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## Chasing the Shaman's Steed: The Horse in Myth from Central Asia to Scandinavia

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# Chasing the Shaman's Steed: The Horse in Myth from Central Asia to Scandinavia

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The site of Pazyryk is famous for yielding fabulously preserved artifacts, including textiles, wooden objects, and mummified bodies. This material, published in English in S. L. Rudenko's *Frozen Tombs of Siberia* (1970), led to the identification of a distinct Iron Age culture centered in the Altai mountains, now known as the Pazyryk culture (González-Ruiz et al., 1) Several nearby kurgans have been excavated in more recent years, providing additional evidence of the Pazyryk people. One of the most distinctive features of these kurgan burials is the inclusion of elaborately masked horses. There are several Pazyryk culture sites, all with slightly different arrangements. In general, the horses are (naturally) mummified, and they are buried with humans. The number of horses in each kurgan varies considerably, and the human burials can be single or double.

One of these horses, a venerable old gelding, was buried in Pazyryk Barrow One with a massive, antlered headdress (Figure 1). The headdress is made up of a squirrel-pelt frontlet representing a snow leopard — complete with gold leaf spots — perforated leather ear covers, and, of course, the antlers, which are made of felt and terminate in tufts of red horsehair. The horse's mane was covered with a leather and felt sheath decorated with cock's heads and crested with red horsehair. Its tail was wrapped to create a smooth, sleek appearance, and the wrapping terminates in a tuft of red horsehair, giving it a distinct resemblance to a lion's tail.

Other horses from Pazyryk wear equally ornate headdresses. A second horse from Barrow One wears a horned, winged lion, its head rendered in three dimensions on the horse's poll (the top of the head), the sides of its body curling over the horse's cheeks; a horse from Barrow Two wears a ram's head with a bird perched, wings outstretched, between its horns; a horse from Barrow Five is crowned

with a wooden deer's head with attached leather antlers. At the site of Berel, not far from Pazyryk, four horses (out of a total of thirteen found in Kurgan 11) were buried wearing massive wooden ibex horns (Samashevich and Serikovich, 143). All had mane coverings and either tail wrappings or tightly braided tails. These horses, as well as the many others buried without headdresses both at Pazyryk and Berel, also wore various pieces of tack, including bridles, saddles, girths, martingales, and cruppers. These pieces were often decorated with images of other animals or scenes of animal predation.



**Figure 1.** Mask with antlers for a horse head. Pazyryk Barrow No. 1 (excavations by M. P. Gрязнов, 1929). Altai Territory, Pazyryk Boundary, the Valley of the River Bolshoy Ulagan. Inv. no. 1295–458. Courtesy of The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

Much has been written on the interpretation of these elaborate horse costumes. Gрязнов (who excavated at Pazyryk before Rudenko) and Kiselev, focusing on the antlered horse from Barrow One, considered the horse to be a substitute deer, with the headdress serving to disguise it as such.

The reindeer, they argued, was domesticated for riding before the horse, and the masking of the horse with the attributes of a deer hearkened back to an earlier period of deer pastoralism. As Cheremisin (2005) explains, this theory can be traced to statements in service of Nicholas Marr's phase theory of languages. He argued that the function of the deer (transportation) was eventually taken over by the horse, and thus words for deer in many languages were transferred to the horse. Griaznov evidently took this to mean that the cult of the deer would likewise have been transferred to the horse after a technological shift (129).

There are several flaws in this theory. One is that the antlers on the Barrow One headdress clearly do not match the antlers of any real species of deer; they instead incorporate aspects of both reindeer and wild stag antlers (Cheremisin 2005, 133). More significantly, it is now widely accepted that reindeer were domesticated around the beginning of the common era, at least a thousand years after the domestication of riding horses,<sup>1</sup> and that they were not initially domesticated for riding (Vainshtein, 120). Reindeer have weak backs and make poor saddle animals compared to horses (Vainshtein, 128). Today, two ethnic groups, the Eveny and Evenky, do indeed ride reindeer (Vitebsky, 3); however, it is unclear when this practice developed and, in these cases, it is clearly predicated on horse riding, rather than the reverse. This theory also does not account for the many other styles of headdress present in the Pazyryk and Berel burials. Only one horse out of the several costumed horses at Pazyryk and Berel was buried with full-sized antlers, and one other horse wears a smaller antlered deer head on its crest.

