

Phallic Cult in the Perception of Ancient Slavs and Aryans

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The beginning of the third millennium A.D. is marked in Russian historical science by two events whose importance will, probably, be understood by researchers already in the near future. It is the publication in Russian for the first time of a work by an outstanding Indian scientist B.G. Tilak "the Arctic Home in the Vedas". This book published in 1903 in Bombay, which became widely known in European countries, has awaited its translation in the largest "arctic" country, Russia,¹ for nearly one hundred years.

Translator and author of the preface, specialist in Indian history and culture, doctor of history N.R. Guseva points out that "science owes two main discoveries to this work by Tilak: 1. The texts of the Vedas contain accurate descriptions of the realities of the arctic region; 2. The most ancient religion of the Aryans arose not in the epoch of the end of the last ice age (that is, approximately in the 12-10-th millenniums B.C.) when a long warm period began in the Arctic (now well studied), but in the epoch of the last inter-ice period"². According to the glaciologists' calculation this epoch lasted from 100 to 35 thousand years B.C.

The second event was the publication of a book of yet another outstanding Indian scientist Rahula Sankrityayana "From Volga to Ganga"³ also translated into the Russian language for the first time. It is necessary to point out here that W.F. Warren's work "The Paradise Found or the Cradle of the Human Race at the North Pole"⁴ widely known in the West was translated into Russian and published in Russia at the same time. W. Warren was one of the first to have directed his attention to the polar region in quest of the initial homeland of not only Indo-Europeans, but also other peoples, and it was exactly his book that according to Tilak had inspired his work on the analysis of Rig-Veda.

As for the book by R. Sankrityayana, which was published in the middle of the XX-th century, N. Guseva emphasizes in the

preface to her translation of this work that the author for the first time in the history of science has introduced into scientific circulation a completely new term *Indo-Slavs* referring to the remote ancestors of the Aryans and the Slavs; this term was never used in scientific works before.

Being strongly convince that the ancient original homeland of Indo-Iranians was in the north of Eastern Europe at the Volga head Rahula Sankrityayana has constructed his book as a number of novels successively describing the different stages of the movement of the Aryans from the upper Volga to the Ganges during many thousands of years. It is desirable to dwell on this point specially since it is connected with the problem discussed in this article.

For example, in one of his novels telling about the mixing of the Aryans with the autochthon population of the Indian peninsula in about 1800 B.C. Sankrityayana, speaking about the Dravidian traditions adopted by the Aryans names "the worship of the male organ" among them⁵. The researcher was convinced that the phallic cult was a specific autochthonic contribution to the Aryan culture and was not typical of the early stage of the Aryans' history (that is of the period of the Indo-Slavic community dated by him to the VI-IV millenniums B.C.).

Analyzing the data of science accumulated for half a century after the publication of R.Sankrityayana's book we allow ourself to disagree with this conclusion of the Indian researcher. There are more than enough reasons for this.

For example, academician B.A.Rybakov in his work "The Paganism of the ancient Slavs" has cited a text of the XII-th century briefly called by him "A word about the idols" which reads that the Slavs "... worshipped the phallus, prayed and made offerings to its image and at weddings put these images into drinks"⁶. He emphasizes that the trustworthiness of the information of the author of "A word about the idols" is "confirmed also by archaeological materials: K. Yazdzewski found a bucket and a phallus, that is a complete set of the wedding ritual in the course of excavations at Lenchitse in the XII-XIII centuries layers"⁷. N.Guseva, too, writes about the existence of a developed phallic cult in Slavic antiquity. She notes that "the Slavs' phallic cult, in which

the worship of the wooden phallus of Rod played an important role, is described by medieval Arab travellers" and that "the function of ancient Slavic god Rod closely correlating with Aryan Rudra and, correspondingly, with Rudra-Shiva, the two-name god of Hinduism, was the fecundation of all living things, and, consequently, his energy was directed at multiplying people. Just as in India people pray for children to the image of Siva's penis, in ancient times the Slavs' ancestors turned to god Roda's phallus with the same supplication; and "phallic cult ideas were not alien to the ancient ancestors of the Indo-Europeans, too; the phallic rites were preserved, for example, in the Slavic paganism till later times"⁸.

Many facts testify that this cult was formed already in the ancestors of the Aryans and the Slavs. Turning to such a science as toponomy let us note that even in the XVIII-XIX centuries such river names as Padma (water-lily, lotus), Shiva and Ganesh were preserved together on the territory of the Olonetskaya gubernya (province). It gives as reason to suppose that the names of a number of deities which have become part of the Shiva cult had probably appeared not on the territory of Hindustan, but on the high latitudes of Eastern Europe, on the ancient lands of the residence of the Indo-Slavs' descendants. Otherwise it is very difficult to explain how the names of the three deities of Hinduism, that is Shiva, Padma (one of the names of Shiva's wife) and Ganesh, their elephant-headed son, could have become the names of the three rivers flowing near each other in the Russian North⁹. Besides, it should be noted that even today about 200 northern Russian rivers and lakes have the names which can be explained only with the help of Sanskrit¹⁰. The fact that the phallic cult was one of the basic ones, probably, already in Indo-slavic antiquity and contained also the ideas about the Universe is proven by such a very ancient object of everyday life as the traditional Russian distaff. So it is necessary to dwell on it in more details.

