Acta Ethnographica Hungarica, 45 (1–2), pp. 205–227 (2000)

MANSI SACRED COVERS

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Abstract: The topic of the Mansi sacred covers is an interesting aspect of Mansi religious and mythic culture. The sacred covers occupy a special place in Mansi art. They represent a highly important element of religious ritual practice and embody a fundamental idea that underlies many social structures, such as household cohesiveness, family welfare, and the fortune of successive generations. Most of the material is described from the Northern groups of Mansi.
Keywords: sacred cover, sacrifice, religion, magic, Mansi

The topic of this article is the Mansi sacred cover, one of the most interesting, yet least studied aspects of Mansi religious and mythic culture. Due to their sacral significance, these objects were carefully concealed from the eyes of outside observers and came to the attention of specialists only at the beginning of the 20th century. Sacred covers occupy a special place in Mansi art. They represent a highly important element of religious ritual practice and embody a fundamental idea that underlies many social structures, such as household cohesiveness, family welfare, and the fortune of successive generations. Today is a time of ethnic reawakening for the Northern peoples, a time to reclaim and nourish fragments of traditional culture. Much of that culture has changed, disappeared or acquired new overlays of meaning; but against the background of this general deterioration, the native peoples preserve small islands of stability that allow them to say, "We are Mansi" or "We are Khanty". Sacred covers have in fact remained part of native religious ritual for several centuries, a phenomenon that has helped preserve the family, clan and society from the destructive forces of time and alien ideology.

Most of the factual material described in this article was gathered from the northern groups of Mansi, the remainder from the northern Khanty. Many scholars have noted that the northern Khanty share more cultural similarities with their northern Mansi neighbors than either does with more distantly located groups of the same nationality. The authors have depicted the role of sacred covers in ritual practice on the basis of Mansi religious and mythological conceptions. The Khanty material is included for comparison.

The Mansi and Khanty belong to the Ugric language family. The Mansi live in the northern part of the Ob River basin west of the river all the way to the Ural Mountains; some also live in Europe on the western slopes of the Urals. The Khanty

1216–9803/2000/$ 5.00

are located primarily on the eastern bank of the middle and southern reaches of the Ob and in the northern Irtysh River basin. The main activities of the northern Mansi and Khanty are hunting, fishing and reindeer breeding. This type of economy predetermined Ob-Ugrian settlement in the form of small groups dispersed widely across the taiga with access to hunting and fishing groups located near the encampment as well as farther away; it also influenced their semi-nomadic lifestyle.

The Mansi as well as Khanty originated as ethnic groups as the result of the interaction of Ugric tribes moving into the Ob basin and Ural area from the south. The time of their arrival in Western Siberia is estimated at about 1000 BC.

MYTHOLOGICAL WORLD VIEW AND THE MAIN FIGURES IN THE MANSI PANTHEON

In Mansi religious and mythological conception the Universe consists of three spheres: the upper (heaven), middle (earth), and lower (underworld). The Upper World is the abode of the god *Numi-Torum*, whose will caused the Earth to be created. According to the main creation myth, a loon sent by *Numi-Torum* brought a lump of clay up from the bottom of the ocean that subsequently grew to the size of the Earth. Recent studies have revealed that the myth of the diving bird was already present in the world's ancient belief systems.

Besides *Numi-Torum*, the upper sphere is also the realm of his brother, the thunder-making *S'ahel-Torum*, *Etpos-ojka* (the moon), and *Hotal-ekwa* (the sun). *Numi-Torum*'s father and his grandfather dwell in the second and third (the highest) level of the Upper World; these are the least active personages of the Mansi pantheon.

In the Middle World (the Earth) dwells *Kaltas'-ekwa*, the wife of *Numi-Torum*, expelled from the Upper World for having an affair with *Kul'-oter*, the master of the Lower World. The Earth is also home to the goddess of fire, *Naj-ekwa* (*Nai-s'an*). Human affairs are governed by *Numi-Torum*'s youngest son, *Mir-susne-khum*, who defeated his brothers in a horse race (the remaining brothers have acquired the status of local gods). And the Earth is home to the blacksmith god *S'okhren-ojka* (in one variant, seven brothers named *S'-okhren-ojka*), as well as the guardian spirits of various territorial groups and individual families, and forest spirits, including both the malevolent *menkw* and the kind *mis-khum* (in female form, *mis-ne*).

The beings of the Lower World include its ruler, *Kul'oter*, and his servants, the *kul'*, or spirits of illness.

A special place in Mansi religion belonged to the concept of the soul (souls), including the reincarnated soul and specific details regarding reincarnation.

The tripartite structure of the universe (on the vertical plane) manifested itself on the level of the household dwelling (storage of religious objects and the spatial division of the interior), as well as on the level of taiga sacred places of differing ranks (placement of the post or posts, a symbol of the world tree). The Mansi also invested great importance in the idea of a tripartite world on the horizontal plane.

The system outlined above only describes Mansi religious and mythic views in the most general terms. To understand the true content of these concepts requires an explanation of the significance of the most important personages in the pantheon, who appear in Mansi religious rituals and objects (assemblages of cult attributes).

Protective functions over various aspects of life belonged, a s rule, to the same guardian spirit who possessed a wide variety of capabilities. When necessary, however, "special" spirits could be summoned to oversee a particular human activity.

A person had to obtain the right to a spirit's protection. Only by receiving a family guardian spirit *pubi* in the way established by tradition could a person enter into relations with a spirit. Violating these accepted and sacred rules of society was considered to have dire consequences.

Guardian spirits of the settlement (the Mansi *pawel*) were considered (in contrast to he *pubi*) to be the ancestors of individuals born within the given territorial group. The ancestor guardian of a *pawel* was literally thought to be the father and founder of the settlement and could assume the form of an animal totem (wagtail, eagle owl, hawk, etc.), or of one of personages in the common Mansi or even common Ugric pantheon (including even *Kul'-oter*).

The variety of forms the settlement guardian spirit was capable of assuming derives from the coexistence of various stages in the development of the ancestor cult. Most ancient are the zoomorphic ancestor spirits. The tendency toward anthropomorphism is obvious; it appears in the name (*ojka* means "old man") and in the iconography (the preponderance of human characteristics in the image). A characteristic detail in the development of the guardian spirit image is its possession (without regard to the basic form itself) of heroic qualities.

The Mansi believed that guardian spirits (in most cases) had wives lacking any special name. As a rule, they were called by their husband's name with the addition of the word *ekwa* (woman).

The Ob-Ugrians also believed in clan ancestor heroes who could assume either human or animal form. In later tradition they figured as the ancestor guardians of settlements.

Relations between spirits and people had a mutual character. A person satisfied the spirit's "needs" with various types of sacrifices. Spirits acquired a special respect expressed in the categorical attention each successive generation paid to any interaction with them. The spirits had to be kept in very definite places inside the home; access to them was possible only for their master (keeper), who was obligated to make all the sacrifices dictated by tradition.

Sacrifices were either bloody (*jir*) or bloodless (*pori*); in the latter case, food was sacrificed or some sort of gifts were offered such as clothing, cloth, money or other objects. Sometimes both types of sacrifice were combined.

