

Ornament and Decor as Semiotic Elements

Kurman Kaliyevich Muratayev, Larisa Ivanovna Nekhvyadovich, Eric Suleymenovich Turganbayev, Shakhizada Sainbekovna Turganbayeva

Abstract: *This article considers the worldview, embodied in the decoration on Bronze Age pottery, created by the tribes of the Andronovo culture period (2nd millennium BC) in the territory of Kazakhstan. The Andronovo culture dates back to the Chalcolithic period when communities of the geometric pottery cultures lived here. Pottery was on the one hand utilitarian, and on the other sacral in use, combining elements of sculpture (the shape of a vessel) and painting (decorating an object). In the process of historical development, in accordance with the regularities of immanent formation and under the influence of external factors, several features of the decoration components emerged. The article contributes to the study of the problems, which remain relevant and require understanding. The opportunities for interpretation of pottery as a source and the use of different analysis methods allow for extracting new ethnological and art history information.*

Keywords: *sacral, pottery, pattern, decoration, Bronze Age, Kazakh art.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times, clay has had a sacral meaning in traditional cultures. Since the emergence of ancient civilizations, this material has served for the creation of various objects, contributing to the development of transformative abilities, spiritual search, and creative aspirations of people. In creation myths, starting from Tengrism as the earliest monotheistic religious system in history and later in biblical and qur'anic traditions, clay plays the role of a substance touched by the "divine spark". The mention of the divine spark as a certain degree of the presence of the spirit of a higher power in transformed clay and the sacral meaning of fire, which was used to make pottery, are known from ancient Turkic runic inscriptions of the 5th-3rd centuries BC, discovered in Kazakhstan. Pottery, besides its purely utilitarian purpose, gains special symbolism in the understanding of reality and becomes one of the central links in the worldview of ancient people. The search for answers to the questions "Where did everything come from?" and "Who are we?" allowed artisans to model the universe as eternity, as well as their relation to it. Let us consider the sacral meaning of decoration on Andronovo pottery in Kazakh art.

Revised Manuscript Received on September 25, 2019

Kurman Kaliyevich Muratayev, Kazakh National Pedagogical University of Abay, Almaty, Kazakhstan.

Larisa Ivanovna Nekhvyadovich, Altai State University, Barnaul, Russia.

Eric Suleymenovich Turganbayev, Almaty University of Power and Communication, Almaty, Kazakhstan.

Shakhizada Sainbekovna Turganbayeva, Kazakh Leading Architectural and Civil Engineering Academy, Almaty, Kazakhstan.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The research topic is covered in numerous archeological and ethnographic written and oral sources. The most complete data about artifacts of the Bronze Age, including in the territory of China and Kazakhstan, are presented in the works by E.I. Ageeva and A.G. Maksimova [1], K.A. Akishev [2], F.Kh. Arslanova [3], T.M. Teplovodskaya and E.F. Kuznetsova [4], A.A. Tkachev [5], E. Childs-Johnson [6], A.N. Podushkin [7], W. Zhongjie and L. Hui'E [8].

Analysis of literary sources allows us to conclude: 1) the idea of the sacral has changed, the boundaries of this concept in humanitarian knowledge are blurred, 2) in art history, a research tradition of interpretation of symbols in art has formed [9].

A problem arises due to the fact that in the methodology of art history, approaches to the interpretation of sacral symbols in the components of pottery decoration are ambiguous. A theoretical understanding of the problem is needed as it is related to the genesis and features of the artistic language of visual arts, its ability to convey archetypical content, and its role as a factor of preservation and development of national specificity in art.

This article attempts to outline the semantic field of the sacral in the formation of the components of decoration on Andronovo pottery in Kazakh art.

III. METHODS

The main research method is the description and analysis of the motifs of decoration on Andronovo pottery pertaining to its sacral meaning (Figure 1). By sacral interpretation, we understand a kind of art history interpretation, which correlates, first and foremost, with spiritual perception, the manner of the sacral vision of an artisan, and the way of expression of their specific worldview [10].

