

# The Birth of Myth

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*The author discusses the parallel concepts of the mythological texts and images, using selected examples mainly from Inner and Central Asia. Discussed are the typological parallels: hill, tree, woman. The research has proven distant typological similarities and mythological universalia.*

## 1. Introductory notes

According to the latest research on human memory and the related brain processes, experiences are broken into small units and these parts of information are in turn stored up in different sections of the brain (Pinker, 1997, Mithen 2006). Human culture as an information storage mechanism is similar to human memory in that it has a capacity for the safe transfer of memory. What I mean by this is that the texts which a culture creates are stored by this culture not merely in a single medium but in many simultaneous “languages” or code systems. All cultures are characterised by an easily traceable multilinguality (multicodality) in other words the same message is formulated in various different ways by the members of the community. Thus, for example, beside narrating it in a myth, they also act out the subject matter in the form of a rite or express it in a graphic form in a rock drawing or on the shaman’s drum. Such safety measures ensure that texts which are important for the culture might survive, at least in fragments, through centuries or even millennia in a practically unaltered form.

In the present paper we shall make an attempt at the parallel analysis of image and text, using selected examples in which the visual and the verbal are centred around the same theme. The reason for doing this is that we believe that in myth research in general, and in various co-operative mythological explorations in particular, only a parallel and synchronic analytic description of various cultural codes can lead to authentic results.

The explanation for this conviction is that in a culturally cohesive community the same *belief system* (Hoppál, 2000:39-60) is operative behind the cosmology which is concealed in the mythological text as well as behind the visual representations, sculptures, structures, edifices or other representations. The myths and representations serving as the subject of the present analysis were selected in such a manner that they should mutually illuminate each other, since one of the most difficult questions in mythological research is precisely this - what is the actual *meaning* of the mythical text in hand, that these narratives speak about amidst their mysterious poeticism? The corresponding problem presented by pictorial (or other visual) ‘texts’ is that they are only very rarely accompanied

by commentaries. Thus it was necessary to utilise pictorial texts which lend themselves to easy and unambiguous deciphering.

In the parallel analysis of pictures and texts, two alternatives offer themselves. If we use the first, the picture and the verbal text belong to the same culture (mythology), while according to the second method we choose the examples from different cultures. However strange it might seem, it is true that elements drawn from the same culture are less likely to be illuminative of each other's origins or the meaning of these origins. The reason for this is simply that on the level of today's language usage (or, more precisely sign-use) the elements are identical even though some fossilised 'archaic elements' use an earlier language in terms of its genuine meaning and contain a rich meaning-content in this medium. To give but one example: the sign X is interpreted today as the letter x or as tipped-up cross, but in earlier ages it used to be seen as the sign used against witches, possessing the power of keeping evil at bay.

Thus it would seem to make sense to match those elements of culture which might be called mythological and which indubitably retain a more archaic system of language and sign usage with parallels from other cultures where the entire system of the culture has been arrested, for historical and social (or perhaps geographic) reasons, at that same archaic degree of development or stage at which it was at the time of data collection.

Naturally, the above line of argument does not exclude the possibility that even within one culture there might be mutually explanatory elements or that profound and efficacious analysis might be carried out within one and the same text. Yet in the following attempts at ascertaining the original meaning or the initial notion (image) at the root of some myths from the region of the Altaic mountains, we chose the second, more difficult approach.

It is a common difficulty in folklore research in general, and in the area of the research of popular belief in particular, that the collector, and later the researching scholar in charge of writing the commentary comes face to face with a text (e.g. a myth) without any further explanatory material or note to aid his or her understanding. Researchers on field work have often had the experience that even their most tricky and craftily formulated questions aiming to probe into the covert meaning of the text receive no usable answer from persons who had in fact related, used or even perhaps understood the text but were unable to explain it.

By selecting texts and pictorial material from Inner and Central Asia, our aim was to analyse texts which are indubitably the last products of a 'mythological consciousness.'

Within comparative mythological research we distinguish between 'genetic' and 'typological' examinations (Ivanov, 1974). The easiest way to grasp the difference between the two methods is by saying that while genetic comparative research concentrates on the syntactic aspect of the connections between elements, the typological approach focuses on the semantic aspect, analysing the shared characteristics and universal content of phenomena of the same type. The former means the examination of closer ties and the latter of more distant connections.

An interesting method which seems to unite the advantages of the last two is the phenomenological approach to religion. One of the most significant followers of this method was Mircea Eliade (1963) whose work might be best characterised by saying that his approach involves in its scope of examination all phenomena that might be called 'religious', whether they are texts, rites or representations. The aim of the examination is

twofold, (1) to define the meaning of a religious phenomenon for the given community, (2) to develop an apparatus of scientific description which enables us to talk about general features in various religious systems on the basis of the analysis and comparison of similar data, without taking into account questions of historical detail such as, for example, direct cultural contact. The article also points out that another difference between the phenomenological and the comparative method is that the former does not aim at the explanation of the phenomenon but only wishes to provide its description (Reno, 1977: 76-71).

The method followed by us in this paper is similar to phenomenology but, surpassing it, tries to go beyond description and attempts to unfold the meaning of the general, recurring features, and thus can be considered more as typology.

The structuralist or even semiotic methods of describing and analysing mythical texts which has been developed in the past few decades (cf. Lévi-Strauss, 1976) has produced a number of excellent works which uncovered the internal structure of mythical thinking. This method has been almost exclusively reserved for the analysis of verbal texts. It is not suitable for the analysis of pictures, in other words visual texts. At the same time, linguistically based text theory has also made significant advances in the last few decades (cf. Petőfi, 1974, 1991) and it would be untoward to leave these results out of consideration.

A text linguistic theory whose roots lie in logic and semantics enables us to filter out identical propositions from various mythical fragments, while structural analysis had only allowed the comparison of larger coherent structures. An even more recent development is the appearance of a visual textual theory (cf. Horányi 1977) which considers the theory of verbal texts as its model so far as its foundations and the exactitude of its structure are concerned. In the course of our analysis we shall make use of the results of the last two theories, in the hope that between different cultures and codes a comparative typological mythological analysis is possible and may be methodologically grounded.

## 2. Myths and beliefs

It is worthwhile starting the analysis of a system of mythological inter-relations by the presentation of a reference myth (*myth de référence* - Lévi-Strauss 1976).

For this purpose we have chosen a work by the 14th century Persian historian Alad Din Juvaini 'Ata-Malik Juvaini who had visited Mongolia on a number of occasions and whose descriptions are our sources for several interesting details of the campaigns of Ghengis Khan (Juvaini, 1997). In Chapter 7 of his work he talks about the origins of the origin of the Uygurs, as it is according to 'their own beliefs' (Boyle, 1958: 53-61) and says that he will include whatever he finds in the books of the Uygurs about their religion and beliefs. He does not treat them as reality - he recognises legends in the narratives of his own contemporaries, people of the late 1200's.

The Uygurs hold that their nation began its life and growth on the banks of the river Orkhon whose source is a mountain, the Black Rock (Qara Qorum) - the Khan had a city built there which was named after the name of the hill.

Among the ruins of this city Juvaini found stones bearing etched writing which he deciphered and on which he found the following narrative:

*"In that age two of the rivers of Qara-Qorum, one called the Tughla and the other the Selenge, flowed together in a place called Qamlanchu; and close together*

between these two rivers there stood two trees the one they call *qusuq*, which is a tree shaped like a pine (*nāzh*), whose leaves in winter resemble those of a cypress and whose fruit is like a pignon (*chilghūza*) both in shape and taste; the other they call *toz*. Between the two trees there arose a great mound, and a light descended on it from the sky; and day by day the mound grew greater. On seeing this strange sight, the Uighur tribes were filled with astonishment; and respectfully and humbly they approached the mound: they heard sweet and pleasant sounds like singing. And every night a light shone to a distance of thirty paces around that until just as with pregnant women at the time of their delivery, a door opened and inside there were five separate tent-like cells [41] in each of which sat a man-child: opposite the mouth of each child hung a tube which furnished milk as required; while above the tent was extended a net of silver. The chiefs of the tribe came to view this marvel and in reverence bowed the knee of fealty. When the wind blew upon the children they gathered strength and began to move about. At length they came forth from the cells and were confided to nurses, while the people performed all the ceremonies of service and honour. As soon as they weaned and were able to speak they inquired concerning their parents, and the people pointed to those two trees. They approached the trees and made such obeisance as dutiful children make to their parents; they also showed respect and honour to the ground in which the trees grew. The trees then broke into speech and said: 'Good children, adorned with the noblest virtues, have ever trodden this path, observing their duty to their parents. May your lives be long, and your names endure for ever!' All the tribes of that region came to view the children and showed them the honours due to the sons of kings; and as they left gave each boy a name: the eldest they called *Sonqur Tegin*, the second *Qotur Tegin*, the third *Tükel Tegin*, the fourth *Or Tegin* and the fifth *Buqu Tegin*.

After considering these strange matters the people agreed that they must make one of the children their leader and their king; for they were, they said, sent by God Almighty. They found *Buqu Khan* to be superior to the other children in beauty of features and strength of mind and judgement; moreover he knew all the tongues and writings of the different peoples.