Regular sacrifices were associated with the economic life cycle; irregular ones occurred in the case of births, weddings or illness. Especially important were sacrifices connected with the creation of a new family. Family spirits also "participated" in sacrifices honoring the guardian spirit of the *pawel*; a portion of meat together with an alcoholic beverage was offered as a treat for the family spirits.

Sacrifices allowed people to "come into contact" with spirits and led to a special type of dialog with them. The sacrifice (or promise of a sacrifice) obligated a spirit to hear a person's supplication and "answer in deed", that is, satisfy the request of the sacrifice giver. Traditional etiquette required a person to be reserved in expressing his wishes. If the request involved hunting, the supplicant usually asked for "some fish" or "a bit of game". In no case could the supplicant ask for more than the sacrifice merited.

It must be noted that the culture of the Ob-Ugrians (both Khanty as well as Mansi) consists of two components. One component is the culture of the Ugrians, who came from the south; the other is the pre-Ugric (Paleosiberian, Uralic) culture of the Ob-Irtysh region that predates their arrival. This circumstance served as the ideological basis for the appearance among the Khanty and Mansi of two moieties, the *Mos'* and *Por*. Marriage was possible only with a member of the opposite moiety; within the same moiety, marriages were forbidden.

MIR-SUSNE-KHUM

A major figure in the Mansi pantheon is *Mir-susne-khum* (whose name means "person watching the world"), the youngest son of *Numi-Torum* and ruler of human affairs; he travels across land and water and is an extremely active personage in the pantheon. In the past the *Mos'* moiety devoted a shrine to *Mir-susne-khum* in his bird (goose) form, as he was considered the ancestor of this group. Images of *Mir-susne-khum* or symbols of devotion to him can be found in nearly all Mansi sacred places, even when the given shrine is supposed to honor a local spirit. In home (family) shrines three-dimensional images of him are uncommon, but flat images depticing *Mir-susne-khum* mounted on a horse were in every Mansi dwelling; these images are in fact *jalpen ulama* – sacred covers. A very definite need to keep this image in the house is obvious. The upper, sacred zone of the house had to be sanctified by *Mir-susne-khum*'s presence; the dwelling could assume the proper cosmic orderliness only when this image was present.

Mir-susne-khum's functions are diverse. In the first place, the protection of each individual from the moment of birth depends on him.

A second important function of *Mir-susne-khum* is protector of the family. It is this circumstance that necessitates the presence of a sacred cover in every house. The Mansi believe that the stable existence of family and home, as well as the health of its inhabitants, is directly connected with the possession of a *jalpen ulama*.

Mir-susne-khum kept track of whether people followed the norms and rules of human society and governed the living in accordance with these observations. He could punish anyone whose behavior was "unsocial" (and consequently "ungodly"), since he was the supreme judge as well as punisher. Sometimes his punishment could be cruel. Notions of this role of *Mir-susne-khum* always occupied a firm place in Mansi consciousness and is vividly reflected in folklore.

Mir-susne-khum is not grouped together with the throng of spirits, or "people-helpers"; instead, he is elevated above them, just as he is above people.

Jalp-us-ojka (the Bear) is the mythic ancestor of the *Por* moiety, which derives from the pre-Ugric (Uralic) population of the Ob region. The moiety center devoted to his worship (the settlement Vezhakory on the Ob River) is widely known. Equally well known and important were the so-called Bear Festivals. According to the Russian ethnographer Valery Chernetsov, *Jalp-us-ojka* is comparable historically to the supreme god *Numi-Torum*.

MOTHER-GODDESSES

Kaltas'-ekwa, the mother of *Mir-susne-khum* and wife of *Numi-Torum*, who was cast out of the Upper World for her affair with *Kul'-oter*, is a very active personage in Mansi mythology. Her three-dimensional images are frequently encountered in holy places of various ranks; but most importantly, each home contained sacrificial objects intended as gifts for her; these included scarves, pieces of cloth, beads and other things. If such items were not brought as offerings to a shrine with *Kaltas'-ekwa'*s image, they were taken up to the attic of the house and kept in a special trunk. It was important for people to show some sign of reverence for *Kaltas'-ekwa*; there was no doubt that she would notice peoples' sincerity and accept their gifts favorably.

One must distinguish between the role of *Kalta'h-ekwa* as connected with the *Mos'* moiety (where she appears as a totem in the form of a hare or goose and functions as protector of the people in this group) and her functions in relation to the Mansi as a whole or even to all Ob-Ugrians. In relation to the *Mos'* moiety, who are considered her descendants, she fulfills the typical functions of protector: she rewards people with success in hunting and fishing, gives long life, and so forth.

As far as concerns the role of *Kaltas'* in relation to all Mansi (or all Ob-Ugrians), her obligations are even more important. These obligations are hinted at in the very name of the goddess, which originally meant "one who awakens, gives birth, creates..." She gives aid to pregnant women before and during childbirth; moreover, it is she who determines which deceased relative will be reborn in the form of the newborn child. Finally, *Kaltas'* could guarantee children "a land inaccessible to epidemics and disease" as well as "a smooth path of life".

Of equal importance to *Kaltas'-ekwa* is the Fire Mother (*Naj-s'an', Naj-ekwa*), the sister of *Numi-Torum*. When addressing *Naj-s'an'* people called her "kind mother, seven tongued mother". When bringing her sacrificial offerings they asked for the well-being of children: "...if the baby begins to crawl, don't cast sparks on it! Keep the hearth from smoking!" In honor of the Fire Mother (*Chores naj anki*) the Khanty every year conducted a ceremony with a blood sacrifice. During this ceremony, the Agan Khanty would dover the fire with a large piece of red fabric, which was a gift to the Fire Mother.

Offerings to the fire were made very frequently, since whenever sacrifices were made in honor of other gods and spirits people never forgot *Naj-s'an'*. Whenever people visited any sacred spot they left food and alcoholic drink by the fire. Analogously, food and drink were always left by the hearth whenever a sacrifice was made inside the house.

PERSONAGES OF THE LOWER WORLD

The Mansi tripartite universe requires examination not only of the figures in the pantheon connected with the Upper World, but also of its polar opposite. The image of *Kul'-oter*, ruler of the Lower World, occupies a significant place in Mansi mythology: offerings were made to him and there were sacred places where he figured among the main fetishes or was the only fetish. However, more important to everyday life and religious ritual was the Lower World's *Samsaj-ojka*, or "Invisible Man", whose image (made of cloth) could be found in every Mansi home, a fact that underscores his significance for those who preserve the traditional culture. *Samsaj-ojka*'s place in the home was beside the entry, between the hearth and the wall.

In gratitude for kindness toward the occupants of the house, once each year the Mansi celebrated *purlakhten*, or hospitality feast. People placed an offering consisting of a glass of alcoholic drink, fish and meat on a small table (*man'-pasan*) set by the wall where *Samsaj-ojka*'s image hung. According to some accounts, *Samsaj-ojka* was given this treat every time a deer or other animal was killed. Along with the feast, *Samsaj-ojka* was presented with a specially sewn gown or *arsen* (a piece of new cloth), both of which had to be black.

NOTIONS OF THE SOUL, REINCARNATION

The most widely represented feature of Mansi religious paraphernalia was the *itterma*, or image of the dead. The Mansi typically imagined the reincarnated soul in connection with the *itterma*, an anthropomorphic image of a dead person that served as repository of a soul ready to return to life in the form of a newborn child belonging to the same clan.