Cheremisin provides numerous pieces of evidence to support the symbolic importance of deer-horses in Central Eurasian religion and folklore. For example, he cites the account of a Tuvian shaman describing his spirit journey: "It is flying, with its legs drawn in, horned, and I am flying by its side, holding onto it but not as if I saddled it, not as if I were riding a horse. I call my Siberian stag the small horse *Chagaa daiym*. But I cannot fly to the upper world with my Siberian stag-horse" (Cheremisin, 2005, 131). He also mentions a Mongolian wedding song in which guests are said to "have arrived on horses, swinging their deer antlers decorated with sable necklaces," and a Tuvian folktale in

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<sup>1</sup> The date of horse domestication for riding is contested: proposed dates range from 3500 BCE to the twelfth century BCE, with evidence for mounted combat dated to no earlier than around 1000 BCE (Hanks, 40).

which a hero receives a horse named Khuluk-Bora, which has antlers with sixty-one branches. Though Cheremisin points out the role of horse–deer as shamanic steed, he ultimately sees in the syncretism of these animals not a special shamanic function, but simply the manifestation of an archetypal ungulate — the ideal sacrificial animal in the Indo-Aryan tradition. In addition, though he remarks that animal horns/antlers are associated with the World Tree in Siberian religions, he does not incorporate this important element into his interpretation of the masks.

Cheremisin's theory does not take into account the fact that Indo-European sacrifice of hoofed mammals centered around domesticated caprids and cattle, rather than wild animals like the ibex and deer. In addition, horse sacrifice in Indo-European culture is not, in fact, directly comparable to the sacrifice of other ungulates. While caprids and cattle are regularly sacrificed to appease, thank, or petition the gods, the sacrifice of horses is closely associated with rites of kingship, particularly those connected with fertility, and with the deaths of heroes. E. Kuzmina offers several examples of kingly horse sacrifice in Indo-European culture, including the Vedic Asvamedha ceremony and the ritual of the October Horse (Kuzmina, 264). The custom of horse sacrifice in Kurgan burials may have arrived in the Altai as a result of Indo-European expansion, but the particulars of the Pazyryk and Berel horse burials cannot be explained as purely Indo-European in inspiration.<sup>2</sup>

In order to understand the meaning of these horse costumes, we must first understand the meaning of their key attributes, that is, the salient characteristics of deer and mountain sheep/ibex. In *Deer Goddess of Siberia*, Esther Jacobson offers a convincing argument for the significance of these animals in Altaic religion from the Neolithic onwards, connecting them to the concept of a World Tree or World Mountain, both of which are reflexes of the World Axis belief common to most if not all Siberian and circumpolar religions (Hultkrantz, 35). The antlers of the deer can be related to the branches of the World Tree (as earlier pointed out by Anatoli Martynov [1988]): petroglyphs of deer dating from the Neolithic onwards represent some deer with strikingly tree-like antlers (Figure 2). The

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<sup>2</sup> mtDNA testing of Pazyryk remains indicates that the Iron Age inhabitants of the Altai region were of evenly mixed (50/50) East and West Eurasian lineage (Gonzalez-Ruiz et al., 9). Any interpretation of Pazyryk cultural remains should assume the high probability of extensive cultural mixing in the Altai region.

mountain sheep/ibex may be said to stand on the top of the World Mountain. Its horns, resembling wood, can probably be connected to the World Tree in the same way that the deer's antlers are.

Jacobson's theory helps to unify the assemblage of horse costumes, all of which feature antlers/horns: emblems of the World Tree. Additional objects from Pazyryk and the wider Scytho-Siberian world offer parallels to the horse costume and may further clarify its meaning. For example, the man in Pazyryk Barrow Two was tattooed with numerous real and fantastic beasts, including beaked and antlered horses with lions' tails (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Martynov, 1988, figure 2. Examples of petroglyphic deer with tree-like antlers.