Another interesting example is the next one which shows the wide-spread recurrence of a few elements and connections of elements within the belief system which serves as the foundation for a mythology.

The following is a detail from a Yakut *olongo*, - in this heroic song, which was widely known among the Turkic peoples of Southern Siberia, the images of the hillock and the tree-god-mother is expressed in graphic lines of description.

I.

*Walking in an Easterly direction...  
on a meadow trembling in blue vapours  
there shines a mighty, age-old tree.  
The roots run through the underworld  
the peak breaks through nine heavens...*

*Walking in a Southerly direction...  
on top of a peaked hillock,  
maidens in floating veils  
close-bound and whispering,  
there stand the silver birches.*

*He cleaned himself in the blue sea  
and wearing radiant garments  
he bowed to the sun three bows.  
A world-tree in the middle of his garden:  
he went there full in dignity  
like a man of good rank.  
Under the tree he sank on his knees*

*and bowed himself three times.  
Turning up his cap  
and pushing it askew, he cried out:  
'Oh divine goddess of my principal tree,  
ancient goddess mother of my land,  
sole nourisher of my forsaken life!'  
(Köhalmi ed. 1973: 134)*

II.

*After this the age-old world-tree  
creaking and crackling  
began to shrink and shrink.  
Appearing from its roots  
with hair as white as snow  
a body in all the pheasant's colours  
and two large breasts  
an ancient goddess mother  
rose and cried out, saying.*

*Having thus spoken, the goddess  
drew from the depth of its roots  
the water of life everlasting,  
filling it into skins she handed them over:  
'Tie them under your left arm,  
for they shall aid you in mortal danger!'  
Having said this,  
creaking and crackling  
she grew and grew rising  
into a tree tall and mighty.  
(Köhalmi 1973: 136)*

*The powers above have ruled  
from the three heavens that after thy birth  
thou shalt descend on earth  
to beget a nation  
to be the forerunner of men.  
(Köhalmi ed. 1973: 135)*

In a much-quoted locus of Uno Holmberg-Harva's book on world-trees (1922: 57) the opening images of the above quoted heroic epic give a graphic description of the abode of the first man on earth. "Above the immense and immobile depth/ *in the middle of the world/ on the navel of the earth/* in the place of the most complete silence/ where eternal summer rules/ and the song of the cuckoo is forever heard/ that is where the Only Man was born.' Some translations refer to the hero as the White Youth who sees a hillock in the distance in the middle of a field on which a giant tree stood, the top of which reached the sky.

In another work, that on the religion of the Altaic peoples, he devotes a separate chapter to describing the imagery related to the world tree and quotes a text collected by W. Radloff who lists the different variants of Altaic legends focusing only on their barest essence. 'On the navel of the earth, in the middle of all things there grows the largest tree on Earth, a great pine. Its peak reaches the home of Bai-Ülgön, the chief god. Representations of this can be seen on shamans' drums, with the sun on one side and the moon on the other side of the tree. The tree itself stands on a hill or an earth-navel which is pictured after the image of a hill. Some legends state expressly that it stands on top of the hill, thus for example according to the narrative of the Tartars of Abakan an iron hill stands in the middle of the earth with a birch tree with seven branches on its top. According to the Mongolian legend the world hill is a blunt pyramid, and the world tree stands in the middle of a quadrangular hilltop. From the top of hill the earth looks the size of a horse's hoof,

and if a stone the size of an ox is dropped, it reaches the earth in fifty years' time, worn to the size of a lamb. Because of this height some myths state that it is in heaven.' (Harva, 1938: 69).

G. U. Ergis was an exceptionally talented figure in the research of Yakut folklore. His main area of interest was oral tradition and he wrote a whole series of monographs about it until his death in 1968. He described the folk lore of his own people in a monograph which was published posthumously - in its section on *mythology* he writes that the spirit of the earth is identified with a female spiritual being who lives in *birch trees* that have grown enormous and for this reason these trees are never felled (Ergis, 1974: 118).

A few lines from the following song for welcoming the new year which comes from the Tartars of Shor or Kuznetsk may also be associated with this set of beliefs.

<i>Our enormous Hill-mother!</i>	<i>six trees open</i>
<i>Rich birch with golden leaves</i>	<i>on the golden mountain</i>
<i>and six spreading roots!</i>	<i>The old year going</i>
.	<i>the new year coming</i>
.	<i>raising my hands I say my prayers</i>
<i>The beginning of the year turning...</i>	<i>Spreading my arms I scatter blessings</i>
<i>the enormous mountain shook</i>	.
<i>the enormous tree heaved up</i>	.
.	<i>To the mountain standing steadfast</i>
.	<i>to the river ceaselessly running</i>
<i>Golden sequins falling</i>	<i>we cast our sacrifice!</i>
<i>off golden hillsides,</i>	(Kõhalmi ed. 1973:69)

In her notes Katalin Kõhalmi notes that among the Shor the 'Rich birch with golden leaves and six spreading roots' is the embodiment of the life tree or world tree of the tribe. (Kõhalmi ed. 1973: 367). We might well have chosen these data for a starting point for our parallel analyses, but let us first revoke some opinions and data which might explain the contents of our reference myth.

'The cult of the holy hills was known, according to L. P. Potapov in the Western part of Central Asia, in Mongolia and Tibet as well. In his study which mainly contains texts collected by himself, he mostly describes data recorded among Altaic Turks. He came to the conclusion, that according to his observations all tribes had their own dynastic hill which they revered as a relative, an ancestor of the tribe and considered holy' (Potapov, 1946: 147 and 153).

Talking of the mother-goddess cult of the Siberian peoples, O. Nahodil says, with reference to the prestigious Russian scholar: 'Traces of the mother-cult may be found up to this day in the hill-cult of the Altaic peoples. This cult is actually a tribal cult which had preceded shamanism and contained a whole set of prohibitions for the female members of the tribe or clan in harmony with the strict rules of exogamy. They envisaged the dynastic (tribal) hill in the shape of human-shaped domestic spirits - according to Potapov's data these spiritual creatures were usually pictured as young naked women or girls, usually with conspicuously large breasts. These superhuman female spirits of the hills often came to tempt young men who were out hunting alone, and in return for their amorous services rewarded them with rich prey.' (Nahodil, 1968: 463).

### 3. Textual elements

One of the crucial problems related to the examination of myths is the analysis of the given text, the definition of its components. Although the determination of the returning elements of texts as the building blocks of the text has been a regularly recurring problem in textual folk lore research for several decades, there always emerges the problem that earlier definitions are invariably found to be insufficient, hazy and, in the final balance, useless. Research is just now returning in the Soviet Union to the re-definition of the notion of *motif*, particularly with regard to folk tales (E. M. Meletensky and his circle). The re-issuing of V. Y. Propp's *Morphology of Folk Tales* has given new impetus to narrative research and the introduction of the concept of *function* has been found fruitful. CL. Lévi-Strauss used the phrase *mytheme* to denote the 'large basic elements' or 'larger components' (1972: 74, originally 1956). Even this French myth scholar, who had reached the highest level of abstraction, omitted to describe with scientific exactitude the mechanism with which he operates in describing myths - he compares himself instead to a street vendor 'who wants to explain the workings of his little gadget to his gaping customers in as few words as possible' (ibid 77).

The linguistic ideas that had served as a basis for the formulation of Lévi-Strauss's theory, indubitably provided the structural analysis of myths with a unified foundation but linguistic research has made unparalleled progress since that time (Petőfi, 1974). The event within this progress which most directly concerned myth analysis, and within that, textual folk lore research, was the emergence of what is called *textual theory* and which was grounded with unparalleled methodological circumspection. (See Petőfi 1991; Hoppál 2000: 21-38.)

A myth is a text which builds up a special *world* or, using the terms of textual theory, a *possible world* which manifests itself in the text is a mass of *propositions*. Thus when we analyse folklore texts, we need to describe as fully and exhaustively as possible the totality of objects that compose this world and the web of relations that obtain among them. This becomes possible with the help of propositions in the sense in which the phrase is used in logic. (for further elaborations of semiotic text theory see Dressler ed. 1978, Burghardt-Hölker eds. 1979).

Thus *proposition* is going to be the key concept which is to gain a principal role in the analysis of texts, and thus of mythical texts as well. Beside this, the statement whereby propositions are the carriers of information which may be considered a unit from the point of view of the text, also stands in complete harmony with the ideas of logically-semantically based textual theory. Thus when we talk about the transfer of folk lore text or other 'cultural information,' or, plainly seeking, of tradition, then we are re-evoking propositions stored in logical terms from the memory of the individual (say the singer or the story-teller) or the collective memory of the community or, more romantically, 'the people.'

The concept of proposition is defined in text theory as 'the shared contents of statements, judgements, promises, wishes and commands which are possible or probable... This is to mean that a proposition has an *indifferent content* which may be related, stated, promised, wished and commanded, asked and answered, which may be possible or probable.... Thus e.g. the phrase *Peter is going* may be considered a proposition (Petőfi, 1974: 9) which naturally also has a formal representation. We shall use essential *propositions* as a representational form of the immanent content of myths which we find plausible and

readable and we shall seek to identify them in the texts which we quoted as our point of departure. We shall consider those of them relevant for our text and our further comparative analyses which appear repeatedly (in an almost unaltered form over and over again). The technique of isolating the propositions as an analytic process has been successfully tried on over fifty texts in 1977 in a seminar analysing the legends of *táltos* (shaman) belief, thus we are not going to transcribe all the texts here but include instead only the results, in other words the propositions which are to be found in the texts which we used as examples.