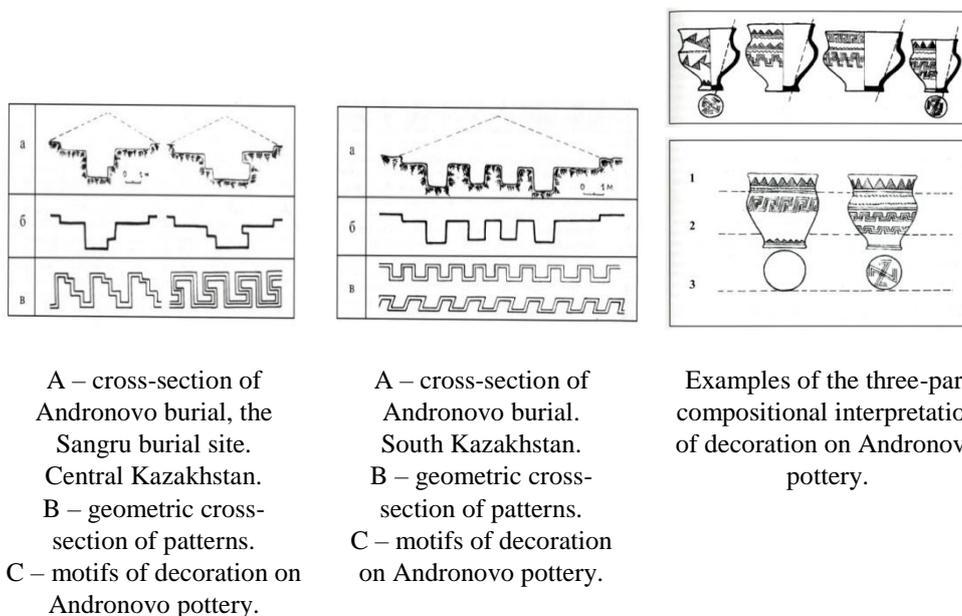


Fig. 1. Examples of Andronovo pottery in the territory of Central and South Kazakhstan

Features of the Andronovo culture in the territory of Kazakhstan

In Kazakh archeology of the 20th century, the periods and features of the artifacts of historical cultures from ancient epochs and to the modern era are sufficiently studied. Among the artifacts of ancient cultures, of particular interest are examples of Bronze Age pottery, created by tribes of the Andronovo culture period (2nd millennium BC) and named after the site of the first excavations of a burial site near the village of Andronovo in South Siberia. The excavations were conducted by B.V. Andrianov in 1913. One of the main centers of the Andronovo culture was located in the territory of Kazakhstan. Over 30 settlements and 150 burial sites of the Andronovo culture were discovered in Central Kazakhstan (the Nura River, the Atasu River, the village of Dandybai near Karaganda, the village Begazy in North Balkhash) [4].

Archeological data evidence that the Andronovo people led a sedentary lifestyle, practicing husbandry, predominantly in shepherding, and made clay pottery. Clay vessels are the main findings in the burials of the Andronovo people. The vessels are flat-bottomed with the diameter of the bottom usually twice as small as that of the opening. The height of the vessel is approximately equal to its diameter. The sides are convex, rounded and the diameter is largest at the upper third of the vessel. The contour is smooth [3] (1973). The Andronovo tradition is characterized by the addition of grus and organic material to the composition of molding compounds. All compositions can be divided into four traditions: a) clay devoid of impurities, b) clay, grus, and shell, c) clay and river sand, d) clay and grog [4]. When making pottery, firing was not just considered a technological stage but had a sacral meaning as well.

A. Features of the Andronovo culture in the territory of Kazakhstan

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IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Semantics of Fire

In the Bronze Age, the images and worship of fire became essential in the artisans' worldview. This is evidenced by the materials of archeological excavations and the ancient hymns of the Rigveda. Researchers' appeals to the Rigveda are justified as there is evidence that it was created by the Aryan nomadic tribes, which came to India from the Eurasian steppes in the Bronze Age. In the Hymn of Creation, heat, as the main quality of fire, is given the role of the basic principle of being [6]. It sets the scheme for transforming external, sensory knowledge into mental

forms. Fire exists as an idea, a semantic formation, which preserves and transfers cultural meanings.

In another hymn, devoted to the cosmic heat, fire serves as the primary element of all things, understood in two aspects: as a physical phenomenon and as an ideal, sacral substance [11, 12]. Fire acquires cosmological characteristics: heavenly (sun, lightning), earthly (hearth), and subterranean (volcano).

