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ROZHLEDY – MATERIÁLY

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**The Ukrainian Folk Painting “Cossack Mamay”
and Cossacks’ Spiritual Practice**

The obstacles to the interpretation of the Ukrainian folk painting “Cossack Mamay” are caused by the researchers’ views of the Cossacks phenomenon, inherited from Soviet historiography. To my mind the main reason for a rather poetic than theoretic explanation of the painting’s essential matter is the fact that post-Soviet historians still do not regard the Ukrainian Cossacks to be a monastic military order with its special religious practice. This problem, as well as the necessity of ruining politically useful stereotypes was emphasized in 1993 by I. Kravchenko, who stated “even primitive logics indicate: if there was knighthood, there were certain rites of passage... There was, there had to be a certain magic act... Because when there is a fraternity, there is a sacrament”.¹

Some attempts to assert the interpretation of Zaporizhian Sich as a special military monastic order are made by Russian scholars, in particular by R. Bagdasarov, whose statements seem unbiased and well argued.² He indicates, “Authors [...] were forced to ignore the fact, that Zaporizhian troops’ main body had military monastic fraternity features, impossible to disregard. The gap mentioned effects the ideas of traditional male societies...”³ The scholar presents Sich as a military-monastic fraternity, an order, though not a copy of Western-European pattern (certainly known to Cossack foremen and elite), but in many ways an original and unique union, with its special mystical religiousness, based on the spiritual practice

¹ КРАВЧЕНКО, І. Є.: *Світ запорозький та його цінності (Замість передмови)*. In: Запорожці. До історії козацької культури. Київ: Мистецтво, 1993, с. 23.

² БАГДАСАРОВ, Р. В.: *Запорожское рыцарство XV–XVIII веков*. In: *Общественные науки и современность*, 1996, № 3.

³ БАГДАСАРОВ, Р. В.: *Запорожское рыцарство XV–XVIII веков*. In: *Общественные науки и современность*, 1996, № 3, с. 113.



Figure 1.

of following the commandments, on “inner doing”, resulting in “the mighty faith of knowing”.

So long as the information on the “secret knowledge” of the Cossacks, as well as that of other monastic military orders, never reached us because of its abstruse hermetic character and lack of documented testimonies, any attempt to disclose Cossack spiritual practice would be based on indirect evidence, such as reminiscences of foreigners, Ukrainian folklore and art.

The paradigm of present analysis is Lotman’s semiological theory, which states that a painting is a text with an inner structure. The availability of constant forms in such text characterizes it as a sacred one or as one-time sacred, which eventually lost its original significance due to time and too much popularity.⁴ All the researchers of the matter emphasize the constant character of the symbols in Ukrainian folk painting “Cossack Mamay”. Their permanent significance, central image (full-face, constant pose, clothes), and available attributes (their number and features), as well as the unchanging plot through the ages, indicate the canonical type of the paintings.

⁴ ЛОТМАН, Ю. М.: *Текст и функция*. In: Лотман, Ю. М. Статьи по семиотике искусства. Санкт-Петербург: Академический проект, 2002.

As Zaporizhian Cossacks were a monastic military order, “the language” of the paintings that represented a member of such fraternity had to be fideistic – put into sacred code and each of the depicted symbols had to have high semiotic status.

The tree in the composition, due to its symbolic character, indicates special time and space, because such a tree, according to folk beliefs, grows in the center of the world, in the sacred space, in the most sacred place in time and space, where and when the creation act took place “at the very beginning”. The special significance of the sacred tree for the mythological thought is the belief that it presents a link between the universe (macrocosm) and the human being (microcosm) and is the point where they cross. The tree depicted in the paintings is “the tree of the center”, because the image is intensified by the images of the tumulus and the spear, driven into the ground at a right angle, which are transformations of the sacred tree and indicate the center of the universe as well – the tumulus as an equivalent of the sacred mountain and the spear as the “axis mundi”, the axis of the world.