Preparing the *itterma* was the duty of the living. Wood chips cut from the sacred wall of the house (the wall opposite the entrance) served as the raw material. The little wooden figure was immediately given a coin, or "bright circle". The deceased for whom an *itterma* was fashioned without this solar sign, which symbolized rebirth, was thought to become a malevolent entity, the *pawel-jorut*. A lock of the dead person's hair was fastened to the figure along with the coin. The Mansi believed that the hair of a living person was the abode of his reincarnated soul.

Thus, the Mansi have an ancestor cult connected with worship of the dead and regard the *itterma* as the abode of the soul before it is reincarnated. The main idea of this cult is society's worship of an individual who has assumed a new state of be-

ing, which is more or less equivalent to achieving the highest position in the social hierarchy of the family (or kin-group) to which the deceased belonged.

However, this is only one aspect of the ancestor cult. Another, equally obligatory manifestation of this cult was the worship of hero ancestors.

The material discussed above attests to the refinement of mythology and the established iconography and functions of personages at various levels of the Mansi pantheon. At the same time, one can find a certain overlap in the spheres of influence occupied by figures of various rank, which corresponds to Mansi social organization and specific details of their ethnogenesis and ethnic history.

USES, CLASSIFICATION AND TERMINOLOGY RELATED TO SACRED COVERS

Mansi sacred covers are called *ulama*. The term *ulam* in Mansi means "clothing", which probably indicates their connection with clothing: both were put onto an animal during Ob-Ugrian religious ceremonies. Modern informants call the covers *jelpen* (Mansi for "sacred, holy") or *jalpen ulama*. A. KANNISTO called this type of cover "the saddle of the person who watches the world", in other words, the saddle of *Mir-susne-khum*, the "Ugric Mithra", borrowed from Iranian mythology.

One of *Mir-susne-khum*'s most important functions is protecting the family. It was considered that the stable existence of the family and home, just like the health of its inhabitants, was directly connected with the presence of a *jalpen ulama*.

Mansi sacrificial items with an image of the *Mir-susne-khum* seated on a horse can be divided into the following categories: rectangular forms composed of four quadrants (parts) with the riders arranged in two rows (Fig. 1); covers with six parts (Fig. 2); covers with seven parts (Fig. 3); ritual belts (rectangular covers with four riders arranged in a row) (Fig. 4); helmets (Fig. 5 a, b); and finally capes (Fig. 6).

Each type of *jalpen ulama* corresponded to a specific stage in the life of a family. After the wedding, the first, four-part cover was sewn; it was called *man'-jalpen, khurum lomt*, meaning "the small *jalpen* in four parts-*lomt*". The next *jalpen ulama*, consisting of six *lomt*, was creating during the family's "midlife". The last was considered the *jany jalpen*, *sat lomt*, or "great *jalpen* of seven parts". Preparation of the *jany jalpen* was connected either with the marriage of an eldest son or was determined by the birth of grandchildren. After the death of the head of a family or the master of the dwelling, no more *jalpen ulama* were created.

Eacht type of *jalpen ulama* was dedicated to a specific figure of the Mansi pantheon: the four-part cover to *Mir-susne-khum* himself, the six-part to *Kul'-oter*; the seven-part to *Kaltas'-ekwa*. These were the main figures in the pantheon, the most important for humans: it was thought that *Kaltas'-ekwa* guarded over births, *Mir-susne-khum* protected the family and each individual person, and *Kul'-oter*, the ruler of the Lower World, had great influence on the length of a given human life. Still, one must bear in mind that no matter who the cover was specifically dedicated to, it

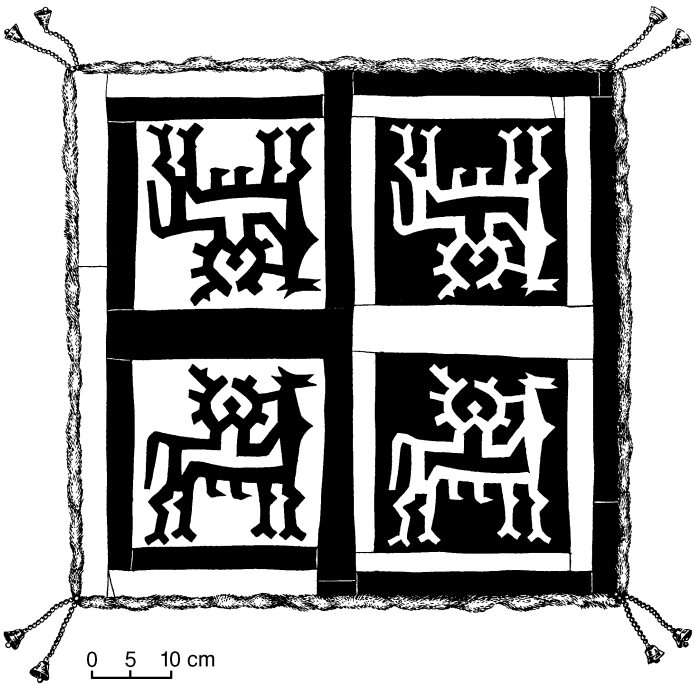


Fig. 1. Sacred cover with four figures of mounted riders made of red and blue cloth and edged with squirrel fur (70 × 70 cm). The Mansi. The end of the 19th century. The Khulimsuunt Village, the Severnaya Sosva r. Kept in the Museum of IAE SB RAS

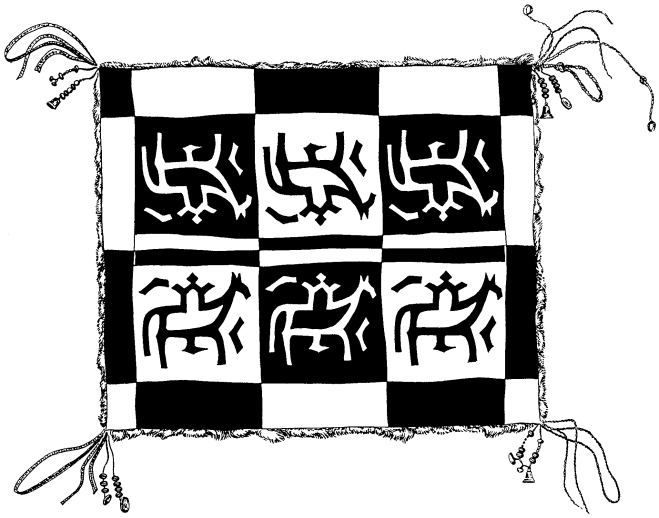


Fig. 2. Sacred cover with six figures of mounted riders made of red and black cloth and edged with sable fur (95 × 105 cm). The Mansi. Second half of the 19th century. The Lombovozh village, the Liapin r.