**Juvaini**

(two)	trees <i>stood</i> (between two rivers)
	hill rose (between two trees)
	hill grew (pregnant woman's belly grows)
	hill opens
	sons are born (from the caves of the hill)
	sons ask around (after their parents)
	sons revere (their parents)
	sons revere (trees)

**Yakut heroic song**

(age-old)	tree <i>shines</i> (in the field)
	birches stand (on top of the hill)
(world-)	tree stands (in the middle of the garden)
	hero reveres (tree)
	tree changes (into woman)
	('an ancient goddess mother with two large breasts')
(tree=woman)	talks
woman	changes (into tree)

Since our texts are not included in the original language but in translation (even, *horribile dictu*, poetic translation), there is no point in giving a precise formal linguistic analysis of the text. This predicament in fact applies to the greater part of myth texts - on most occasions they are not available to the analysing scholar in their original form but only in abstracts. These 'condensed texts' must naturally contain all the essential propositions of the original text (cf. Van Dijk 1975 and Petőfi 1974). Indeed they do, which is why we are still able to accept even the sketchiest textual abstracts as a myth.

It is worthwhile reminding ourselves here of the conclusions drawn by two Soviet researchers, according to which poetry and myth are sharply opposed to each other (Lotman – Uspensky, 1973) mainly in the way in which they utilise linguistic devices. And, let us add, in the way in which linguistic techniques may be applied to them. In this case I mean that while, for example, a myth, similarly to an academic lecture, will survive the process of becoming condensed and compressed into an abstract, this procedure is lethal for poetry and the same may more or less be declared of the process of translation.

Condensing the contents of our texts, the essential 'message' of the original myth noted down by the 13th century Persian historian was that the hill which had emerged

amidst miraculous circumstances began to grow and gave birth to sons. The growth of the hill is expressly compared by the writer of the text with the condition of pregnant women. Using our concepts that we borrowed from literary theory we might say that this is a simile but later on we shall see that it is more than a mere metaphor. Although born from the hill that rose between the two trees, the sons revered the trees as their parents. Just like the hero of the Yakut olongho who sinks on his knees at the 'feet' of the enormous tree-ancient-goddess-mother who speaks to him in human language.

In both cases the basic proposition states the identity of the tree and the childbearing woman/mother.

The other data contains a series of supplementary information which adds colour to the story. An informal description of further such propositions might be drawn up as follows:

*the navel of the earth is in the middle of the world*  
*on top of the world hill stands an enormous tree*  
*the largest tree (which reaches the sky) grows on the navel of the earth*  
*the world hill is the middle of the world*  
*the tree which stands on the world hill reaches the sky*  
*a birch tree stands on the middle-of-the-world tree*  
*the birch is a sacred tree*  
*a female spirit being lives in the birch tree*  
*the birch is the holy tree of the tribe*  
*the hill is referred to as a mother*  
*the hill is a sacred place for the tribe*

Or in an even more simplified version:

(world)	middle =	navel		
		navel =	hill	
	middle	=	hill	
			hill (on top) + tree	= sky
		navel +	tree	= sky
	middle +		hill + (birch) tree	
			(birch) tree =	sacred
			(birch) tree =	
	woman		(birch) tree =	tribe
			hill =	woman
			hill =	tribe

By writing the identical elements of the propositions beneath each other we have made it clearly apparent that in the variants of a myth circle the elements form clearly circumscribed groups. Furthermore, we have seen that it is possible to establish certain connective relations between the elements. The rules which describe these ensure that the myth in question is 'well-formed.' And although not all the elements are to be found in each myth, yet in the case of examining a satisfactory number of myths it is possible to reconstruct a series of elements which is likely to contain all the propositions which were necessary and adequate in the creation of the later variants and all the fragmented texts.

(Naturally, the cluster of elements of a myth or, more precisely a system of myths is delimited by the number of texts which are available in the course of the analysis!)

We may compile (not in a logical but in a natural linguistic form) the supposed series of elements of our initial myth (which has never in actuality been as complete as this):

in the middle of the world/earth there is a mountain/hill on the top/peak of which there grows a birch/tree, this tree/or the hill itself shows female qualities.

We have seen that the elements are not to be found in this complete form in the individual texts, but with the help of our technique of analysis the full, or relatively full, line of elements may be reconstructed. The hill which grows on the navel/centre point is identified with the tree which together, as a unit, are identified on the level of mythical narrative and mythical consciousness with the mother of the entire tribe, the life giving woman.

Similar recognitions regarding individual details have been made by earlier research, 'in the original form of myth the world tree must have been a contingent part of the world mountain, a complementary of the image of the world mountain. The two themes of world mountain and world tree, were usually merged ... a great deal of material in support of this has been gathered by Uno Harva,' writes Ferenc Vámos (1943:36-57, cf. also Harva, 1922). We may consider it a confirmation of our own method when we find that research in the phenomenology of religion (or other methods of research) yields the same results (Reno, 1977).

At any rate it is potentially possible to point out further and more remote connections of the world-mountain/world-tree set of myths and at the same time it is possible to ascertain that this image or proposition was the central one from the point of view of the totality of this myth set - this was the central organising notion which arranged the other images around itself.

To mention but a few examples: the world mountain is doubtlessly in connection with the creation of the world, it is, as it were, a device of it. At the root of the world tree (or in other cases life tree) there is always a lake of milk (water of immortality). Yet a further area of interest may be the sun and the moon which are on either side of the world tree (Golan, 1991).

If we wish to reconstruct the total web of elements of a mythological system we need to make a whole line of extremely condensed myth abstracts similar to those displayed above - and even then we have only concentrated on verbal texts. A counter-test of this sort of textual reconstruction may be seen if we find, either in the same culture or in different loci, pictorial representations of a similar nature. It is this kind of representation that we sought and found.

#### **4. Image - sign - language**

There is absolutely no novelty in the statement that in all cultures pictorial representations play the role of signs and thus mediate information similarly to speech - this is not an archaic sign of culture but a living reality to this day.

Researchers of visual communication, but particularly those who work on the analysis of visual works of art from various cultures come up against the fundamental question as to what are the criteria which visual communication needs to answer in order to be effective or successful. Do such criteria alter from culture to culture or are there recognisable universal marks?

What seems definite at any rate is that successful visual communication needs to fulfil the following three basic criteria:

The system must contain

1. the cluster of (signifier) elements,
2. the cluster of meanings related to the elements developed by the cultural tradition,
3. the rules governing the interconnection of these elements (i.e. the cluster of rules).

(Layton 1975: 1).

It is particularly important for us to understand the concept of 'the meaning of the picture.' Visual textual theory offers a number of possibilities at the present stage of research. One of these interprets the meaning of the picture as some sort of a 'cultural unit' and 'instead of personal contingency, sees it in relation to a given group, community or culture' (Horányi 1977: 52-53). Although the approach advocated by the Italian Umberto Eco is not entirely free of problems, it is doubtless that cultural information is stored in units of this kind, such as, e.g. the *world tree*, *world mountain* that reaches the sky or (in Finnish mythology) '*sampo*' or (in Vogul mythology) *Mir-sunse-Xum* (the world-surveyor man) or, to take our examples from a lower level, units like witches, shamans, or dragons. Finally, we may even leave the area of mythology and think of the extremely different meanings that common notions like horse, cow, deer or dog carry in different cultures. Such cultural units may be characterised by one or more lines of propositions, in other words we describe their use in the given culture with the propositions that may be associated with them. Let us look at the example of *dog*:

- (1) an animal whose meat is eaten on festive occasions
- (2) an animal which is cut in half on the occasion of swearing an oath
- (3) an animal whose main role is in carrying heavy burdens
- (4) an animal whose meat is under the strictest dietary prohibition ... etc.

But let us return to the sphere of myths and cite as our point of departure a few lines from Ferenc Vámos's excellent book in which he stated many years ago that comparative research can utilise pictorial representations produced in several various 'languages' (sic!). 'There are representations of the type of myth, the legend and story, and there are pictorial representations. The last mode of representation works in the medium of drawing while the former uses words in which to describe or relate its meaning. Pictures speak a different language to words. But in terms of content there is either a full or a partial overlap. Thus we can read from a drawing and seek the correlative in the verbally related picture and vice versa' (Vámos, 1943: 11-12).

There exist representations, from the Altaic region, of trees standing on hills that show a connection with the world-tree representation of other Siberian nations which are obvious on more than the mere level of the compositional (Plate VII, figure 2.) - one already proven connection is with the Avar bone pot found at Mokrin (Plate VI, figure 2.). Beside the co-occurrence of the signs of hill and tree, it is also possible to find instances of the visual co-occurrence of the signs of navel and tree.