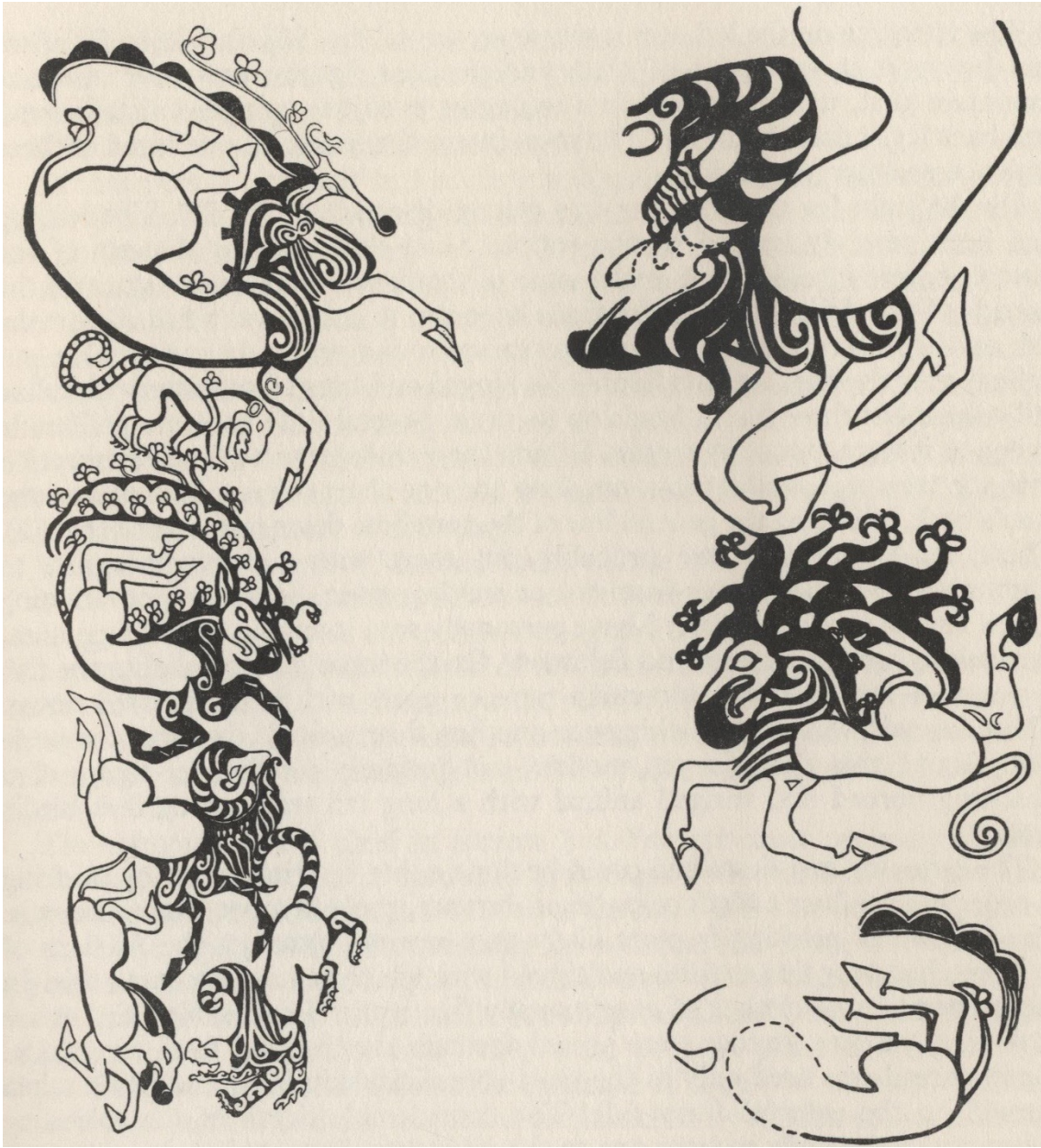


Figure 3. Tattoos of fantastic creatures. From Rudenko 1970.

Interestingly, the subtle, backwards curve of the antlers and the short tines create a shape suggestive of ibex horns, perhaps indicating the artist's effort to unify the two symbols. The tines of the antlers terminate in birds' heads. The motif of a beaked horse with antlers terminating in birds' heads is also seen in the tattoos of the Ukok Ice Maiden, in plaques from Western China (Figure 4), and in a gold Xiongnu statuette or finial (Figure 5).



**Figure 4.** Ordos plaque showing a beaked and antlered horse attacked by a wolf or tiger. One example of many featuring the antlered horse motif. British Museum. Wikimedia Commons.



**Figure 5.** Xiongnu gold “monster” in the Shaanxi History Museum. Wikimedia Commons.

The motif of bird-headed antlers is also seen in otherwise normal representations of deer across the Scytho-Siberian world, and indeed is strongly characteristic of Scythian Animal Style art (Jacobson, 56). In some cases, comparable birds’ heads appear — not on antlers, but sprouting from the body, tail, or mane/crest of predators (Jacobson, 56).