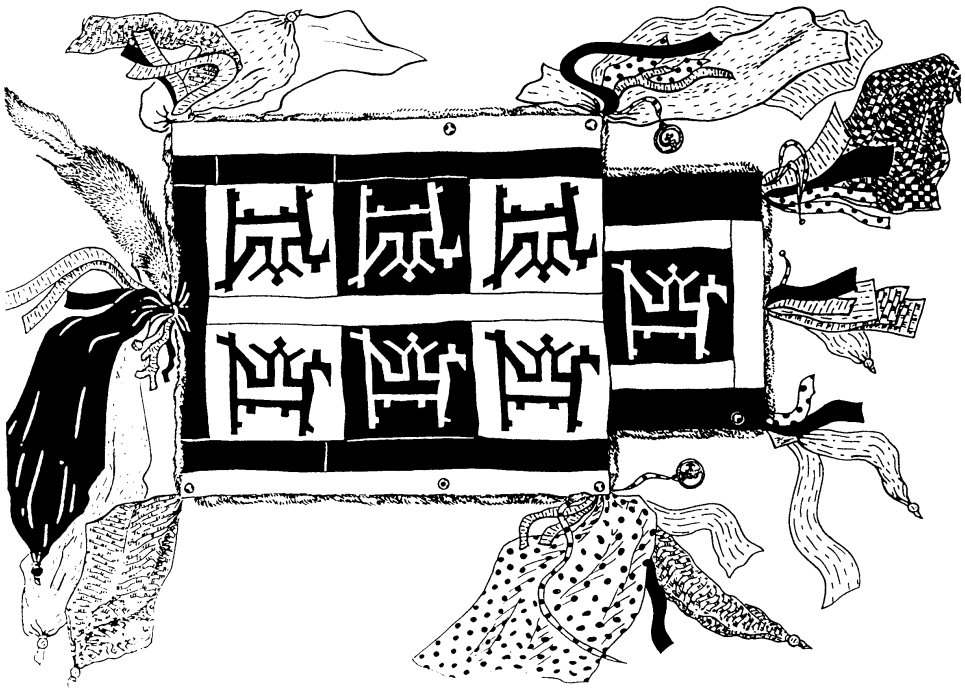


Fig. 3. Sacred cover with seven figures of mounted riders made of red and green felt and edged with squirrel fur (77 × 114 cm). The Mansi. The sixties fo the 20th century. The Khurumpaul Village, the Liapin r. Kept in the Museum of IAE SB RAS

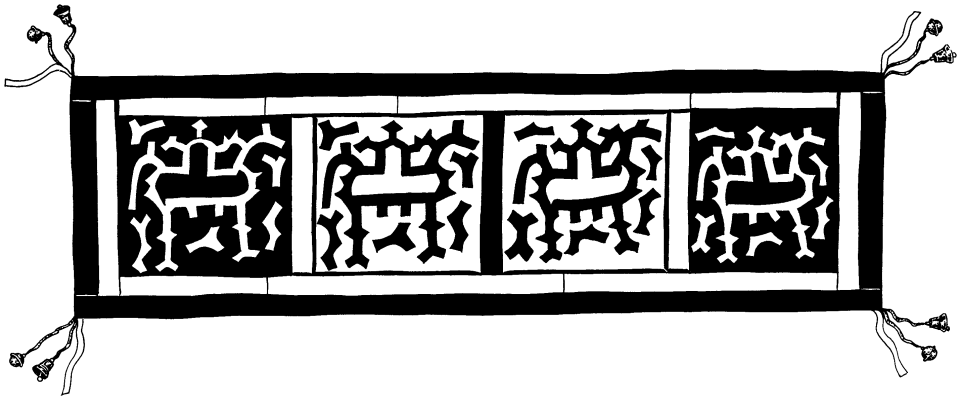
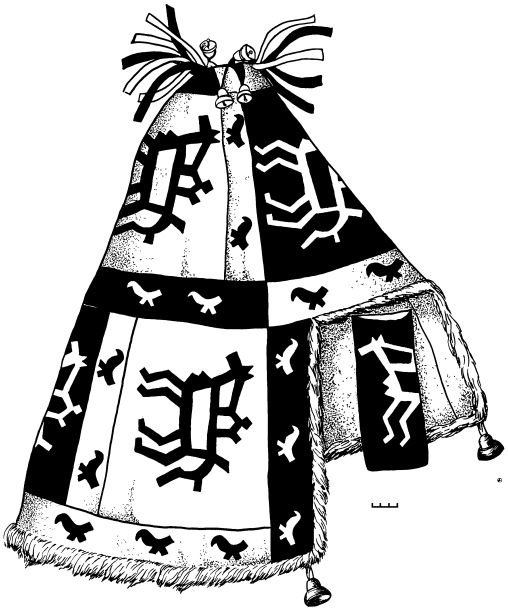


Fig. 4. Sacred cover (belt) with four figures of mounted riders made of red and black cloth (39 × 135 cm). The Mansi. The end of the 19th century. The Shomy Village, the Severnaya Sosva r. Kept in the Khanty-Mansijsk Museum, N 4797

Fig. 5. *a* – Helmet with four figures of mounted riders made of red and black cloth, and edged with squirrel fur (height: 42 cm). The Mansi. The thirties of the 20th century. The Nildino Village, the Severnaya Sosva r. Kept in the Museum of IAE SB RAS



b – Helmet with seven figures of mounted riders made of yellow and blue cloth, and edged with squirrel fur (height: 62 cm). The Mansi. The thirties of the 20th century. The Nildino Village, the Severnaya Sosva r. Kept in the Museum of IAE SB RAS

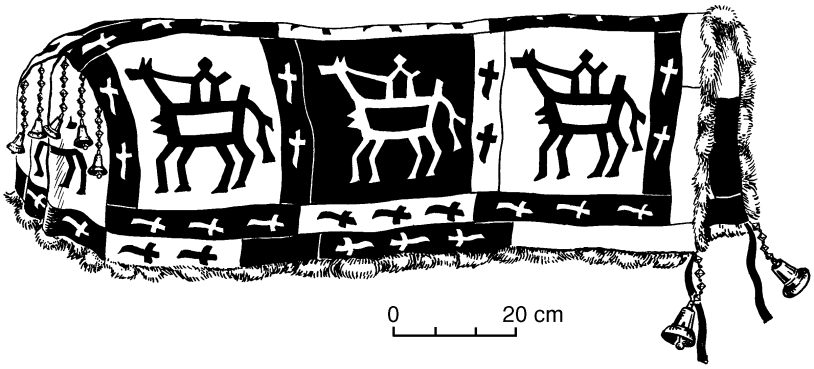


Fig. 6. Ritual cape with seven figures of mounted riders made of red and black cloth, and edged with squirrel fur (70 × 120 cm). The Mansi. The end of the 19th century. The Nildino village, the Severnaya Sosva r. Kept in the Museum of IAE SB RAS

manifested the patronizing function of *Mir-susne-khum*, the only personage depicted on it.

The "heroic" helmet and belt (*entap*) were prepared during the last stage of a man's life, after three *jalpen ulama* had already been made for him.

Sacred covers could be sewn not only in regular connection with specific phases of the life cycle, but also because of some concrete occurrence. A person might dream about a *jalpen ulama* or "hear" its voice in a dream, telling him to prepare one for himself. A *jalpen* was made "whenever old people say it should".

In addition to covers with images of riders, some Ob-Ugrian *jalpen* have been found simply with images of horses (Fig. 7) (only three such examples are known). Among the Khanty covers decorated with bears have been found (Fig. 8).