Since 19th and 20th century 'folk art' material yielded no such examples, we surveyed the 'art work' of earlier centuries. Two Russian scholars, V. M. Masson and V. I.

Sariadini excavated two early bronze age urban settlements in the early 1960's. The graves contained a large number of small female idols (Altin-depe, from the Namazga V. period, cca. 2000 BC), which had the distinctive characteristic that beside the accentuated indication of their female traits, they displayed a stylised tree (or plant) placed about the navel area (Plates I and II). According to the two Soviet archaeologists the female statues symbolise the *mother-goddess* or the *goddess of vegetation* (according to them, the plant-like or tree-like symbol is probably an embodiment of 'the spirit of cereals' - Masson-Sariadini 1972: 136 and 1973: 207). The different types of these idols show clearly (Plate II) that by the concomitant use, the interscription, of the signs of *woman* and *plant* the creators of the statuettes meant to circumscribe in that long-bygone, most definitely myth-creating era, the concept of *fertility* and *motherhood*. (This is why these idols also include the masculine traits - contrary to the statement of the two archaeologist researchers, these are in no way male statues!)

If we go back in time another few centuries and move in a South-Western direction in space, we find further, very descriptive data to confirm the joint occurrence of the ensemble of propositions that we isolated from the text, such as the representation of woman as a receiving vessel, the identification of the hill and the tree (Plate III, figure 1 - pottery from Kis city dating back to 2400-2300 B.C., cf. Müller-Karpe 1968: Tafel 200). The tree that grows out of the navel of the 'naked goddess' found in Northern Iran takes these traces back to the third millennium B. C. (Plate IV figure 5).

The golden breast-pins coming from Ras Shamra provide further evidence of the concrete historical process through which the motif of plant in general or, more precisely, a stem of flower growing out of a 'pot' (Plate IV). An other *typological* parallel for this sort of identification of woman and flower can be found in a depiction which appears on a carpet found in the famous burial mound at Pazirik. Here we see a seated female figure holding in her hand, as an indispensable female attribute, a life tree with flowers (tulips?) (Rudenko 1960: 299, figure 152. Plate VII, figure 1).

The pictorial representations of ancient cultures also provide plenty of examples of the close mythological association of hill and tree (Plates V-VII). Particularly valuable of these are the representation, to be found on the rims of some of the Sasnida silver plates, of hills with triple flower-stems sprouting out of them for no apparent reason (cf. the silver plate from Klimova, Fodor 1973: 39, figure 7, Plate V, figure 3). Indeed, this is the point where we may turn to the question which we have heretofore not explained satisfactorily, namely: what was the reason for the cultural elements of navel (as centre), hill or hill-ock and a growing plant (or tree) to appear through centuries in such close interrelation, as mutually paradigmatic of each other, mutually interchangeable and complementary, as a meaning of something. The phenomenologist of religion we have already quoted a number of times was correct in ascertaining that 'in the depth of most religious symbols there is usually some sort of a natural foundation' (Reno, 1977: 77). In the case of the mythical texts and pictures which we are examining, the natural 'event' is completely obvious - pregnancy, the growing of the abdomen (the navel-hill), and when the time for this is over, a new branch of the dynasty starts to develop similarly to the plant sprouting from the seed. And since only women can grow a new life, this is why mythical consciousness associated her with the plant which yields fruit, the tree which grows a branch.

Throughout the past millennia humankind has had plenty of time to observe the surrounding natural world and within that its closest natural environment - the human

body itself. Mary Douglas is right in ascertaining at the beginning of her excellent book *Natural Symbols* that the human body and its structure are, exactly because they always have been, of fundamental importance in the development of man's symbolic behaviour forms (Douglas, 1970: VII). The same may be said of the forms of mythical thinking and textual construction. Thus we may take literally the 'simile' of the pregnant woman with which the Persian historian Juvaini interjected the origin myth of the Uyгур - it is not an explanation of the myth but the meaning of the mythical image itself.

We are talking about such general human, natural signs which lead to the emergence of identical symbol systems in distant and different mythologies and cultures – these mythological universalia are linked by typological similarity. This is how the work of an orthodox psychoanalytic author becomes interesting to us: a work which he devotes to the description of the various forms in which the ancient mother goddess appears.

A separate chapter is devoted to the 'woman of plants,' in which he quotes Egyptian, Hindu and Scandinavian examples for the mythological identification of woman and tree (Neumann, 1972: 240-267). At the beginning of the book the author presents an extremely interesting summary of the symbol system related to 'woman.' Although he places 'vessels' of a female shape in the centre of his system, as a central symbol (see Plate III), this is a good starting point from which to unfold the other symbols such as abdomen » hill » pillar » tree (for this, see a great number of further data in the following articles: Ivanov 1974 and Toporov 1971).

This is a true 'natural symbol' and at the same time a human 'universal' since the navel is the natural centre of the human body as we can clearly see in Leonardo da Vinci's drawing. Earlier research (Berze Nagy, 1961) has described a great deal about the connections of the above elements but we do not find an example of such a *natural* interpretation. They correctly recognised the identity between the hill which is the middle of the world, the life tree, the world pillar, and the Pole Star, but nobody inquired into the initial image which lay at the root of all these. The small female clay idols of Central Asia have made it clear to us what exactly was the notional germ which gave rise to this circle of myths.

## 5. Concluding notes

As we can see from the above, our interest was mainly in the origin of the mythological thought, in this case of a particular image: that of hill/tree/woman. Further research into distant typological parallels and mythological universalia will probably enable us to analyse motifs from recent folklore material which are still unintelligible at the moment. (E.g. Erdélyi, 1976: 182 - 'The tree that was born from the sky, born from the earth.' Ibid. 242 - 'I looked up to the sky and there I saw a golden tree.' Ibid. 248 - 'Garden of Paradise, in the middle a golden boughed...')

In spite of our disclaimer of the examination of genetic connections, we must admit that at one point myth casts a light on history. Beside indicating the state of consciousness of a given society it also becomes its communal memory. Folklore texts, among them the texts of myths, are what computer science calls the 'long term memory' of their culture, with the help of which it can repeat/revise from time to time its past, the history of things, of the world, of its own people - i.e. pre-historic history. It is myth that mediates between the two.

This is the reason why the examination of myths and mythological systems can be used in an indirect fashion to draw conclusions regarding prehistoric events.

An excellent example of this is the essay by Gyula László in which he writes about the ancient religion of the horse-breeding peoples of the age of migrations, and draws a most plausible picture of the cosmology of the Avar on the basis of an analysis of a bone pot found in the village of Mokrin in Banat, then in Yugoslavia (Plate VII, figure 1). One chapter is devoted to describing the origin and the sphere of existence of the image system of 'life-tree and ancient mother goddess.' He points out that 'in the earlier phase the life tree used to be not a tree but a woman, the mother of all life,' and that the joint manifestations of the navel of the earth (omphalos), the world mountain and the tree of life may be found in the entire Inner Asian cultural sphere. It is worth quoting here a statement which completely squares with our earlier dry and formal analyses, according to which, 'knowing the way in which images tend to accumulate in myths, it is not difficult to understand the merging of the notions of world-mountain, navel of the earth and earth mother' (László, 1977: 152). László, who is an archaeologist also at home in the field of popular belief systems, here introduces the image of the deer-shaped ancient mother into the paradigmatic sequence and clearly recognises that the cult of this figure, interacting with the set of customs and beliefs related to tree worship, has penetrated the consciousness of Eurasian man in a most complex and manifold fashion. The more elementary an image is, the closer it is related to anthropomorphic universalia, to the omnipresent phenomena, the more powerful it is to become and 'this fact makes it understandable that an image, once embodied, will survive ages and changes with incredible perseverance' (László, 1977: 151). We believe that the pictures presented serve as a good illustration to these lucid and well-presented ideas.

At other points in his work László refers with a great deal of certainty to the direction of cultural influence in Siberia when he points out that 'it is obvious that the notion of the life-giving tree migrated from the South to Siberia and there into the *taiga* there to undergo the transformations which follow from the already existing tradition. The idea that the tree of life is the source and sustainer of all things has survived in many places. ... The notion of the world tree is often associated or united by the Altaic peoples with the notion of the navel of the world (omphalos) and the world mountain' (László 1974: 101, also Eliade 1972: 266).

Indeed, the idols of Southern Turkmenistan and the female statuette excavated in Iran, together with some Mesopotamian representations, offer us further parallels with this set of ideas.

Following the tracks of comparative mythological research it is also possible to introduce here the data of ancient Iranian mythology. In the most recent and thorough summary of related research, Mary Boyce gives a description of the Zoroastrian teachings and the cosmogonic ideas of the mythology. This is followed by quotations from original texts which reveal that the notion of the enormous mountain which reached the sky was also known in ancient Iranian mythology, 'around its peak circled the sun, the moon and the stars (Yašts 12.25, 5th c. BC). This enormous mountain stands in the middle of the world, it is the highest point of the world and it is through this that the souls of the dead move up to heaven. Talking of the fourth phase of creation, the old Zoroastrian hymns talk of the creation of the plants, stating that at the foot (base) of the enormous mountain sprouted the source of all plant life, 'the plant (the original phrase being *urvar*) which was imagined in the shape of an enormous tree, the 'tree of all growth', 'the all-healing tree' (Boyce, 1975: 135-138).

