pointed stars are among them and their disposition tends to the upper part of the anthropomorphous figurines, to the head-dress and shoulders (though there occur some other variations of the disposition which follow the old tradition). It is most likely that the formation of such specialized symbols alongside the phenomena peculiar to the Anau culture proper was influenced by written languages of ancient Mesopotamian and Iranian states. Their emergence in the Anau culture itself is one of the indications of the complication of social structure, of the need for resorting not only to ancestors but the creatures possessing a broader "Sphere of action". And, finally, these kinds of symbols point to the orientation of ritual ceremonies not only in the ties with fruit-bearing earth, a family or a clan, but with the celestial sphere and large communities of people.

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