Sacred covers among the northern groups of Ob-Ugrians have the following general characteristics:

1. This is a flat or three-dimensional item of bicolored cloth sewn together into a mosaic and lined with fur.

2. The mounted figure of *Mir-susne-khum* can be found in several quadrants located on the front.

3. The corners are decorated with narrow strips of cloth, animal fur, or small bells. The canvas is decorated with a fox's tail or cloth strips arranged as a sort of tail.

4. This religious image is used in ceremonies to honor *Mir-susne-khum* as the saddle cloth of the sacrificial animal (horse or reindeer).

5. Sacred covers are prepared and stored to insure well being of the family and home.

The process of making sacred covers was regulated by a series of rules. A cover could only be sewn during the fall and by a woman from another family. The future owner provided her with the necessary cloth, bells, and also fur for the lining. The cutting and sewing took place in the home of the person who ordered the cover. A

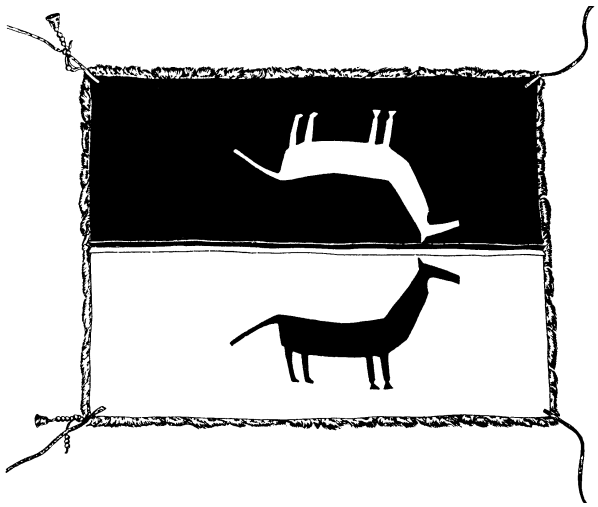


Fig. 7. Sacred cover with two figures of horses made of red and black cloth and edged with fur (62 × 90 cm). The Mansi. The first half of the 19th century. Khozhlog Village, the Liapin r. Kept in the Museum of IAE SB RAS

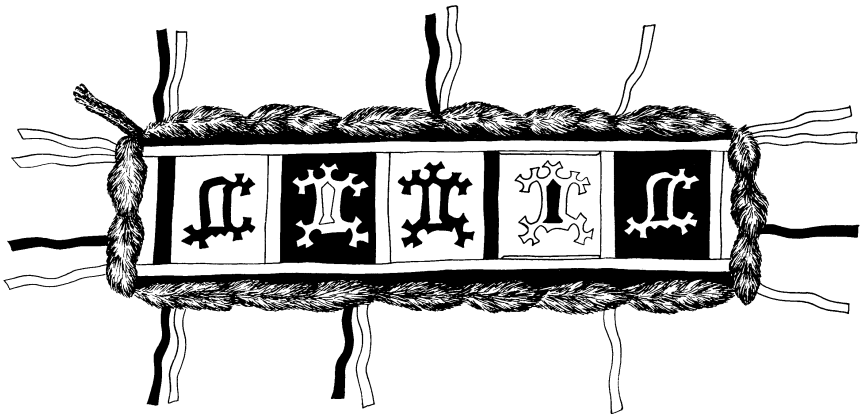


Fig. 8. Sacred cover with figures of a bear and an elk made of red, green and yellow cloth, and edged with fox fur (45 × 126 cm). The Kazymian Khants. The beginning of the 20th century. Kept in the Khanty-Mansijsk Museum, N. 372/97

curtain was drawn to conceal the seamstress from view. One part (quadrant) was to be sewn every day. When the work was done the seamstress was treated with a special meal and always presented with a scarf or some clothing. The preparatory process was as follows: ready-made quadrants of cloth in the two colors being used for the cover were placed on top of each other and the outline of a horse and rider was cut into them. Then each figure was sewn into a quadrant of the opposite color.

Quadrants and riders of alternating colors was a typical characteristic of all covers and originated from the technique of fur mosaic, which was well known to the Ugrians and Nenets.

After finishing the work of sewing the main design, the seamstress decorated the canvas with strips of colored cloth, strings of beads, squirrel, sable or fox pelts, small bells. The remaining scraps of cloth, rather than being discarded, were sewn onto the corners or "tail" of the *jalpen-ulama*. To the corners might also be fastened new scarves or even coins. In a number of cases coins were added between the top layer of the cover and the lining, or sometimes sewn onto the figures of the rider.

According to Mansi tradition, only adult males who owned their own *jalpen-ulama* could see the cover. So that uninitiated didn't accidentally see the forbidden image (which caused immediate retribution from the gods), the front side of the cover was hidden by a piece of cloth or newly bought scarf of the same size sewn over it. During recent decades this rule has not been followed very strictly and many *jalpen-ulama* do not have this final layer. It should be noted that during the 20th century a certain number of covers were made with an underlayer.

STORAGE OF SACRED COVERS AND THEIR ACCESSORIES

Sacred covers were kept inside the dwelling on a sacred shelf or in the attic. In each Mansi dwelling, the left or right corner opposite the entrance was equipped with a *norma*, a shelf used for storing holy family objects. Here stood trunks or cases containing various religious paraphernalia: the figures of household guardian spirits, gift scarves, coins, fox, sable or squirrel pelts, and sacred covers. The trunk contained only the most recently made cover; the others were taken to the attic after each sacrificial ceremony. Covers belonging to dead parents were also stored there. After a death, the destruction of a house or the disappearance of an entire settlement, the corresponding sacred covers could be taken away to the village holy place.

Reasons for storing sacred covers in the attic or on a *pubi-norma*, or "spirit shelf", inside the dwelling involve the question of where ancestors could dwell. The guardian spirits of a settlement were the masters of the sacred ground *jalpen-ma*, that is, a spot free from any human economic activity. That was considered "clean" ground, and guardian spirits could dwell only on such clean ground. Family guardian spirits had no less of a requirement in clean ground. However, the concentration of people and domestic animals in the settlement mean that strangers might accidentally violate the holy ground: children might run across it or animal might wander there, which would cause its purity to disappear. A logical alternative naturally developed: "clean" ground began to be created artificially, using the ceiling or attic space. One variant of the attic was the holy shelf for storing holy family objects. Sacred covers undoubtedly were included here as well, since they either accompanied the images of guardian spirits or carried the image of a protector of even greater rank. Storing sacred covers in a "clean" spot was obligatory.

Fig. 9. Small silver dish. The first half of the 19th century. Kept in the Museum of IAE SB RAS

Sacred covers were usually accompanied by small silver or copper dishes, upon which *Mir-susne-khum*'s steed could place his hooves should he appear during the ceremony (Fig. 9).

RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES WITH SACRED COVERS

Sacrifices to *Mir-susne-khum* were made when a child was born, a marriage celebrated, or a specific time after a funeral, as well as to consecrate a newly made cover. The object of sacrifice could be a horse, deer, or rooster (chicken). A reindeer could serve as a Mansi sacrifice only during the preparation of a *man'-jalpen*; in other cases a horse was required. The most orthodox tradition presupposed the sacrifice of a horse in all cases. It was thought that a red or multicolored horse corresponded to a *man'-jalpen*, a black horse to the six-part cover, while a seven-part cover definitely required a white horse. When a new *jalpen-ulama* was made, a silver or copper dish also had to be sacrificed. A reindeer was killed right in the dwelling, opposite the holy wall (*mul*).