It is remarkable that this set of notions and myths has ramifications and parallels even further South. In an excellent monograph G. S. Kirk has drawn attention to an interesting connection between the Sumeric sky-goddess Inanna, also the goddess of love and fertility, and the tree, which occurs in the Shukalletuda myth (Kirk, 1971: 103-115, particularly 108).

We must note here that the 'tree of all growth' or 'tree of all seeds' which occurs in Zoroastrian 'mythology' (although it would be more correct to say 'teachings'), has already been compared with the Scandinavian notion of *Ygg-drasill* and the *Irmingsul*, world pillar, mentioned by Saxo Grammaticus – "quod Latinae dicitur universalis columna." (This phrase is probably the origin of the phrase 'world tree' which is generally used in related literature and which never occurs in this form in the original texts.) This is thus the source of all Iranian tree-cult (Boyce, 1975: 143).

The phrase 'life-tree' has become widely used in a similar fashion - this, too, is a technical term of myth description and analysis, i.e. a term of the metalanguage, but not one of the myths themselves. Géza Komoróczy has also critically analysed and shown the fact that life-tree as a phrase in a text cannot be found anywhere in the Sumeric cuneiform texts. Analysing the pictorial representations, however, he has pointed out that in the depictions seen on surviving early objects 'tree is a fertility symbol.' Fertility is often depicted in all areas of mythology as an ensemble of plants and animals.

'It is without doubt,' continues Komoróczy, 'that the Mesopotamian tree symbol can be brought in connection with the trees that stand in the middle of the Biblical garden of Eden. ... But we are also acquainted with another line of the afterlife of the Mesopotamian tree symbol. Similarly to many other symbols, the tree of fertility became transferred to Iran in the last phase of Mesopotamian culture in the first millennium B.C. as an ornamental element' (Komoróczy, 1976: 571). We believe that the pictorial material here presented proves convincingly that the last statement requires correction.

What we see here is far more than a mere ornament. Mircea Eliade was correct when, in the late 1940's, he pointed out that the symbolic representations of the 'sacred' were often identical with that of the concepts 'height,' 'highness,' or 'middle.' Indeed, he drew a great part of his data from various Siberian mythological traditions. It is a most wide-spread belief amidst the Uralic-Altaic peoples that the 'world pillar' touches the sky in its very middle, at the Pole Star. For these peoples the world pillar, the shaman's ladder, the sacred tree of the sacrificial groves were all represented by the birch tree (Eliade, 1963: 106). This tree is a kind of mythical mediator just as, according to Lévi-Strauss, the sacred tree had a mediating role between heaven and earth.

Particularly interesting are the French myth scholar's explanations regarding hallucinogenic mushrooms. Some researchers believe this type of mushroom (the deadly amanita or death cap, *Amanita muscaria*) to be identical with the sacred plant of vedic mythology, the *haoma* (or *soma*) which gives eternal life. This mushroom often grows at the roots of birch trees which, as numerous examples prove, have been revered by the peoples of Eurasia as one the forms of the life tree (Lévi-Strauss, 1976:231). The elixir of eternal life and the tall tree both mediate between life and death, as immortality is neither life nor death but a sort of liminal state, a 'connecting bridge' which Edmund Leach considers so vital in the description of mythological notions (Leach, 1976: 71).

We have not included all areas of the set of myths related to trees, thus for example we have omitted a discussion of the possibility that the tree may be seen as a masculine

principle as well as a feminine one (just as the sun and the moon bear female attributes in some mythologies and male marks in others). We have not included the elements of custom related to the may-tree which is a typical fertility symbol throughout Europe. It is still worth noting a warning from Russian myth research, according to which ‘The concept of the *invariant* which becomes preserved through all the transformations of the given type is becoming increasingly productive in European research. It is not merely preserved: the invariant itself is determined by the totality of the transformations. In its examinations of myths, epics, tales and custom-related texts in a broader sense, folk lore research will find this approach important because with the help of this concept (the invariant which remains constant through transformations) it becomes possible *firstly* to reconstruct the scheme which lies at the base of all the texts pertaining to the type in question, *secondly*, the scheme thus reconstructed will obtain the rules for the unfolding and enrichment through which the text developed to its fullness and, *thirdly*, on the basis of the totality and sequentiality of the transformations it is possible to make important observations regarding the developmental phases of the texts in hand and of the other sign systems which may be detected in them’ (Ivanov-Toporov, 1975: 44).

## 6. A note on iconicity in myths

According to one of the classic formulations of semiotics, we distinguish three main types of sign, *index*, *icon* and *symbol*. The last of these three is the type which is most often referred to in connection with myths, mythology and particular mythological types.

The attitude which found its peak in the classicist period is well known to interpret the figures of Greek mythology, and myths in general, as allegories, as though each of the gods stood as a symbol for something, be it an abstract concept or a natural phenomenon (like lightning). In this approach the scholar is viewing the myth from a distance, from the outside, in fact from the vantage point of a different and alien culture and thence points out that ‘myth is actually a history of beliefs which, however, contains a symbolic meaning beyond its everyday meaning. Mythology is a system of myths which vindicates the rank of an ideology. It is in this sense that we may consider mythology (i. e. the system of myths) as a symbolic form’ (Voigt, 1976:565, see for further elaborations Voigt 1999: 76-91).

In opposition to this, Yu. M. Lotman and B. S. Uspensky warn us that ‘in myth there is no room for synonyms, allegories, metaphors or symbols.’ What we may conclude now is that the type of sign most frequently used in mythology is, using the terms of Peircean semiotics, not symbolic but *iconic*. ‘Mythological thinking has encouraged the emergence of the capacities of identification, analogy and equivalence. Thus, for example, the representation of archaic consciousness constructed a typically mythical model in which the *universe*, society and the *human body* are positioned as isomorphic worlds. (This isomorphism only extends to establishing the relationships of similarity between the various planets, minerals, plants and the social functions and parts of the human body! A peculiarity of mythological thinking is that the identification of the isomorphic units takes place on the level of the objects themselves’ (Lotman-Uspensky 1977: 224).

What we have in fact seen in the above examples is that the characteristic of mythological thinking is that it uses the commonly known elements of the given culture for its building or its *bricolage*. It operates with iconic signs which work on the basis of similarity. This does not introduce new symbols unknown to the community (such as the cross or

the swastika) but uses as its building blocks *icons* which are understood and read without difficulty by everybody and it is from these that it creates its texts. This is why we have ascertained that the overlapping representation of tree and woman is the mythical identification of the two notions which is only possible with icons. Analogous coding played a vital role in the development of consciousness in what might well be called the early, mythological phase. But we must add to this the statement that iconicity, generally the use of iconic signs, has played a role of fundamental importance in all cultures up to this day, even in a whole set of actions that we regularly perform in our everyday life (Sebeok, 1976: 1446).

A final remark follows from the above. Because myth does not ever refer to an object but identifies directly with it, it becomes possible to identify a further characteristic which has not yet been discussed. This is that mythical statements are never pure declarations of something, although such cases also occur, but can be seen instead as 'performative statements,' i.e. linguistic acts, the essence of which is to perform a particular action (e. g. to promise, command, lay a spell or pray).

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## Rojstvo mita

*Mihály Hoppál*

V članku so raziskani vzporedni koncepti mitoloških struktur, ki se pojavljajo tako v besedilu kot v upodobitvi. Na osnovi sorodnega gradiva, zbranega predvsem v Notranji oz. Centralni Aziji, je izpeljana komparativna raziskava različnih tekstov in podob, ki imajo v osnovi skupno mitološko jedro. Obravnavano gradivo se osredotoča predvsem na sporočilnost simbolike gore, drevesa in ženske. S pritegnitvijo fenomenološke, komparativne, strukturalistične, semiotične, lingvistične in vizualno-tekstološke metodologije je prikazana tipološka podobnost in mitološka univerzalnost tega gradiva tudi pri med seboj oddaljenih in zelo različnih kulturah. Razloge za to podobnost lahko iščemo med drugim v enotnem človeškem razmišljanju in obnašanju.