Certain parallels could be found in the iconography of the Saka twin belt plate (fifth century B. C.) from “The Siberian collection” of Peter the Great [← Figure 1]. The detailed analysis of its composition and the comparison of its iconography with those fragments of Scythian-Saka Weltanschauung known (its cosmological picture of the world in particular), provided by D. Raevsky, allowed the scholar to state that the tree, depicted on the belt plate is the cosmic sacred tree of Indo-Iranian, in particular of Scythian-Saka mythology, and its belonging to the “upper” world is emphasized by marking the tree with hanging armor.⁵

The whole horizontal succession of elements at the tree is believed to form a ritual scene. The Slavic ritual usage of a tree is verified by a stone relief of the rock temple (second – seventeenth centuries A. D.) at Busha, Vinnytsia region, Ukraine [Figure 2 →]. Historians and archeologists state that it certainly correlates with some mythological conception.⁶ There is an outline of a big leafless tree carved in it, on the branches of which a cock is sitting. A human knelt under the tree and raised a chalice. The researchers emphasize the similarity between this figure and the sculptured landmarks of the Chernyahiv culture of Southern Ukraine (second-fifth centuries A. D.). There is a deer carved behind the human with his head towards the tree. A rectangular frame is at the top central part of the image next to a tree branch, and that frame “might have had a pagan significance. It could be a symbol of a sown field”.⁷ The report on the excavations at the temple site shows evidence (a bay with the remains of the Chernyahiv, medieval and ancient Rus ceramics) of the courtyard in front of the relief being used as a pagan altar from the first centuries

⁵ РАЕВСКИЙ, Д. С.: *Мир скифской культуры*. Москва: Языки славянских культур, 2006, с. 496.

⁶ *Отчёт об археологических исследованиях в с. Буша Ямпольского района Винницкой области*. Каменец-Подольский, 1988, с. 13.

⁷ *Отчёт об археологических исследованиях в с. Буша Ямпольского района Винницкой области*. Каменец-Подольский, 1988, с. 14.



Figure 2.

A. D. to the Middle Ages. The relief might depict an act of sacrifice intended to gain fertility, the human being a priest, who was in charge of everyday magic-religious affairs.⁸ In such case a tree acquires a top semiotic status as an indication of the center, the place where the worlds cross, the threshold, and therefore the best place for an altar.

A big number of facts give an opportunity to reconstruct two horizontal axes in the structure of the sacred tree. That is a horizontal plane, which is determined by two coordinates: from the left to the right and from the front to the back. So, if we “read” the plot depicted on most variants of the painting “Cossack Mamay” following these instructions, a certain succession of symbols reveals itself from the left to the right: the tree – the main character – the spear – the horse, and from the front to the back: the attributes (the sword, the chalice and the carafe, the powder-flask, the bow and arrows, the gun, the coat of arms, the bandore (a musical instrument), the pipe, the food, the hat) – the main character – the spear – the horse – the horizon

⁸ ХАРИТОНОВА, В.: *Заговорно-заклинательное искусство восточных славян. Этнологические исследования по шаманству и иным традиционным верованиям и практикам*. Ч. 1. Москва: ИЭА РАН, 1999, с. 182.



Figure 3.

(steppe) – the sky (full moon or sunset) [Figure 3 ↑, Figure 4 →]. This succession is very much alike the action order in the episode of Odin's initiation into the secret knowledge. Some features of the tree of cognition are peculiar to the tree in which Odin, the patron of military unions and martial initiations, the god-wizard hang to cognize the runes. He sacrificed himself by piercing the body through with his own spear and hang in the sacred tree Yggdrasil for nine days; thereafter he drank



Figure 4.

the sacred honey (“the honey of poetry”). At that time the secret knowledge of the runes was revealed to him. “Yggdrasil” means “the horse of Ygg”, which is “the horse of Odin”, because Odin tied up his horse to this special tree for all the nine days of the initiation. Thus the conjunction of the tree, the horse, the spear and the chalice marks some magical, spiritual practices, rites of passage, followed by the revelation of sacred knowledge.