What is the meaning of these birds’ heads? Jacobson suggests that they are indicative of the transformation brought on by predation, the bird-headed antlers representing the beginning of the prey animal’s metamorphosis as it dies. This would explain the numerous examples of this motif that occur in scenes of predation, and in the case of antlered animals that appear in isolation, it could be argued that the birds’ heads imply predation even though it is not explicitly represented. However, this theory would not explain the rare but undeniable occurrence of birds’ heads on predators (Figure 6).



**Figure 6** Belt buckle. Siberian collection of Peter I. Sakae Culture. Inv. no. Si.1727–1/11. Courtesy of The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

If we accept that the antlers and horns are attributes of the World Tree/Mountain, then the birds' heads may be related to this concept. Ethnographic data concerning the Siberian World Axis is helpful here: a great bird is often said to perch at the peak of the tree or mountain. The soul of a shaman, who travels between the upper, middle, and lower realms, may take the form of a bird. According to the Yakut, the souls of future shamans are raised in nests on the branches of the World Tree (Eliade, 70). Of course, one must be cautious in drawing parallels between beliefs recorded in the past couple of centuries and the beliefs of people more than two millennia ago. However, given the remarkable antiquity of the concept of the World Axis (it is shared among circumpolar peoples from Scandinavia to North America), it is not unreasonable to imagine some connection between the religions of native Siberian peoples today and the religions of the people who inhabited the same region in the past. It seems likely the birds indicate a connection with the World Tree: after all, birds do not

readily perch on the antlers of live deer, but they do make their homes in the branches of trees. In particular, they may represent the shaman's relationship to the World Tree in the form of a bird, and thus ascribe a shamanic significance to the animal. If this is the case, sprouting birds' heads may have come to indicate a connection with the World Tree and shamanism even if they do not appear associated with antlers, the World Tree's more obvious manifestation. This might explain the occasional presence of sprouting birds' heads on predators: they are being marked as "shamanic," belonging to the world of spirit and symbol.<sup>3</sup>

The costumed horses from Pazyryk and Berel are not themselves marked with birds' heads in this way, but they do bear a strong resemblance to the beaked and antlered horses with lions' tails represented in other Scytho-Siberian media. They wear the attributes of the World Axis: both deer antlers and mountain sheep/ibex horns. In one case, the mountain sheep is topped with a bird perched on its horns, likely a reference to the eagle at the top of the World Axis. Their tails are wrapped to give the appearance of lion's tails just as in the Pazyryk and Ice Maiden tattoos and the aforementioned Ordos bronze. The horses are not disguised as deer or mountain goats; rather, they seem to represent a sort of composite creature, known throughout the Scytho-Siberian sphere, that includes the equine body as an essential element along with a lion's tail — probably borrowed from Near Eastern representations of the griffin — and attributes of the World Tree. What is the identity of this strange and ubiquitous creature, and what is the significance of its equine features?

While many authors have discussed the antler, horn, and bird motifs of Scytho-Siberian art, few have considered the significance of the canvas on which these motifs so often appear: the body of a horse. Jacobson's book focuses so heavily on the deer as a sacred animal that she doesn't explore the possibility of the costumed horse taking on its own religious function. Griaznov and Kiselev assume the horse is masked as a deer, while Cheremisin blends the horse with other ungulates such that its

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<sup>3</sup> In Figure 6 a wolf and tiger are shown in combat. The wolf, whose crest swirls with birds' heads, has the tiger by the neck, whereas the tiger bites the wolf's leg. It is hard to imagine that the wolf is the loser in this battle, so Jacobson's interpretation of the birds' heads as indicative of transformative death cannot explain the image. If instead we interpret the wolf as "shamanic," this scene could represent a shaman in animal form or a shaman's animal familiar battling with a hostile animal spirit, a common theme in shamanic religions.

individual significance is lost. In all cases, the unique qualities of the horse are considered irrelevant. But how could the horse, whose domestication for riding caused a fundamental shift in the lifestyle of the inhabitants of the Eurasian steppe, be irrelevant? The saddle horse allows for larger herds and greatly increased mobility, not to mention the fact that a mounted warrior is at a significant advantage compared to a foot soldier. The horse, and specifically the rideability of the horse, was essential to ancient semi-nomadic and nomadic people. Taking this into account, it is no surprise that the saddle horse attained such an important role in the indigenous shamanic religions of Eurasian peoples.