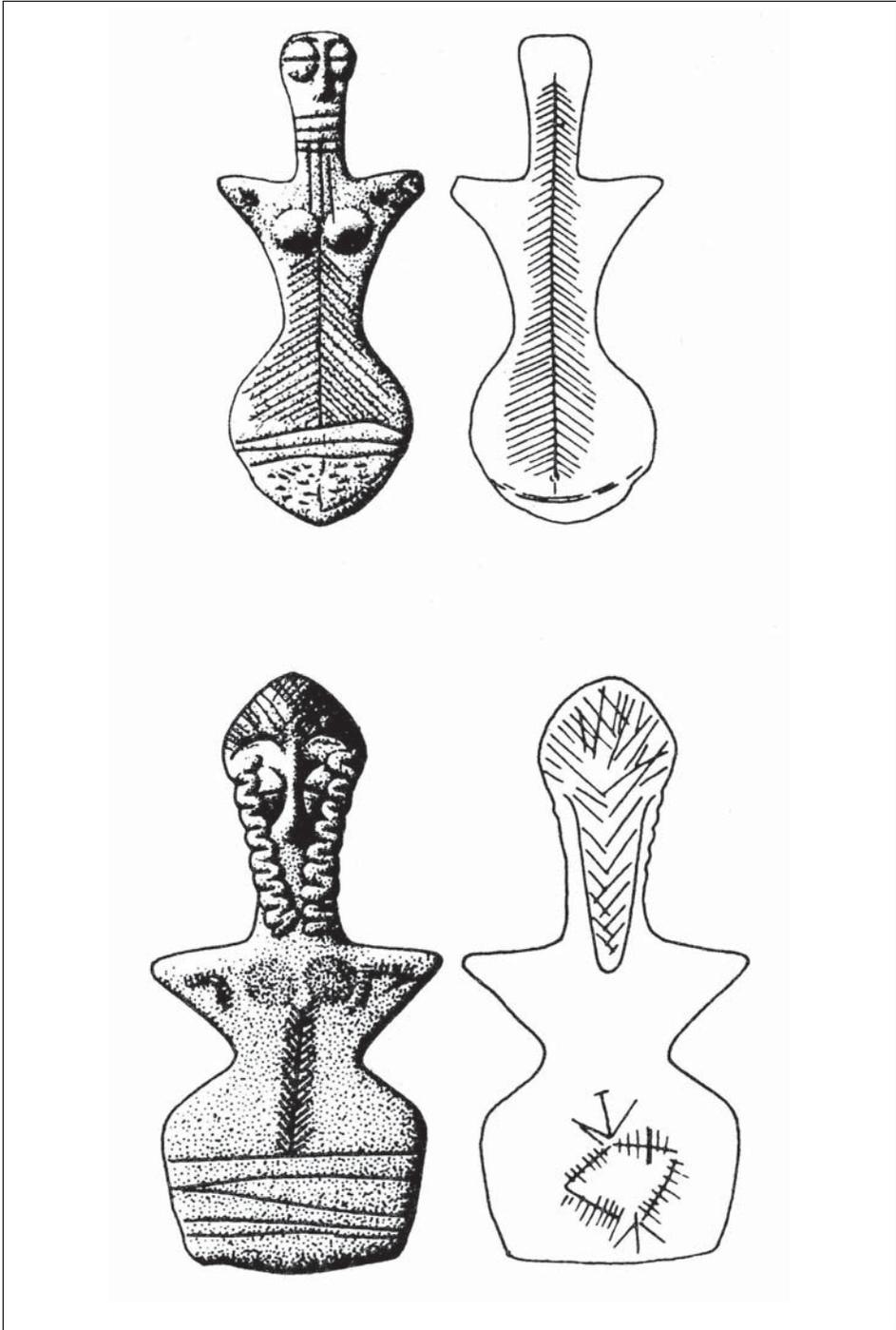


Plate I. Idols of women from Central Asia  
(Altin Depe. 2nd millenium BC - Müller-Karpe 1974:730.A)

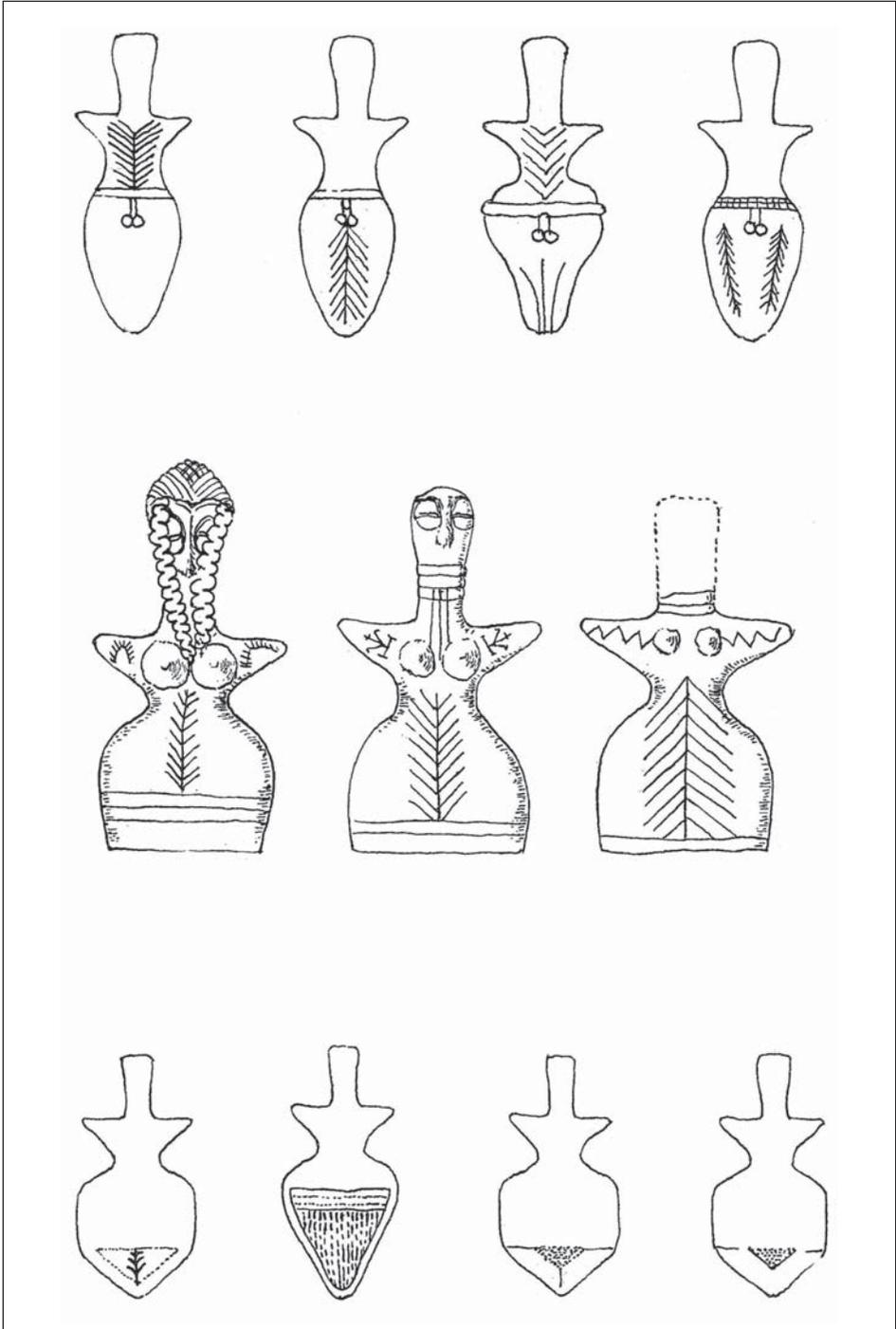


Plate II. Small women figurines  
(Central Asia. 2nd millennium BC - Masson-Szarianidi 1973: fig. 8. and 13.)