The tree depicted has features of “the tree of cognition” or “the Bodhi-tree” or “the tree of paradise”, those variants of the sacred tree, which determine the process of distinguishing the essence for the purpose of achieving integrity and perfection. One of the most fundamental mythologems, relevant to the theme, is the one which states that there is a certain treasure, material or spiritual, which has its own guard. Such motif will appear in the further analysis of symbols of the painting. The main mythical character has to find the treasure, bring it to light and cognize it. A similar archetypal scheme in a transmuted form can be found in some texts, which explain



Figure 5.

the meditation techniques, where the images of a tree, a serpent, an eagle, a combat of celestial and earthly powers are transformed into the context of spiritual evolution and deliverance. That is an essential detail for analyzing the significance of folk painting “Cossack Mamay”, because the main character is depicted in a meditative pose.

The tree in the composition of “Cossack Mamay” has some features of a tree of fulfilled wishes (“the wishing tree” of fairy-tales), variants of which can be often found in Slavic tales. A person who stands under such a tree and makes a wish by speaking it out or thinking about it gets the wish fulfilled. This tree can grow in a different world, judge the main characters, serve as a passage to fairylands, or give magic power. The tree in the paintings might have wish fulfilling function, because some of the paintings’ variants have an inscription: “There’s a Cossack sitting, playing his cobza [Ukrainian musical instrument], whatever he thinks of he receives” [← Figure 5].

The Christian tradition gave the sacred tree an allegoric interpretation. The Cross of Christ made of the tree of life from the Garden of Eden became a substitute of the cosmic tree. The Orthodox liturgy on the Holy Cross day praises it as “the tree of life, planted at the place of Execution”, as a tree, which “arose from the earthly depths and stands now in the center of the universe and sanctifies the whole of it”. A lot of patristic and liturgy texts associate the Cross with stairs, a pole or a mountain (James), with the images which indicate the mythological center of the universe.

Many researchers determine the relation between the composition of “Cossack Mamay” and that of Iranian medieval miniatures.⁹ The protagonist of eschatological imagery in Iranian medieval iconography was an image of the gardener, who looked after the garden.¹⁰ His permanent presence reminded people of a transient and cunning fate. In Iranian culture the process of gardening symbolizes an improvement of one’s inner self, of the garden, which is hidden in every person, the gardener being a guard of such a hidden treasure. Such comparison exposes a deep layer of beliefs, which correspond with Middle Eastern Gnosticism and early Christian sources in particular. There is a traditional triad for Christian world later adopted by Muslims: the tree of life – Adam (the prime ancestor) – the gardener; this triad remained popular in the art of medieval Iran. Very similar beliefs can be easily found in Persian folklore. They originate from mythological imagery, which conjoins tightly the three significant elements: the prime ancestor (a sage old man, a king) – the tree of life (the tree of cognition) – the gardener. Medieval Iranian iconography is based on an eschatological motif

⁹ БЛІЦЬКИЙ, П. О.: «Козак-Мамай» — українська народна картина. Львів: вид-во Львівського університету, 196011; ШЕРОЦКИЙ, К.: Живописное убранство украинского дома в его прошлом и настоящем. In: Искусство в Южной России. Київ, 1913, № 6, с. 71.

¹⁰ ШУКУРОВ, Ш.: Искусство средневекового Ирана. Формирование принципов изобразительности. Москва: Наука, 1989, с. 225.

of “nostalgia for the paradise”, which is combined with the traditional view on the correlation between the elements of the mythological triad (the tree – the prime ancestor – the gardener).

A tree (an oak-tree) in the paintings “Cossack Mamay” determines the place, the time and the space of the depicted subject and in conjunction with the mountain, the spear and the central figure¹¹ characterizes the space as a center of a concentrical world model, which is visually noticeable – the outline of the central image fits a circle in the vertical plane of the composition, and the objects, which lay on the ground next to the Cossack, in many variants of the painting form a circle in the horizontal plane of the picture.