The process of sacrifice was refined in rather great detail. Five ribbons were woven into the horse's mane, and a specially purchased scarf was hung about its neck; the horse was then led in a clockwise direction around the house and tied to a sacrificial post opposite the *mul*. The victim was then "cleansed" by being sprinkled with an alcoholic beverage and annointed with *chaga* (a growth on birch bark) smoke. The horse's back was then decked with the *jalpen-ulama* ("if there was two or three, then all of them were placed on the horse's back"); a silk gown was put over this and last a scarf. Explaining the symbolic meaning of these attributes, informants said that "This means that the hero *Mir-susne-khum* is riding the horse and sitting in

the saddle-*jalpen*, wearing the gown, with a scarf on his head". Right before the killing of the horse, these objects were removed, the horse's eyes were covered with a scrap of cloth, and the horse received a blow from the butt of an ax across the forehead. The fallen animal was stabbed in the heart and then skinned. During all this the *jalpen-ulama* hung on the *mul* outside the dwelling so *Mir-susne-khum* could see the sacrificial victim. Women were not allowed to attend the sacrifice. They were allowed only up to a certain point to clean out the contents of the intestines. The meat was boiled in a cauldron, starting with the heart, liver, lungs and head. As the meat was being eaten the *jalpen-ulama* was placed on the table in the house and a bole of smoking meat and an alcoholic beverage placed in front of it. Afterward the sacred covers, scarves and gowns were taken away to the attic; the horse's hide was also hung there.

Sacred covers were also figured in the bear festival, which was celebrated on the occasion of a successful bear hunt. One of the key moments of the festival was the "arrival" of *Mir-susne-khum*. The dancer who imitated him, wearing a fox pelt, "arrived" on a wooden horse. In a number of instances, the role of the horse was played by a seven-part cape placed upside down on a sabre so that the images of the rider could not be seen by those present. Attendance of hero ancestors was signified by placing on poles enormous helmets decorated with figures of riders and sometimes bears and geese.

Etiquette in ceremonies with sacred covers in honor of *Mir-susne-khum* consisted of the following: the cover had to be placed on the animal then removed before the act of killing; money was traditionally tied to the corners; and after the sacrifice the cover was stored in a "clean" place, the attic; the killing also took place in a "clean" place, outside the dwelling, opposite the holy wall *mul* (if the ritual took place inside, the animal was placed by the wall opposite the entrance); the sacrificial clothing was hung from the back rafters; at the moment when the cover was placed on the animal everyone present uttered prayers; there were a number of taboos for women and children, who were forbidden to come close to the spot where the killing took place or see the *jalpen*'s "face"; the horse with the cover on its back was led around the house in a clockwise direction. Sacrificial animals were primarily horses and reindeer. The role of covering could be played by pieces of white cloth, clothing, scarves, a fox pelt or the cover itself with its rider images. The elements of covering the sacrificial animal were meant to signify the presence of *Mir-susne-khum* at the sacrifice.

GENESIS AND EVOLUTION OF SACRED COVERS

This question is one of the most complex aspects in the study of sacred covers. The cloth towels that form part of museum collections today were, as a rule, made around the beginning of the 20th century. Unfortunately, it must be said that the chances of finding sacred covers from an earlier period no longer exist, a such items could not have stood the test of time.

The material we have collected allow us to make several hypotheses regarding the origin of the tradition of placing covers decorated with the image of a mounted horseman onto the back of an animal to be sacrificed.

Such a tradition may have arisen in the taiga regions of Western Siberia. People there would place the hides of small fur-bearing animals (included foxes) on the back of a reindeer being sacrificed to a local god; in this way they "increased the value" of the sacrifice and also decorated it. A fox pelt was placed along the back of the animal, which later led to the creation of covers in the form of a long rectangle with a lining that included the fur, paws, head and tail of a fox.

Such a tradition could have arisen near the Ob and Irtysh rivers in areas where there was active trading with merchants from Bukhara or other southern cities. During the bear festival people put onto the hide of the dead animal a particularly expensive and rare object: a bright, imported silk scarf, which served as sacrificial gift. The high material and artistic value of these scarves made them for many centuries the most commonly used and appropriate gift for guardian spirits of various ranks. An imported scarf gave the sacred covers the form of a rectangle easily divisible into two or four parts. It is possible that in the course of time the scarf was transformed into a lining for cloth canvases and in a number of cases began to be used for the top surface.

Using a scarf to cover the bear served as an impetus for an analogous covering of a reindeer or horse during sacrifices at the bear festival.

It must be noted that in the 19th and 20th centuries sacrificial scarves were made in the same way as sacrificial covers: the main area of the scarf was lined with a wide strip of cloth of a different color; the most popular color was red; coins, small bells or strings of beads were tied or sewn into the corners. Both types of religious attributes served the same role as covering for a sacrificial animal.

N. LUKINA, a noted scholar of traditional Native Siberian cultures expressed the idea that the origins of sacrificial covers might be found in Khanty reindeer belts. On the Yugan River belts often took the form of an ornamental strip sewn out of reindeer suede using a mosaic technique, or from cloth using an applique design. On the Demyanka River sacred covers were put across the back of an animal (just like the belt of a reindeer harness). To underscore the fact that the Mansi associate sacred covers with family well being, it is extremely interesting to compare with this the tradition among the northern Khanty whereby a mother and daughter make three or four long rectangular ornamental belts for a reindeer harness before the daughter's marriage; often the mother passes on to her children such decorated reindeer harnesses.

Of course, today it is difficult to say with any certainty which animal was the first to be covered by a sacrificial cloth, the bear, reindeer or horse. It is possible that this tradition developed independently in several regions with a horse in the south, a bear in the taiga, and a reindeer in the north. The first sacrificial coverings seem to have been the silk scarf and fox pelt. During later years they influenced one another, which finally led to the formation of a cloth canvas of rectangular form with a fur lining. The main idea of the sacrifice, death for the sake of pros-

perity and new life, led to a predominance of red and black colors in the sacred covers.

The canvases described above are in most cases lined with cloth. In the Khanty variant they are lined with red fox, whereas the Mansi more often used sable or squirrel fur. The fur of a red fox (fox pelt) occupied a significant place in Ob Ugrian religious practice. It was considered that the pelt of a red fox could not be sold but should be sacrificed to the "shaitan", that is, to *Mir-susne-khum*. On the Kazym River, domestically raised foxes were never sold; instead, they were killed and skinned, the pelt being immediately given to the "shaitan"; this custom was seen as a special sacrificial gift used to make the lining for sacred covers. During the sacrifice to *Mir-susne-khum* bundles of fox pelt were placed atop the sacred cover on the back of the sacrificial animal (or a horse was covered with a fox pelt). Their mythological hero *Urt-iki* (the Khanty equivalent of *Mir-susne-khum*) the Khanty sacrificed a hat and belt made of fox fur. The fox sacrificed to *Urt-iki* even had a special name, *ur-woj*, or "hero's beast".