Eliade's monumental work *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, provides many examples of the horse's significance in shamanic traditions: for example, among the Buryat, Yakut, and Soyot, the shaman's drum, the beating of which transports him to the World Tree, is referred to as his horse (175–176). The Buryat make their drums out of horse skins, and their shamans ride the hobby-horses, pantomiming the act of flying on a magical horse (408). A Vasyugan shaman rides a gray horse on journeys to the upper world (89). Eliade recounts a Buryat legend about a shamanic steed with eight legs: "a young woman takes as her second husband the ancestral spirit of a shaman, and after this mystical marriage one of the mares in her stud gives birth to a foal with eight legs. The earthly husband cuts off four of them. The woman cries: 'alas! it was my little horse on which I used to ride like a shaman!' and vanishes, flying through the air, to settle in another village." The Buryat see the stars as a herd of horses tethered to the World Pillar, which is represented by the pole star (261), while according to the Mongols, the gods use both the Cosmic Mountain and the World Pillar as a hitching post for their horses (270).

In a few cases, the shaman's steed is a deer rather than a horse (174). But just as the practice of riding deer must be traced back to that of riding horses, so must the concept of the (ridden) shamanic deer be traced back to the shamanic horse. In fact, the shamanic deer–horses already mentioned in relation to Cheremisin's article may represent the link between shamanic horses and shamanic deer.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In Old Norse, when non-equine animals serve as mounts, they are still referred to as horses, e.g. *leiknar hestr*, literally "giantess's horse," a kenning for wolf (Price, 120). Price translates *hest* as 'steed,' obscuring the meaning slightly, but *hest* is in fact the normal word for horse in Old Norse. Likewise, a deer–horse could be a deer that, because it is being ridden,

The role of the horse in Siberian religions is predominately that of an animal that transports a shaman in his journeys, especially his journeys to the World Tree. The Scytho-Siberian horses and horse-hybrids, marked with the emblems of the World Tree and in some cases literally saddled for riding, may represent shamanic steeds of this type. Concentrated on the role of the horse as a mystical means of transportation, the concept of shamanic horses and mounted shamanic deer must postdate the introduction of horseback riding into Siberia and the Altai. This is in contrast to symbols such as the World Axis and Drum: the presence of these elements across the whole circumpolar sphere suggests their great antiquity. The shamanic horse, inextricably linked to the World Tree and the Drum, yet necessarily much younger, thus represents the seamless merging of two different traditions. Samashevich and Serikovich (2015) consider the horses at Berel to have served the purpose of transporting the dead to the afterlife, noting that “all the buried horses were placed in the north side of the inside grave construction with their heads to the east. It is possible to assume that the head’s orientation in one or another direction pointed out the route that ancient nomads considered to be ‘the road to the world of the dead’” (255).

The connection between an (equine) shamanic steed with elements of the World Tree is very clearly attested within a group of people who may, at first glance, seem distant in time and space from the Scytho-Siberians: the Viking Age Norse. Much has been written on shamanistic elements of ancient Norse religion, usually focused on the god Óðin, his eight-legged horse, Sleipnir (Figure 7), the Norse World Tree, known as Yggdrasil, and the magical practice *Seidr*. Generally, these shamanistic elements are attributed to Norse contact with the Saami, who traditionally practiced a shamanistic religion related in some respects to Siberian religions.

I do not wish to deny the importance of Saami contact with the Norse in shaping the cultures of either party: Mundal gives a good summary of the extensive evidence for Norse-Saami contact in the Viking period and later. Trade, intermarriage, and cohabitation are all attested (98–99, 104). Interestingly, the Saami are frequently associated with magic (99). That being said, certain elements of

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must be referred to as a horse. These examples seem to indicate that the act of riding is intrinsically linked to horses, regardless of the animal being ridden.

Norse shamanism, including the oft-cited Sleipnir and Yggdrasil, cannot be explained by contact with the Saami.