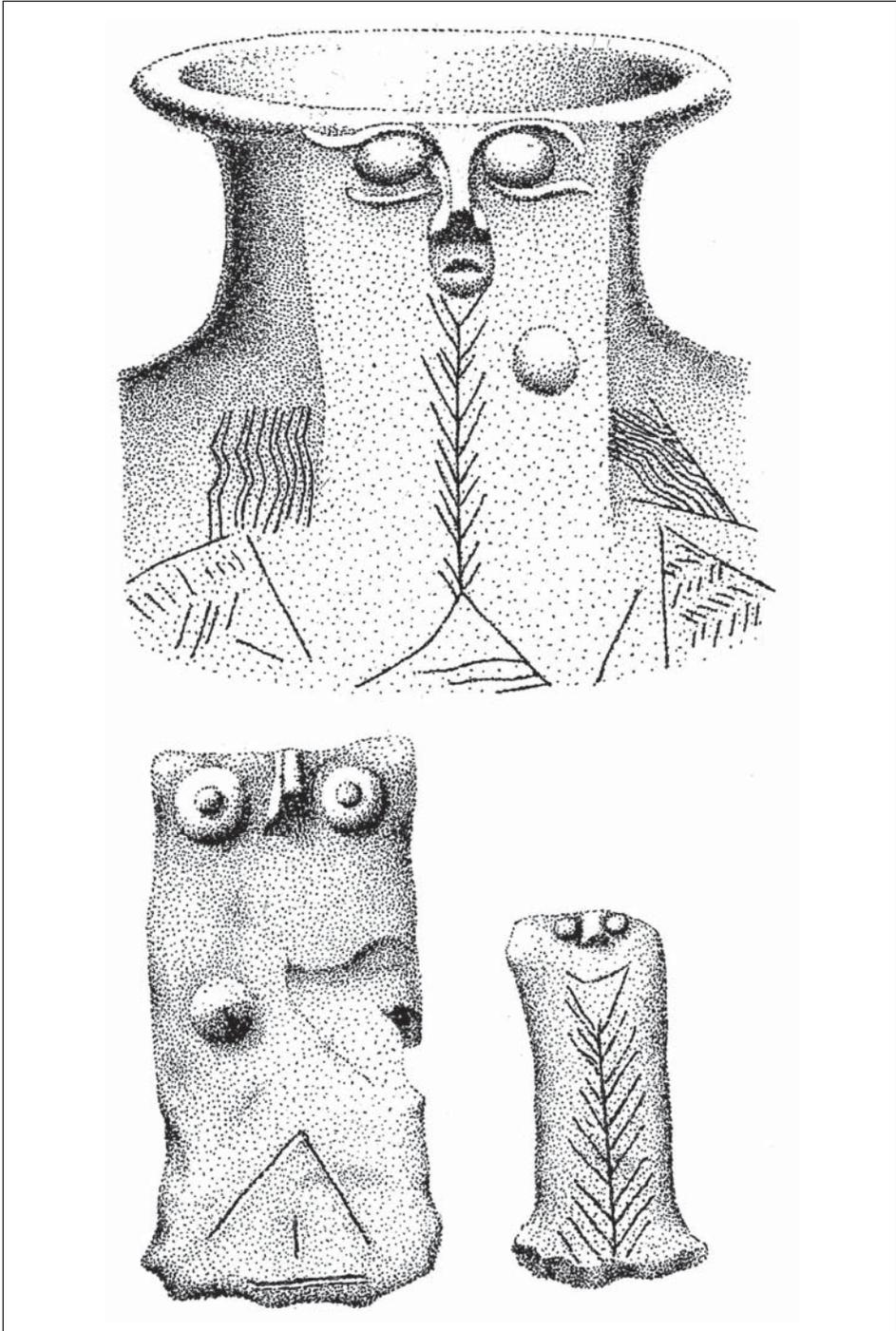


Plate III. Clay figures with the signs of tree and hill  
Kiš, Sumer – 2400-2300 BC. - Müller-Karpe 1974. Tafel 200)

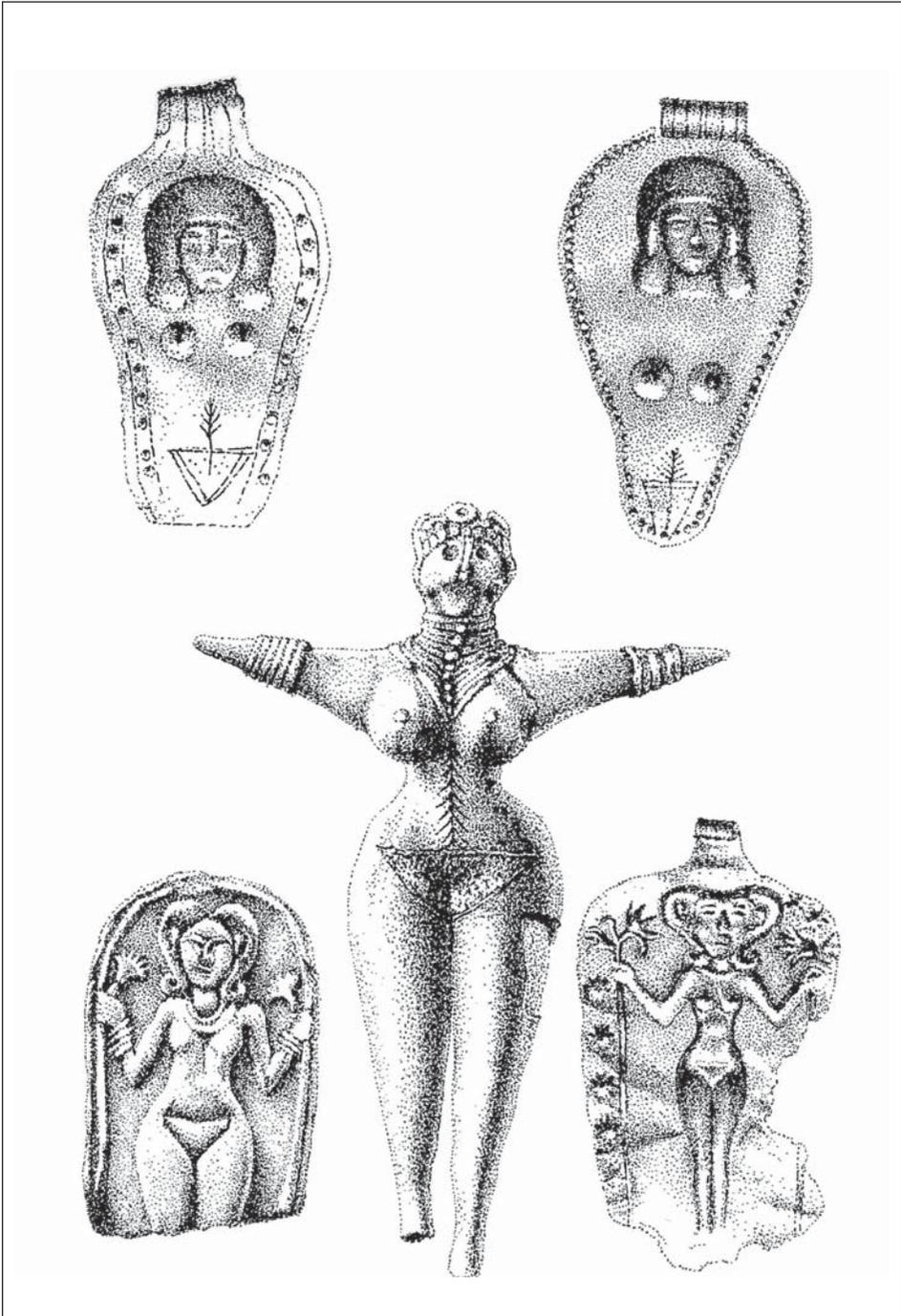


Plate IV. Gold necklaces, representing Astarte

(Ras Shamra, 1300 BC - National Museum of Aleppo - Gray 1969:71)

Clay goddess(?) - (Turang Tapa, Iran, 3rd millenium BC - Philadelphia, University Museum - Girshman 1964:1.)

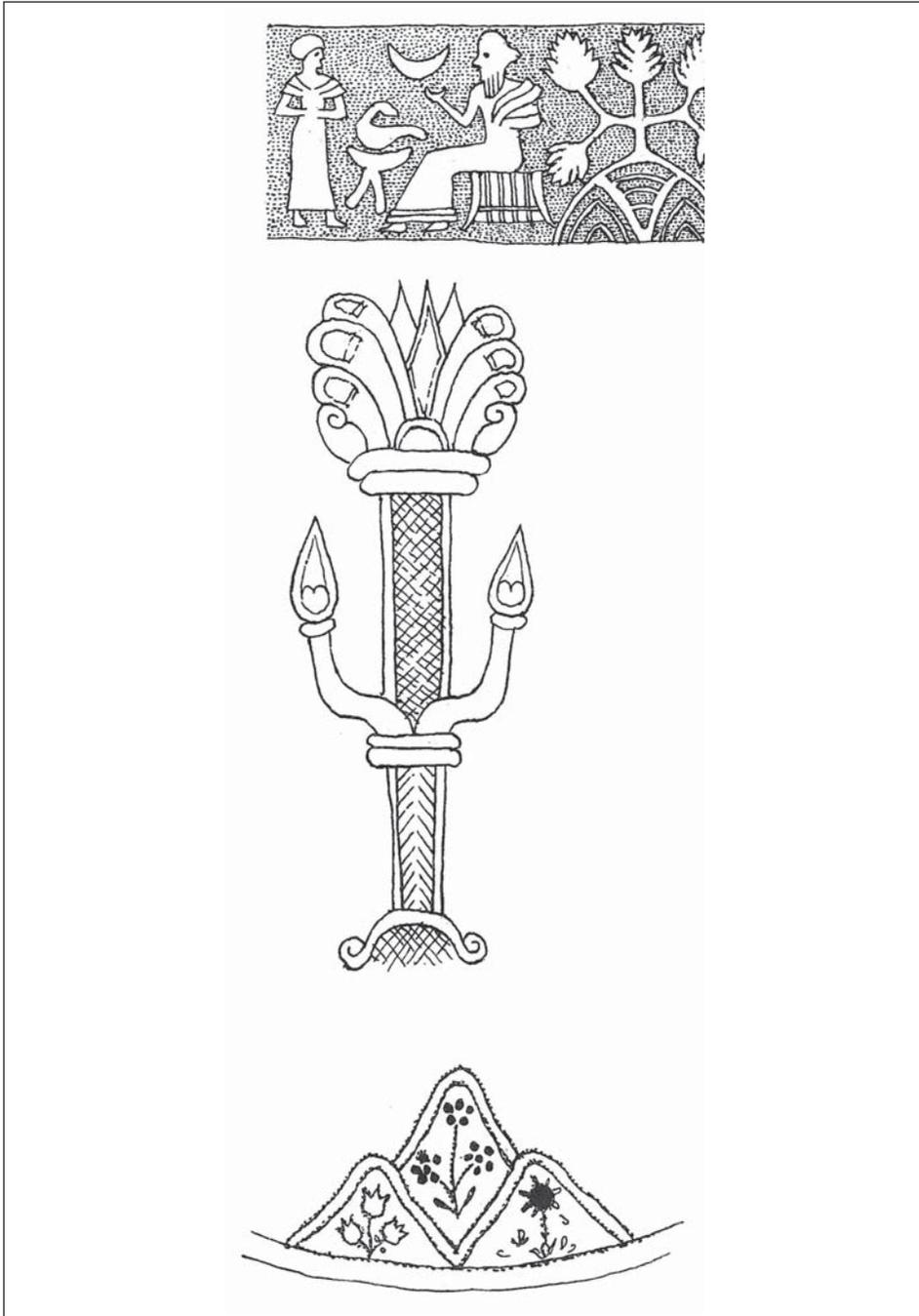


Plate V. Clay seal-cylinder (Susa, Khusistan, Iran, 2nd millenium BC – Müller-Karpe 1974:705.)  
Decorative motif from the golden treasure of Ziviyah (7th century BC – Girshman 1964:120. picture 167.)  
Hill and flowers-motifs on a sassanian silver dish.  
(6th century Klimova, Perm, Russia – Heritage, St. Petersburg – Orbeli-Trever 1935. picture 7.

