



Symbolism of Ceramics of the Bronze Age Kazakhstan

Kurman MURATAYEV¹ & Erlan ASEMBAYULY² & Tokkoja KOJAGULOV³

Abstract

Clay had sacral value in traditional cultures since the ancient times. Since the ancient civilizations, this terrestrial material promoted disclosure of reformative abilities, spiritual search and creative aspirations of the mankind. Early mythological, later religious and philosophical systems refer to clay as “God's spark”. The substance was spiritualized in Tengri belief, and later in the Bible and Koran. Mentioning as “God's spark” at a certain degree acquired a sacral value of fire, by means of which the ceramics was burned. For this reason, products from ceramics, besides their purely utilitarian appointment, have a special symbolism. In this article, the symbolism of ceramics of the Bronze age Kazakhstan is searched. The Andronovo culture is in the focus. It was interpreted from the philosophical viewpoint, with the usage of the Regveda, the hymn of the Sanskrit hymns. Besides, the shapes, features, motifs and décors of the ceramics in the Andronovo period are dealt with.

Key Words: Archaeology, ceramics, Bronze age, Kazakhstan, Andronovo culture, the Regveda, décor.

Introduction

Clay had a sacred value in traditional cultures since ancient times. From immemorial times, in the pre-dawn of ancient civilizations, this earthly material contributed to the disclosure of transforming abilities, spiritual quest and creative aspirations of human being; especially in its ability to create forms, volumes and images that are not visible in nature. It is meaningful that in early mythological, religious and philosophical systems, in interpretations of the creation of the first man, clay plays the role of the spiritualized substance of “spark of God”, beginning with the Tengrian belief, which is the earliest in the history of monotheism, and later in the Biblical and Koran traditions. Referring to the “spark of God” as a certain degree of presence of the spirit of higher powers in the transformed clay, we know from early mythologies and about the sacral meaning of the fire with which it burned ceramics.

That is why ceramics, in addition to their purely utilitarian purposes, acquire a special symbolism in understanding and become one of the central links in the worldviews of our forefathers. The search for answers to the “infant” questions - “From where and how did everything appear?”, “Who are we and I in this all?” allowed the ancient masters to try to

¹ Prof. Dr., Abay Kazakh National Pedagogical University, E-posta: dindidin@mail.ru.

² Associate Prof., Abay Kazakh National Pedagogical University, E-posta: altai-73@mail.ru.

³ Prof. Dr., Abay Kazakh National Pedagogical University, E-posta: tokkozbagul@mail.ru.

model this everything, that is, the universe as eternity, the universe and its semantic involvement in this eternity.

It will be appropriate to trace the process of creation of ceramics by the ancient masters of this kind, which reflect the features of their understanding of the world order noted above (Smirnova, 1972).

Archeology of Kazakhstan, the periods and characteristic features of monuments of historical cultures from ancient eras to modern times have been studied rather in details in the 20th century.

Among the monuments of ancient cultures, of particular interest are samples of pottery from the Bronze Age, created by the tribes of the period of the so-called Andronovo culture, around 2nd millennium BC. Andronovo is the name of the village in Altai, where archaeological monuments with previously unknown characteristics inherent in this culture were first discovered in 1914.

In the Bronze Age, a complex set of world representations is formed, the features of which are largely determined by the discovery and use of such a quality of fire, with which Andronovo people, like all other tribes of this time, began to produce bronze widely (with a ratio of copper and tin as 9: 1). This phenomenon, which played a truly revolutionary role in the technology of ancient industries, qualitatively updated the whole complex of mythological ideas (Muratayev, 2011: 29). Images and the cult of fire are among the pivotal in the understanding and ideas of the ancients about the universe.

This is evidenced by the materials of archaeological excavations and testifies to the most ancient hymns of the Rigveda, dating back to the Bronze Age. Our treatment to the Rigveda is fully justified, as there is more evidence that this is a monument to the ancient nomadic tribes who came to India in the Bronze Age from the wide Eurasian steppes. So, the main quality of fire, the heat plays the role of the first principle of the existence in the hymn about the creation of the world:

There was no non-existence, and there was no existence then ...

There was neither death nor immortality then ...