**Figure 7.** The Tjängvide image stone with a depiction of Oðin riding Sleipnir. Wikimedia Commons.

In his discussion of Sleipnir, Eliade called the eight-hoofed horse “the shamanic horse par excellence” (380). Others have echoed this sentiment, claiming that Sleipnir is in fact one of the best

indicators of shamanistic elements in Norse religion (Davidson, 144; Price, 320).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Sleipnir does resemble the shaman's horses of Siberia: he carries his rider to other realms, including the underworld in *Baldr's Drauma* and *Gylfaginning*, and, like the Buryat horse, he has eight legs (Einarsdóttir, 30). The Saami, however, are not Siberian. While they are related to the Finno-Ugric people of Finland, Estonia, Hungary, and Siberia, the Saami nevertheless have inhabited Scandinavia for at least seven thousand years (Broadbent and Storå, 27). The horse plays no role in their mythology or culture, excepting certain aspects of the god Ruto.<sup>6</sup> Notions of a Shamanic steed are absent from any account of Saami religion (Price, personal communication), nor would the concept of a shamanic steed be expected to develop in a culture without riding animals. Instead, it seems that this concept must have entered the culture from another source: direct contact with the Scytho-Siberians, who had already incorporated the horse into their mythology as a shamanic steed.

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<sup>5</sup> Price has also pointed out that multiple images of eight- and six-legged horses (and a few six-legged deer) appear on the Overhögda tapestry. This could indicate that extra-legged horses form a class of creatures (shamanic steeds) of which Sleipnir is only one example. Price acknowledges that Saami religion cannot explain all aspects of Norse shamanism and suggests that Norse shamanism should be understood within the wider context of circumpolar religion. However, he does not go so far as to explain how the Indo-European Norse would have acquired concepts from the circumpolar world if not from the Saami.

<sup>6</sup> Ruto is a much-contested figure in Saami religion. He was said to ride a horse, and horses were sacrificed to him to ward off illness. Ränk is of the opinion that Ruto must have Eurasian origins, citing the role of horse sacrifice among Siberian tribes. He also claims that "Ruto's mount is undoubtedly a remote horse nomadic feature, which, from South East Europe, through the mediation of the Scythian, has pushed forward all the way to Lapland" (178) — apparently bypassing the Norse! While this paper demonstrates that he may be correct in connecting Ruto with the Scythians, it is not true that their influence bypassed the Norse; rather, it is the mounted Norse Óðin who has Scythian traits. DuBois clarifies the Ruto problem: "Both [Saami] underworlds have extensive counterparts in other North Eurasian Finno-Ugric cultures and certainly belong to an ancient stratum of Finno-Ugric religion. The specific characteristics of Ruto were influenced, however, by the widespread Finno-Ugric tendency to model demon figures after the high gods of neighboring peoples: thus ... the south Sámi renderings of Ruto acquire Óðinnic traits" (DuBois, 78).



**Figure 8.** Thracian cup featuring an eight-legged deer. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Eight-legged deer with bird-headed antlers are represented in two silver cups from Aghiol in Thrace (Figure 8). The Thracians were in contact with the Scythians of the Pontic Steppe, and Thracian art is widely considered to have developed out of the distinctive Scythian Animal Style. It is curious that the eight-legged deer/horse, if it was a part of Scytho-Siberian mythology, should only be represented visually among the Thracians and Scandinavians, who would have received the motif independently of each other through contact with the Scythians in Eastern Europe. I might consider it a coincidence, except that the concept of an eight-legged shamanic horse is attested among the Mongolic Buryats of Siberia. One possible explanation is that a metaphor of eight-leggedness (perhaps to imply the speediness of the horse) was applied to shamanic steeds among the Scytho-Siberians — a metaphor that was then reinterpreted as a literal description in later periods and more distant places.

The World Tree, Yggdrasil, is just as problematic as Sleipnir. The literal meaning of the name is “Yggr’s Horse,”<sup>7</sup> the first indicator of the close symbolic relations between horses and the Norse World Tree. Like the World Trees of Siberia, Yggdrasil’s roots extend beneath the human world into the underworlds, while its branches reach above the human world into the upper realms of gods and other beings. It is surmounted by a great eagle, while a serpent, symbol of the underworld, gnaws at its roots; four deer are gathered around its trunk. Oðin is said to tether his horse to Yggdrasil, recalling Buryat and Mongolian traditions (Eliade, 380).