A mountain is the most widespread variant of the cosmic tree. It’s remarkable, that in those mythological traditions, which have a developed image of the sacred or cosmic mountain, the sacred tree plays a minor role or is completely absent; though in numerous cases these symbols coexist. An example of the latter can be easily found both in Ukrainian folklore and in the imagery of the paintings “Cossack Mamay”. A mountain or a hill is a sort of mythological celestial gate, the threshold. The main character of eastern Slavic fairy tales often performs his initiation feat at a place which has all the attributes of the center of the world – a tree, usually an oak, a pole with a horse tied up to it, and a mountain.¹²

The motif of a mountain as a hiding-place for material or spiritual treasures, which have their own mythical guard is also widespread. There are a lot of legends dedicated to charmed Cossack material treasures, hidden in the tumuli. They cannot be touched until the time of the treasure runs out, and the violation of the place and the spell may cause blindness, madness or death. Such treasures often have their guards, which are Zaporizhian Cossacks who grew old under the ground while guarding the treasure and trying to find a replacement by using different tricks.¹³ The guards can also be stone landmark sculptures of the deities, which are called “mamays” or “baba (the lady)” in folk tradition. Frequently the legends tell about a treasure being hidden right underneath such a sculpture. But a treasure is not always of a material kind. Often enough a person who follows certain instructions, such as to bring three hems of soil to the tumulus each Easter night for three or seven years or to carry water in one’s mouth from a river and to water the entire grave until the third rooster crows, that person will “know something special”,¹⁴ which means he will attain the secret knowledge of the buried wizard. The numbers are symbolic; the sacred time is used (Easter night, until the third

¹¹ The central figure (the image of the Cossack) by its’ name correlates with the “altar” stone of the spells, with the ancient steppe sculptures, which could have functioned as an altar and in Ukrainian folklore were named “the Mamays”.

¹² ИВАНОВ, В. В., ТОПОРОВ, В. Н.: *Исследования в области славянских древностей. Лексические и фразеологические вопросы реконструкции текстов.* Москва, 1974, сс. 12–15.

¹³ *Савур-могила. Легенди і перекази Нижньої Наддніпрянини.* Київ: Дніпро, 1990, с. 144.

¹⁴ *Савур-могила. Легенди і перекази Нижньої Наддніпрянини.* Київ: Дніпро, 1990, с. 118.

rooster crows etc.), the time when chthonic powers become active and fight cosmic powers. That is the best time to attain secret knowledge. It is important to point out that time in the paintings “Cossack Mamay” is always determined: it’s midnight (a full moon), twilight or sunset, which is the time when all chthonic powers arise, the boundary between the worlds becomes obscure, thus it is the best time to gain secret knowledge. So, the motif of a sacred time in conjunction with material or spiritual treasure and its supernaturally gifted or chthonic guard reappears.

The image of a mountain gains extra meaning in Ukrainian folk art due to its close relation with the image of tumulus; they correlate so closely that become virtually identical in their sacredness and functions.

A mythical *horse* performs “a break through the level”, a passage from one world to another, that is why it is so often used in some types of male initiation. There are numerous folk (“the bylines”) and annalistic testimonies to the ritual of “putting in the saddle” as an element of a martial initiation in Kyiv Rus (Balushok). An image of a horse as a mediator between the worlds is widespread in the entire Eastern Slavic folklore in plots, which reflect the ancient initiation rites.¹⁵

Thus a horse in traditional world models of some nations (in Indo-European mythology in particular) has common to the cosmic tree functions of mediating between the three worlds; a horse is also an attribute of a number of deities, epic heroes and prime ancestors; it exercises conspicuous burial and apotropaic functions; sometimes it is equipped with oracular and divinatory powers and in some religious ecstatic practices symbolizes the separation of the soul from the body.