Breathing, not shaking the air, according to its law,

Something vital, which was concluded in the emptiness,

Alone was generated by the power of heat. (The Rigveda: X, 129, 1-3).

In another hymn - about the cosmic heat, fire in its main capacity serves as the primary element of all things:

Law and truth were born

From the ignited heat.

From here was born the night.

From here, a moving ocean (The Rigveda: X, 1).

In the solar cult system, burial rites, as a rule, included cremation rituals. Thus, the way of initiation of the soul of the departed to the eternal cosmic fire was sanctified and modeled through the meaning and symbolism of the funeral pyre, whose patron was the god Agni.

The path of this initiation through the fire of the earth to its cosmic prototype is interpreted by far from unequivocal and “eternal happiness,” that is, immortality is guaranteed, as it was understood, only with the attainment of the “eternal light” that permeates the entire universe and underlies it. For example, in one of the hymns of Soma (one of the solar deities) from the Rigveda says:

(There) where is unfading light,

In the world where the sun is placed,

Put me there, o Pawaman,

In the immortal indestructible world.

Where is the closed place of the sky...

Where are the luminous worlds,

There, make me immortal (The Rigveda: 188, IX, 113, 7-9).

The immortality of the “unfading light” in this case is identified with the world order, the “indestructible world” as the main quality of the universe, and the fire, being its creator, also acts as a “guardian” of this order. In the late Avesta traditions, genetically associated with the Vedic, fire will be assigned the role and periodic renewer of this order, i.e. with the emergence of eschatological concepts.

Andronovo people, like numerous Eurasian tribes of the Bronze Age from the Volga region and the Caucasus, Siberia and Altai to the Indus valleys, between the two main religious ideas, the worship of fire, its various deities and the reverence of their ancestors, are established in the main form of the burial rite, i.e. cremation. This rite is becoming so widespread, on the one hand, due to the fact that in the system of cosmogonic ideas fire is

central, as the creator of the universe, and on the other, because of the beliefs in the afterlife that were firmly established by this time, in the immortality of the soul as the carrier of the “spark of God.” Thus, the funeral pyre was perceived and interpreted as an earthly image of heavenly, cosmic fire, for which it becomes, in the understanding of the ancients, a universal magic tool.

Ideological ideas are reflected in the artistic work, in particular, in the features of the components of the decor of the Andronovo ceramics and the general ornamentation system of the vessels, accompanying the burial.

The main feature of the decor of the Andronovo ceramics of all periods is the geometric nature of its character. At the same time, the structural elements that make up the decor as a whole are few in number and form three main groups: varieties of triangular, linear and horizontal, and variants of graphically related Z and S-shaped components.

Already in the early Andronovo, with the presence of the marked constituent elements in the decor, the traditional principles of decoration and the composition system were formed for the following periods. So, basically, the decor is built on a strict sequence of two tiers: the upper one, as a rule, from the rows of triangular vertices upwards, and the lower one on the combination of Z and S-shaped elements.

Tiers are divided by straight or wavy lines. Below this main part of the decor, often on the ends of the vessels, there are solar signs in the form of crossings of two Z-shaped figures (swastikas). Thus, the principles of decoration, based on the sequential combination of definitely constructed rows and elements, form a three-part structure of the composite structure of the decor.

So, straight and wavy lines (elements of the 2nd group of components) separating the two-tiered part of the decor were obviously interpreted as the line between the real world and the otherworld. Above them there is a row based on triangles (elements of the 1st group of components), as profile images of revered and in connection with the cult of deceased sacred objects, gravestones of mounds (earthen, stony or stone erections). If we consider that the Andronovo settlements were not far from the family burial grounds, numbering dozens, often from 200-300 such burial structures, then the structure of the ensemble of these burial mounds constituted a very significant part of the steppe landscape. Also, the triangular elements may be an image of the flames of the funeral pyre. The more complex structure of the lower tier,

organized on the basis of the Z and S-shaped elements, corresponds to the design features of the drilled pits with stepped terraces and burial chambers (Fig. 1).

The sign in the form of crosshairs of two Z-shaped elements acquires the graphics of non-stop dynamics, as if conveying the character of "unfading light", "eternal fire", creating and underlying the universe as interpreted by it in the hymns of the Rigveda. This explains the frequent presence of this sign on the ends of the vessels, which closely concur with the flame of fire (Muratayev, 2011: 8-17).