The Hávamál describes how Oðin hangs himself on the World Tree for nine nights in order to attain knowledge of the runes. This ordeal, an experience of death and rebirth in the quest for sacred knowledge, can be related to shamanistic initiation rites (Eliade, 380). Gallows trees are referred to as horses in the Ynglingatal: “svalan hest,” literally “cool horse” in stanza 9, and “hábrjóstr Sleipnir hq̄rva,” literally “high-breasted Sleipnir of flax (rope)” in stanza 12. In the Øseberg tapestry, the gallows trees of the sacred grove of Uppsala are represented as having horses’ heads on the ends of their branches. It seems that the gallows, which in a sense transport someone to death, are conflated in Norse religion with the horse and particularly Sleipnir, also capable of transporting a person to death.

Saami religion has a World Pole rather than a World Tree. Its primary purpose is to hold up the sky (that is, to hold the earth and sky apart), whereas the role of the World Tree is to connect the earth with the sky and the world below (Hultkrantz, 42). Yggdrasil is far more closely related to Siberian concepts of the World Tree than it is to the Saami World Pole, and its close connection with the horse suggests a root in the motif of horses bearing the attributes of the World Tree that we have seen in the Central Eurasian material. It is not a very great leap to go from marking a shamanic horse with the emblems of the World Tree to seeing the shamanic horse and the World Tree, both means of transportation between realms, as one.

It is clear that the equestrian-shamanistic elements of Norse religion cannot be explained by contact with the Saami, but they could in fact be easily explained as developments from a Scytho-Siberian symbolic system that had already linked the horse and its powers of transportation with the

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<sup>7</sup> Yggdrasill means “Yggr’s horse.” *Yggr*, meaning “dread” or “the terrifier,” is a name for Oðin, while *drasill* is an archaic word for “horse” (Einarsdóttir, 32).

ancient Siberian World Tree. If not through the Saami, how did these motifs enter Norse culture? One explanation might be that the Proto-Germanic peoples, ancestors of the Norse, adopted the concept of the shamanic steed through interaction with the Scythians in Eastern Europe. There is linguistic evidence indicating that these two groups were in contact. Two words, \*hanapiz 'hemp' and \*paidō 'cloak,' were borrowed into Proto-Germanic before the operation of Grimm's Law and most likely from an Iranian language (Ringe, 296–297). Even more importantly, the word *papaz* 'path' *must* have been borrowed into Proto-Germanic from an Iranian language, as the interdental fricative in the middle of the word is only present in this word in the Iranian languages (Mayrhofer, 224–230; Ringe, personal communication). In contrast to the first two, however, it was borrowed after the operation of Grimm's Law. An additional word, *wurstwq* 'work' survives only in Gothic and cannot be derived from the Proto-Germanic word for 'work,' so it may also be a borrowing from an Iranian language.

Lotte Hedeager (2011) has suggested that there was significant contact between the Norse and the Huns in the Migration Period. Interestingly, horse sacrifices in which only the head and hooves are included have been documented in Scandinavia beginning in the Migration Period; in Central Asia, this type of deposit has been linked to a ritual in which the skin of a sacrificed horse was suspended on a sacred tree (Mair). Chinese accounts describe this ritual among the Xiongnu and Xianbei, and Herodotus describes a similar (if more gory) ritual among the Scythians. It is possible that the westward expansion of this type of sacrifice, which clearly links horses and sacred trees, is related to the belief in a shamanic steed. The theory that Norse-Hun contact can be used to explain aspects of Norse mythology is not widely accepted at present, but the possibility that the equestrian aspects of Norse religion could be explained by Hunnish influence certainly merits further exploration.

The path of the shaman's steed winds from the Neolithic petroglyphs of Eastern Central Asia, to the Pazyryk burials of the Altai Mountains, to the firesides of Viking skalds. The shaman's steed represents the merging of symbols as a result both of cultural contact (the Siberian Tree of Life merging with the horse as a means of transportation) and the deformations of time (in Norse religion, the shaman's horse and the Tree of Life are one). This study is an effort to unify long-contested elements of Pazyryk artwork and to correct the error of either assigning all shamanic elements of Norse culture to the Saami or attributing them to Siberia without explanation. Of course, more work remains to be done, particularly to examine archaeological finds for evidence of contact between Scandinavia and

the steppes and to explore the expansion of the shaman's steed into South Asia, an area outside the scope of this paper. This study is a start, however, toward revealing the potential of the ancient shaman's steed to explain equine rituals and mythologies across Eurasia.

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