When a girl was married, she took the *ur-woj* from her parents' house and brought it to the holy corner of her husband's home; whenever the newlyweds visited the wife's parents they brought along a fox pelt to let the "hero beasts" of both houses to "visit" also. A fox pelt was likewise essential at the bear festival: the dancer who imitated *Mir-susne-khum* held a fox pelt in his hand, since "*Mir-susne-khum* was as sly as a fox" (a fox pelt was also tied around the dancer's head).

Participants in the seven hero saber dance wore hats made from red fox fur. Fox fur could also be used to make a shaman's hat, and if the shaman didn't have one, he tied the pelt around his head so that the tail hung in the back. The "head" of *Mir-susne-khum* on a sacrificial pole (birch tree) was made from the fur of a sacrificial fox.

Today it is difficult to discover the sources of this connection between red fox and heavenly horseman. It is true that Mansi legends speak of the first Mansi ancestors being six hero *naj-oter*, the youngest of whom was *Tek-ojka*, who had the power of changing into the shape of a red fox.

It was also believed that a man had five souls, *is,* and one of these *is* was the *urt* (here it is easy to see a connection with the northern Khanty deity name *Urt-iki*), a six-legged fox-like entity which left the human body five years before its actual death and which no shaman could bring back. This *urt* was invisible to its host; only other people, and then very rarely, could hear the cry it made whenever the middle paw touched the earth.

It should be said that if a sacred cover was lined with fox fur, it was always red fox fur. This color carried an important meaning: the image of the fox, through the color of its fur, could be connected with fire or sun. It is known that one of the names of *Mir-susne-khum* meant "man giving forth light". In the "Invitation Song to the Person Who Watches the World" he is often compared to the sun: "Lay golden clothing the color of the rising sun across your shoulder! Place on your head a sacred crown, place it on your curls, which are like the golden sun at dawn. Illuminate the Earth with the light of your golden curls, like the rising sun, like a turning hoop. On

your sacred saddle of seven corners place your hand, gilded by the rising sun; o praiseworthy one, let it shine there!".

In this way, the fur of a red fox on the covers could also have emphasized *Mir-susne-khum*'s sunny form.

COVERS WITH BEAR IMAGES

It would appear that in the northern regions of West Siberia covers with bear images preceded those with images of the horse or horse and rider. During the bear festival a reindeer or horse was sacrificed and, just as the hide of the bear itself was covered with scarves or fur pelts, a holy canvas was likewise placed across the back of this sacrificial animal. It is known that a Khanty woman who used even once any ornament connected with the figure of the bear was obliged during her lifetime to use this ornament when making seven other items; violating this rule could bring down grief and misfortune on her clan or family. This might indicate that most of the attributes used during the bear festival had to have a single ready-made design, the image of a bear. This image was found on the gloves of participants, on fur bags or birch-bark containers, on "hero" helmets, and on bone thumb protectors (for bow and arrow). The bear image was also present on sacred covers. When placing the head of the bear on the table as the ceremony was about to commence, the Khanty used the expression *khosa lol'ty*, or "stand on the stars" meaning that the soul of the killed bear had already been taken up into heaven. It is possible that the image of a bear on the sacred cover placed on the back of a reindeer or horse would be carried up into heaven (a least it is known that this is how the Mansi understood the presence on the covers of *Mir-susne-khum*'s figure, since he himself was being carried up to heaven on a horse).

Next in the development of sacred covers came canvases with the image of a horse. Small horse figurines began to be made in the Ural and Ob regions during the early Iron Age and became most widespread during the first millenium AD. In the 19th century the Mansi regularly worshipped the horse image, since they thought that *Mir-susne-khum* rode a horse around the earth every night. The paraphernalia decorating the Khanty shaman's drum included single, three-dimensional figures of a running horse. It is interesting that the Nenets *Yuno nyu* (horse's son), an image equivalent to the Mansi *Mir-susne-khum*, was born in the shape of a foal on the seashore, where his mother, an old mare intended for slaughter, fled to in order to escape her pursuers.

It is known that in cases requiring a blood sacrifice, if a sacrificial animal was lacking, one could be promised to the spirit and in confirmation of the promise a small figure of an animal could be fashioned out of birch bark or metal. The horse was extremely rare in the north, and a temporary replacement may have been its image on a piece of cloth; at least this would provide a plausible explanation for the appearance of an unusual cover from Nil'dino village decorated with the image of a single horse (Fig. 10).

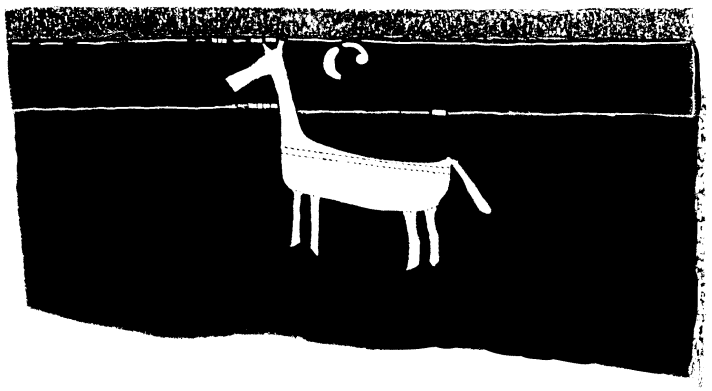


Fig. 10. Sacred cover with a figure of a horse made of red and black cloth (47 × 90 cm). The Mansi. Beginning of the 20th century. Nildino Village, the Severnaya Sosva r. Kept in the Museum of IAE SB RAS

The appearance of two-part covers with horse figures is probably merely a later development. In contemporary religious practice, if there was no sacrificial animal available the cover is laid upon a horizontally placed pole; the two parts of the design allow one image of the horse to be seen from each side (Fig. 7).

Covers with the images of mounted horsemen, in our opinion, represent the latest development in sacred covers. Any religious practice (including one involving a mounted horseman) acquires its own iconography, a collection of accepted decorative techniques for depicting a given image which must be adhcred to. If one examines horseman iconography in decorative metal in the Ob River area, it is obvious that the horseman is very meager: few bronze figures have been discovered, and their influence on the style of horsemen depicted on the covers is limited.

The composition on sacred covers was noticeably influenced by the style of Medieval silver belt buckles depicting falconers made by the Volga Bulgars and later brought to the Ural region along trade routes (Fig. 11). Their influence on the graphic composition of the covers must be kept in mind: the angularity of the rider's head, his pose, the surrounding animals and birds, sun, moon and horn. It is obviously tempting to consider the silver buckles to be the original source for the designs on later sacred covers. However, it seems more logical that by the time hunting scenes appeared in the Ural region the image of the heavenly rider *Mir-susne-khum* had already been thoroughly adopted into the mythology. The local population accepted the buckles with no difficulty; and their designs showing a rider mounted on a horse, along with a bear, elk, fox, goose, sun and moon was recognizable and fit easily into existing concepts and images. But there could not have been any complete borrowing. The status of the rider was considerably higher than that of a bear or elk, and the goose in fact duplicated the central image. The fox also practically disappeared, leaving traces of itself in the form of 'prickles' on the horse's breast or bushy tail. Other images, alien to Ugric society, gradually took on another, more familiar significance. For instance, the falcon was transformed into a whip, the musical horn