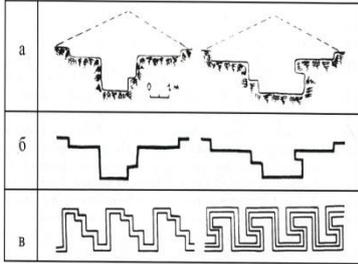
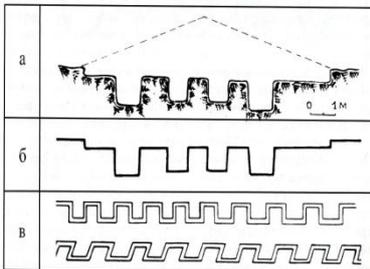
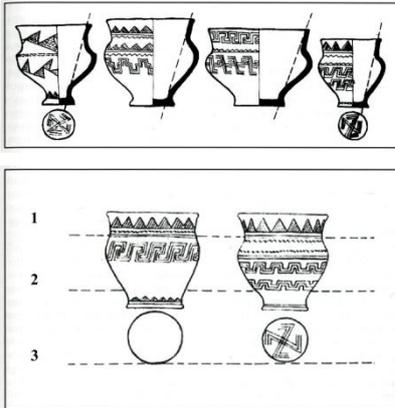
		
<p>a – Sections of the Andronovo Burial, Sangru Burial Ground. Central Kazakhstan.</p> <p>б - Graphic sections of Repetitions.</p> <p>в – Motifs of the Decor of the Andronovo Ceramics.</p>	<p>a – Cuts of the Andronovo Burial. South Kazakhstan.</p> <p>б - Graphic sections of Repetitions.</p> <p>в – Motifs of the Decor of the Andronovo ceramics.</p>	<p>Examples of Three-part Compositional Interpretation of the Andronovo Ceramics Decor.</p>

Figure 1. Sections and Cuts of the Andronovo Burial in Kazakhstan. Shapes of the Andronovo Ceramics Décor.

Thus, the basis for the content of the decor of the Andronovo ceremonial ceramics could be the idea of modeling the represented process of the initiation of the soul of the dead to the eternal life of the universe. It is no coincidence that earthen vessels, being an important material value of the life of the ancients, at the same time and as an indispensable attribute of burials accompany the ashes of the deceased, being as if its substantial continuation. Attempts to explain the secrets of the constant renewal of nature gave rise to quite complex ideas in this

regard. These include the concepts of the nature of fire, its functions as eschatological, and earlier interpretations of life forms in the world around us, for example, witnessed in a hymn to a funeral pyre:

Do not burn it, Agni, to the ground, do not devour! ...

With the sun let the eye merge with the wind of the soul!

Merge with heaven and earth, as it should be!

Or water, if you like there,

Bones take root in the plants! (The Rigveda: X, 16, 1-3).

In sum, holistic archaic consciousness and thinking do not oppose to mankind, created directly by his own hands, a qualitatively new spatial volume and do not endow him with anthropomorphic features. Creating a compositionally thoughtful and ideally conscious decor, the ancient masters subconsciously seek to penetrate the line of the seemingly closed circle, birth and death. Thus, when decorating an earthen vessel, its tectonically regular, plastically closed state is overcome and its second feature, the infinity of volume, arising from perception dynamics, develops and the ideological theme of a non-cyclical nature; birth, death and immortality, is affirmed. This three-part semantic structure corresponds to the three-part shape of the composition system of the Andronovo ceramics decor. And this is not as an image and a symbol of the whole, but only as a quality inherent in the universal in the process of its development. Such symbolism of ancient vessels obviously became the basis for the legend of the magic lamp of Aladdin, only the spirit of the ancestor, the patron saint is transformed into a fabulous gin, the master of the desires and wishes.

References

- Muratayev, Kurman (2011). *Essays on the History and Theory of Applied Art of Kazakhstan*. Almaty: Öner.
- Smirnova, N. (ed.) (1972). *Kazakh Folklore in the Collection of G. Potanin*. Alma-Ata: Nauka.
- The Rigveda* (1999). Translated by T.Ya. Elizarenkova. Moscow: Nauka.