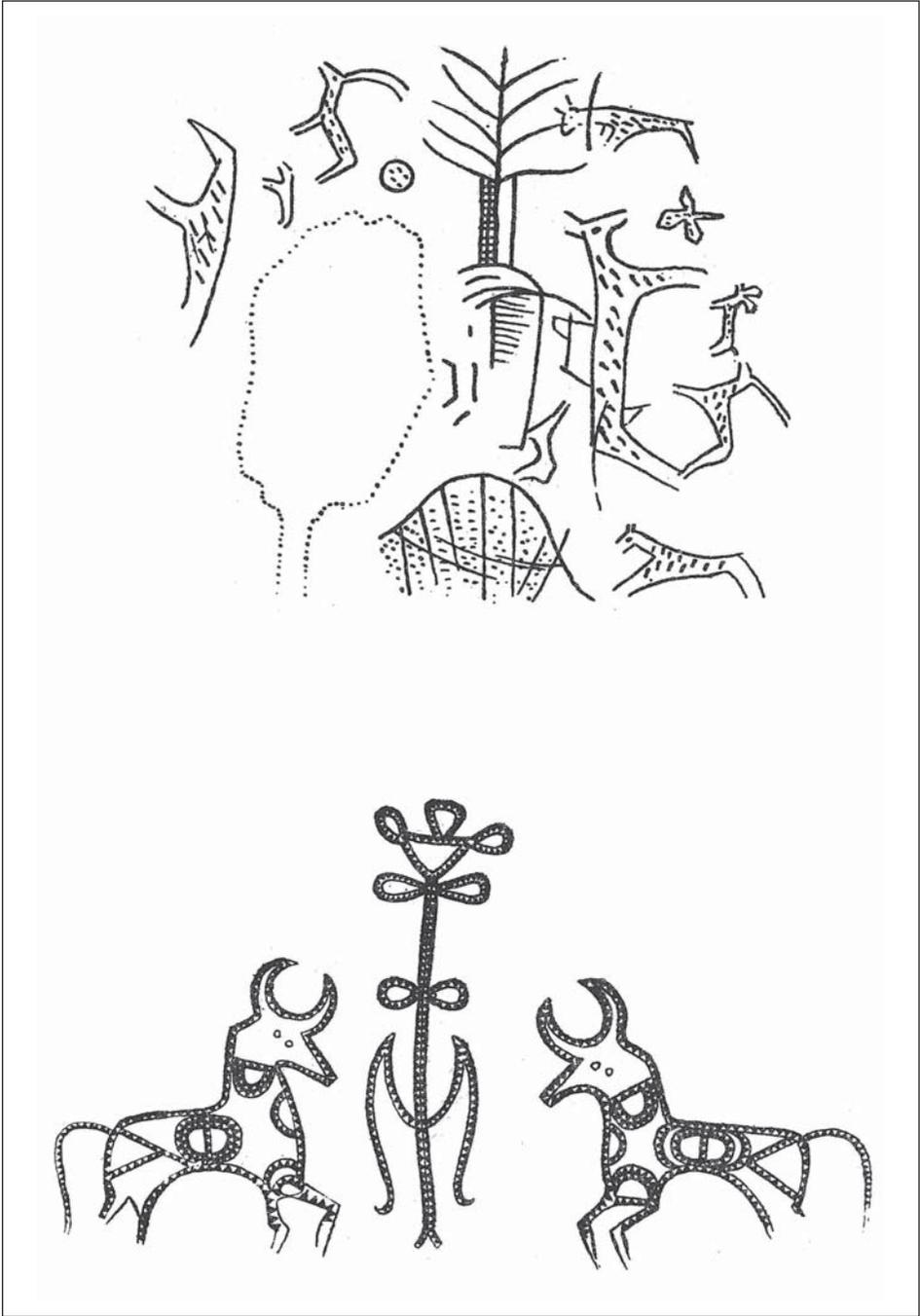


Plate VI. Hill-and-tree – motif on a decorated bone-vessel  
(6th century – Mokrin, Yugoslavia – László 1974:100. picture 55.)

Tree-and-animals – motif on a salt cellar made of bone.  
(6th century – Sopronkőhida, Hungary – László 1974:104. picture 59.)

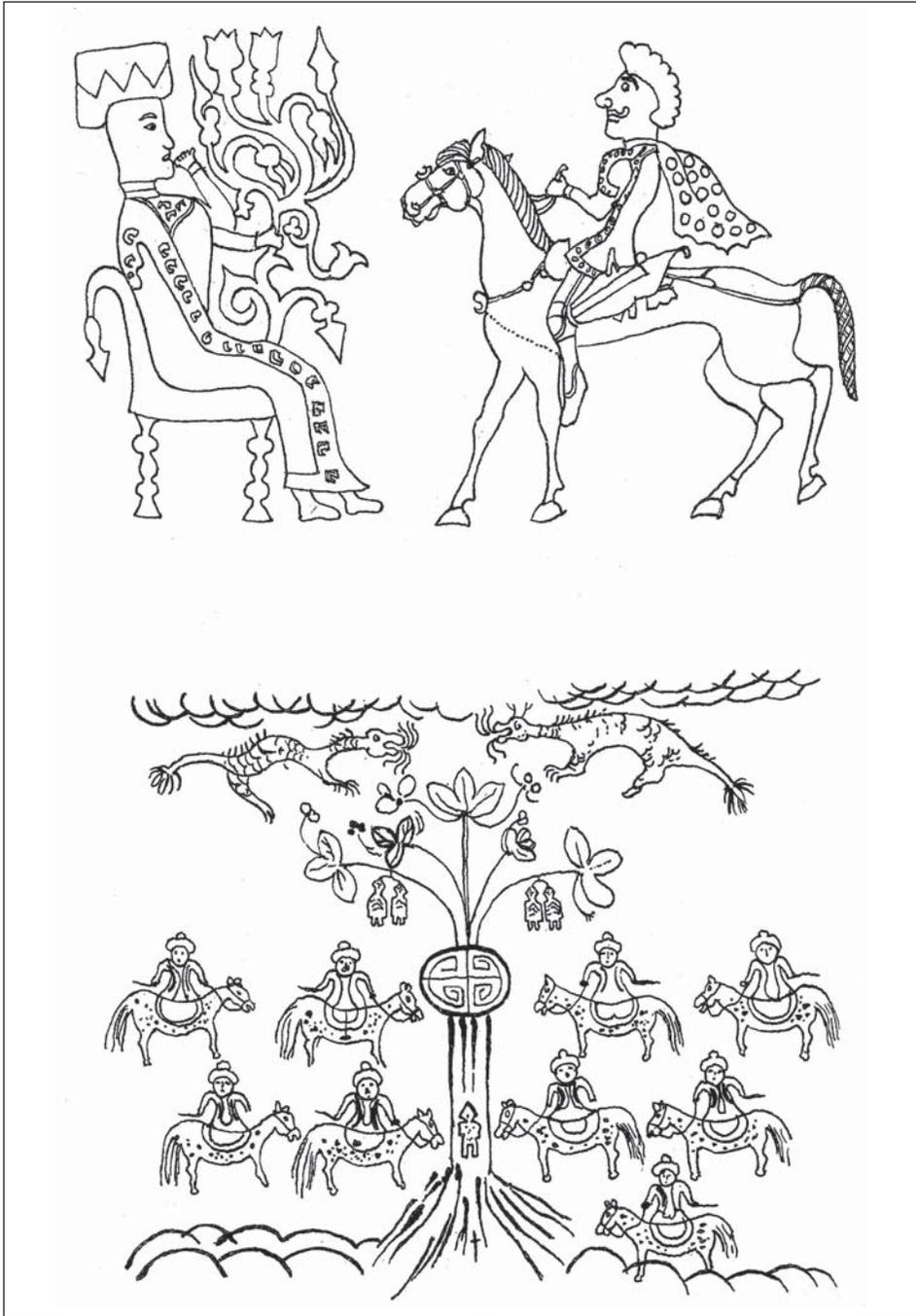


Plate VII. Woman with a tree of flowers  
(Kurgan of Pazyrik, Gorno Altai, Russia – Rudenko 1960:299. fig. 152.)  
Nanai world-tree and/or tree of ancestors  
(Amur region, Russian Far East – Ivanov 1954:258. fig. 131.)