The vertical image of *a spear* can be interpreted as an analogue of the Axis of the world and of the cosmic tree. This aspect was emphasized in burial rites of Indo-Europeans, in which a spear was driven into a tumulus at right angle etc. A spear is also an attribute of deities, epic heroes and the prime ancestor. The motif of the conjunction of a spear with a tree is of some interest to our quest as well. In Scandinavian mythology a spear has subsidiary functions in the episode of Odin’s initiation in the cosmic tree; the god pierces his own body with a spear while hanging in a tree. The biblical scene of Christ’s Crucifixion also involves a spear, by which the one on the Cross was pierced through; and the allegorical relation between the Cross and the cosmic tree has already been mentioned.

A spear is often engaged in the legends about Cossack charms as one of the instruments used in magic acts. It seems especially interesting that in such legends a spear is often used in conjunction with a horse, a tumulus and a tree. Here are some extracts from two narratives. The first one is called “The way Zaporizhian Cossacks charmed” and it tells the following. “Sometimes Cossacks trespass Tatar land. They tie their horses to tree roots, draw their spears into a tumulus and fall

¹⁵ ПРОПП, В. Я.: *Исторические корни волшебной сказки*. Изд. 2-е. Ленинград, 1986, сс. 69–90

asleep. The horde waits till night comes and sneaks up to them, reaches the tumulus and all of a sudden a very dense forest arises in front of them”.¹⁶ The second legend tells a different story. “Zaporizhian Cossacks were wizards. For instance, if they want to relax in the middle of a wild steppe, they put their horses tail to tail, draw spears between them and start playing cards. Suddenly the Poles appear. They reach Cossacks, but pass them, because they see an illusion of an oak ravine...”¹⁷

All the above-stated facts lead to the conclusion that a constant conjunction of such symbols as a spear – a horse – a tree form a certain imagery in Ukrainian folklore. This imagery in narratives forms a description of a magic act. If such a conjunction of images exercises a magic function in narratives, it might as well illustrate some spiritual, magic-religious practice when engaged in folk art.

The Ukrainian folk painting “Cossack Mamay” can be a desacralized piece of art, bearing its apotropaic function, which presents a mythical prime-ancestor, a warrior-charmer (“Cossack-characterneck” [magician]), or a certain instruction to Cossack spiritual practices, made of symbols, understood only by those initiated. The paintings could have been widely used only among Zaporizhian Cossack neophytes, passing their first stages of spiritual initiation. This would explain the fact, that the oldest samples known and wide spread are dated by the seventeenth century, though at that time they already have had a constant canonical form. If such images were an illustration, a training appliance for spiritual exercising, than they had been spread among the consecrated Cossacks and only the loss of information on their essential meaning and allegoric code, thus for some reason the loss of their hermetic character could have caused the wide popularization of the painting among profanes. Perhaps, the reason for this lies in the mighty influx of fugitive serfs in the order during the War of Liberation led by Bohdan Khmelnytsky in the seventeenth century. It is quite possible that at that particular time the leak of hermetic information occurred; the simplicity and lapidary character of composition conjoined with the Cossacks’ special supernatural talents, by which they were endued in folk beliefs, favored the vast popularization of the image among all sections of Ukrainian society as a private folk icon, bearing its apotropaic function till nowadays.

The iconographic parallels to the Ukrainian folk painting “Cossack Mamay” are found in Indian, Iranian, thus in Buddhistic and Scythian imagery, in Celtic, Scandinavian, Slavic and Turkic mythologies. All those traditions mentioned are of Indo-European genesis, except for the Turkic one, which could have inherited the image from Sakas, culturally related to the Scythians. Thus a certain invariant of a prime-ancestor, a patron of warriors and priests, a guard of spiritual treasures and a gardener of the divine garden could have existed.

¹⁶ *Савур-могила. Легенди і перекази Нижньої Наддніпряниці*. Київ: Дніпро, 1990, с. 61.

¹⁷ *Савур-могила. Легенди і перекази Нижньої Наддніпряниці*. Київ: Дніпро, 1990, с. 61.

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