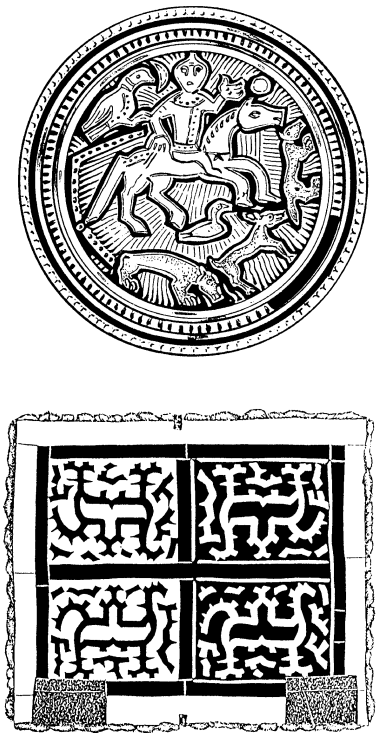


Fig. 11. Medieval silver belt buckle depicting falconers made by the Volga Bulgars and sacred cover

into a horn flask for tobacco. The rider's pose assumed greater variability, and the position of his arms and legs, the attitude of his torso, began to be executed with more variations on later sacred covers.

If we observe more traditional Ob-Ugrian designs, it is possible find certain technical similarities between them and those on sacred covers; these include the grid layout of decorative elements, the use of later material (cloth), and a general formal similarity with typical northern Khanty pillows and sled covers. The covers used for women's sleds employed the same techniques used in making pillows, except that the covers were wider and longer. Such covers were usually made for brides. The mother and daughter would make them together for the daughter's wedding. We can also note a functional connection between holy covers and covers used for a bride's sled, since both were made on the occasion of the creation of a new family.

Sacred covers and pillow also share other points of similarity: the dual repetition of figures, bear images, "underground bucks" and riders. Since most drawings on the pillows go back to earlier stages in the development of Ob-Ugrian ornamental designs, it is possible that the tradition of making the pillows influenced the development of covers with riders arranged in a single row.

The image of the rider occupies a well-known place in Ob-Ugrian folklore. The northern Khanty have several versions of the story about "the man on a horse." The most ancient one is "Upper Irtysh Man," who became so old that he forgot his sacred songs. Then there are "horsemen living today", "Holy Town Man" and "Middle Sosva Man". Finally, it is the youngest and most influential "Upper Ob Man" who rides the horse. All these gods have a claim to the image of the man on the horse. "Upper Irtysh Man" is more often depicted on birch bark, "Holy Town Man" and "Middle Sosva Man" more often on hats. All differ from gods who "seek a victim with male reindeer horns, with male reindeer bones," since they require a horse as sacrificial victim.

HEROIC ATTRIBUTES

The image of *Mir-susne-khum* seated on a horse appears on various paraphernalia associated with sacrifices: on covers (the godly saddle), belts, capes and helmets. The sacredness of these elements of warrior attire also receives confirmation in Ob-Ugric myths. Here are some references to the 'godly saddle' (the cover itself): 'A mother dug a hole in the corner of her house and found a box with seven compartments. She lifted the lid... She took out a decorated saddle of a type never seen by any man, never seen by any woman... He sat in the saddle in the image of a golden duck, in the image of a golden goose' (compare the term *hansang inar*, "decorated saddle"); "Spread upon your horse's back a sacred saddle with seven corners, decorated with seven sacred bells, concealed by your ancestral mother of seven gods. Spread it out, o princely hero! On your sacred saddle with seven corners place your hand, gilded by the rising sun..."; (finally, when speaking of the sacrifice of a colt): "May the animal that rose up to the bright heavens of seven realms receive there a wonderful golden saddle! May he receive a saddle decorated with red!"

These myths give details about a helmet and belt in addition to the saddle: "...on his (*Mir-susne-khum*'s) mother's advice, sent his hat to one place, his gloves to another, and his belt to a third so that these thing would constantly remind people of his existence". The *Mir-susne-khum* invitation song includes the words, "Gird yourself with your belt of seven winged geese, which was put on you by your ancestral mother of seven gods; place upon your head your sacred hat of seven sides, which your father *Torum* gave you!"

One should note the antiquity of the tradition of decorating belts with small bells. According to folkloric data, during the period of armed conflict with the Nenets, the Vakh Khanty fastened pendants to their belts "to make noise and trick the enemy into thinking they were wearing chain armor."

It must be noted that helmets and belts with the image of *Mir-susne-khum* were made in sizes considerably larger than those needed for practical everyday use. The large size of the helmets and hats derives from the fact that *Mir-susne-khum* was considered to be a giant hero (which is why he is often called *sorni oter*, "the golden hero", or simply *oter*). This also explains the gigantic size of the sacrificial gowns and caftans sacrificed to local guardians spirits.

CONCLUSION

The institution of making sacrifices already existed among most peoples of the world in deep antiquity. One special feature of the Mansi sacrificial rite was the important role accorded to sacrificial covers. The figures of a bear or heavenly rider depicted on them emphasized the actual presence of the god at the ritual ceremony. During the past thousand years these images followed a path of development from very simple forms of sacrificial coverings (imported scarves and animal furs) to cloths depicting horses, bears and finally the heavenly rider himself.

The starting point for this development seems to be the Bear Cult among the peoples of the middle and lower Ob River region as well as the Ural area.

During the Bear Festival sacrificial gifts were placed on the hide of a bear killed for this purpose; these were skins of fur-bearing animals and imported scarves, which became not only one of the forms of sacrificial covers but also imparted to later forms the shape of a square divided into two or four parts. In more recent times these covers took on the role of underlining or front covering for cloth covers.

The ceremony of sacrifice, based on the idea of life and death, influenced the predominance of red and black cloth in the composition of sacrificial covers.

The cloth and fur attributes of the Bear Festival were made with the sewn figure of a bear which led to the development of corresponding sacrificial covers.

The custom of covering the sacrificed bear was transferred to a horse or reindeer sacrificed during the holiday. The fox pelt placed on the horses back gave the sacrificial covers a rectangular form and later was represented in cloth artifacts in the form of a fur lining which included the paws, tail and head of the fox. The technique of making covers in the form of long rectangular canvases was also influenced by decorative reindeer belts and pillows.

The tradition of temporarily sacrificing the image of a horse when no real animal was available led to the creation of cloth canvases with depicting horses.

The appearance during the first millenium AD in the Ob area of the concept of a heavenly rider influenced the creation of sacrificial covers with the image of *Mir-susne-khum*. The tradition of depicting a rider on horseback derived from bronze images horseback was influenced by the decorative techniques used for cast bronze images.

Medieval silver buckles from the Volga Bulgars also significantly influenced the composition on sacrificial covers.

The development in Western Siberia of a cult of hero ancestors led to the appearance of rider images on various items of so-called “heroic” clothing, such as helmets, capes and belts. The sacredness of these items was echoed by many Ob-Ugrian myths and legends.

During the 19th and 20th centuries canvases with the image of *Mir-susne-khum*, whose cult replaced that of the bear or horse, became the most widespread forms. The presence of sacrificial covers satisfied the need to keep an image of *Mir-susne-khum* in the dwelling. Rendered sacred by *Mir-susne-khum*’s image, these objects were transformed from traditional coverings used for sacrificial animals into an essential symbol that guaranteed the welfare of family and home.

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