The path of joining of the soul of the dead with the eternal cosmic fire was revealed through the meaning and symbolism of the funeral pyre, the patron of which was the deity named Agni. The process of this joining through earthly fire to its cosmic ideal was not interpreted simply as eternal happiness. Immortality can only be guaranteed by the comprehension of the “everlasting light”, pervading the entire universe and serving as its basis. For example, in one of the hymns of the Rigveda devoted to Soma (a solar deity), the everlasting light is mentioned [6, 9, 10]. The immortality of the everlasting light is associated with the order of the indestructible world as the main quality of the universe. Fire, being its creator, serves as the guardian of this order.

B. Components of The Pattern of Decoration on Andronovo Pottery

The main feature of Andronovo pottery decoration of all periods is geometricity. The structural elements of decoration are few and form three main groups: triangular, linear-horizontal, and graphically related Z- and S-shaped components.

In the early period of the Andronovo culture, the composition and principles of decoration emerged, which became traditional for later periods as well. The decoration is based on the strict sequence of two levels. The upper level consists, as a rule, of rows of triangles with the points up and the lower level is based on the combination of Z- and S-shaped elements. Straight and wavy lines separate the levels. Below the main part of the decoration, often on the bottoms of the vessels, solar symbols in the form of two crossing Z-shaped figures (swastika) can be found. The principles of decoration based on a combination of organized rows and elements form the three-part structure of the decoration's composition.

Straight and wavy lines (elements of the second group of the components), separating the two-level part of the decoration, are interpreted as the border between worlds. Above it is a row of triangles (elements of the first group of the components) as cross-sections of sacred burial mounds (earth or stone constructions), revered in connection to the veneration of the dead. Considering the fact that the settlements of the Andronovo people were situated not far from burial sites with dozens (sometimes over 200-300) of such constructions, the ensemble of burial mounds was a significant feature of the steppe landscape. The triangular elements may be the depiction of funeral pyre flames. The more complex structure of the lower level, based on Z- and S-shaped elements, correlates with the design features of terraced pits and burial chambers.

The symbol in the form of two crossing Z-shaped elements acquire perpetual dynamics, expressing the nature of the everlasting light, the eternal fire, which is the basis of the universe, as interpreted in the hymns of the Rigveda. This explains the frequent use of this symbol at the bottoms of the vessels, which have a direct connection with fire. Originally having the qualities of a magic symbol, with time, its individual elements became subject to stylization and various iconographic variations emerged.

The idea of modeling the process of the joining of the soul of the deceased with the eternal life could be the basis of the content in Andronovo pottery decoration. Not by chance, clay vessels, being an important material commodity in the life of ancient people, also served as an indispensable attribute of the funeral. Accompanying the dead, they were, in a way, their substantial continuation. Attempts to explain the secrets of the constant renewal of nature gave rise to complex ideas. Among them is the aforementioned understanding of the nature of fire, its eschatological function, as well as early interpretations of life, found, for example, in the hymn devoted to the funeral pyre [6].

V. CONCLUSION

Holistic archaic consciousness does not contrapose its own creations to humankind and does not endow them with anthropomorphic features. By creating a deliberate compositionally thought-out decoration, ancient artisans subconsciously sought to cross the boundary of the seemingly closed “birth – death” cycle. Thus, decoration of the clay vessels overcomes their plastically-closed state. This results in the development of its second feature – an infinity of volume in the dynamics of perception, affirming the ideological “birth – death – immortality” themes of a non-cyclical nature. This three-part semantic structure correlates with the aforementioned three-part composition of the decoration on Andronovo pottery. It is not an image and symbol of the whole but the characteristic of the universe in the process of its development.

Bronze Age pottery in the territory of Kazakhstan is a cultural text, a detailed study of which allows to comprehensively analyze the worldview of artisans and its embodiment in the components of decoration. Semiotic interpretation of pottery as a cultural text allowed us to identify the structural units of geometric pattern and to systematize the presumed meanings of the symbols. The considered symbols confirm the spread of fire worship in the period under study in the territory of Kazakhstan and its influence on the components of decoration.

Pottery, due to the features of its creation and use, is an informative source for the study of the history of Kazakh art. All elements of shape and decoration have specific meaning and the re-construction of any of the historical periods of traditional Kazakh pottery may be an effective source of ethnological and art history information, which can be considered a text, revealing ethnic features of art.

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