One cannot say that researchers have not paid attention to the Russian distaff as both a work of art and a utilitarian object. But in spite of the abundant literature the meaningful essence of this interesting and very functional object of the old rural life does not seem to be sufficiently studied for today. Out of the great

number of works only in few an attempt has been made to disclose the symbolic meaning of the distaff language. A considerable contribution to the explanation of the symbolism of the ornament has been made by B.A.Rybakov's article "Macrocosm in the Microcosm of Folk Art" where the author speaks about the shape of the distaff, about the most typical compositional elements of its décor. He connects all this complex with the world outlook of our distant ancestors – the Aeneolithic farmers. He notes a connection of the cosmogonical symbolism fixed in the ornament of the distaff with the idea of fertility, reproduction, with the system of mythological ideas about the harmony of life and death¹¹. B.A.Rybakov turns again to this subject in his fundamental work "The paganism of Ancient Slavs" where together with a variety of material on ornamentation confirming the author's thought about the presence of a complicated cosmogonical scheme, the general picture of the Universe as it was imagined by our distant ancestors on the distaffs, an interesting bottom of the distaff in the shape of a lying male half-figure, is given¹² (Fig.1.1). The arms of this odd character are crossed on the breast as in the case with the dead, but the eyes are wide-open. The leg of the distaff is inserted into the rectangular slit of the mouth with an even row of teeth; this leg is completed by a comb or a plate ("lopaska" – a vertical plank) with a whole of its cosmogonic symbolism. A circle with a rosette with six petals, a symbol of light, fire, life is placed in the lower part of the torso of this character where the spinner sat. B.A.Rybakov writes the following about this sign: "... the six-rayed thunder sign (a wheel with six spokes) was the most polysemantic, connected not only with the sun. It was connected with the skies on the whole, with the ruler of the skies whose power was especially felt in the thunder-storm and the lightning strokes and the thunder which accompanied the thunder-storm¹³.

Such a peculiar solution of the bottom does not seem to be accidental; it is a kind of clue allowing to some degree to explain some of the enigmas of the Russian distaff. The analysis of the décor of the bottoms of such a type brings one to the conclusion that there is the distinctly expressed symbolism of the male basis on them. It is known that the distaff was always made only by a

man from the beginning to the end, and was a traditional present to a woman – the wife, the bride, the daughter. But the thread obtained with the help of the distaff as we know played a very serious role in the mythological and poetic world of our ancestors. An attitude to the process of spinning as to a holy act is traced already in the Rig-Veda hymns. Let us recall the hymn about the "two maidens" who are crating the Universe, "own of them extends the yarn to another, and they do not tear it, do not cut it". In the hymn dedicated to the Universal Fire (Agni-Vaisvānara)¹⁴ the singer is distressed that he can understand neither the cloth, nor the yarn, nor that two spaces are being woven in competition – the black and the light days¹⁵.

It should be noted that in Sanskrit the word "*prajā*" – means birth, people, population, subjects, children, posterity, "*prajān*" means to come into existence, to be born, and "*prajāna*" means producing descendants, conception and, finally "*prajānana* – producing, giving birth, birih, reproduction, child-bearing, seed. Sanskrit dictionaries contain the explanation of the word "*prajān*" also as the designation of the male organ of reproduction¹⁶, which is especially important for this text. One should pay attention to the words of the hymns about creating the Universe which tells about a sacrifice which is "extended in threads", and it is being "woven" by fathers who are busy creating a cloth from threads, the cloth being fixed on pegs; and the role of the shuttles is played by glorifying melodies¹⁷.

The cloth of the Universe is being woven from the word-threads by a voice, by the ritual singing as if by a shuttle. And nothing surprising in the fact that the word "*prastava*" means a song of praise in Sanskrit¹⁸, whereas in North Russian dialects "*prostava*", "*prostavka*" means a strip of canvas filled with a cloth design by which shirts, towels, table-cloths, wedding sheets, etc were adorned¹⁹. The rhythm of the ornament is the rhythm of the holy canticle.

We know that a similar attitude to spinning and weaving is typical of Eastern Slavic tradition. For instance, A.N.Afanasyev notes: "Recollections about a miraculous spinning-wheel which spins pure gold, about gold and silver threads coming down from the sky have been preserved in Slavic tales. That wonderful pink

folk tradition the distaff was a kind of symbol of the male basis taking part in the process of spinning correlated with the act of life creation.

But the image-bearing and symbolic language of the Russian distaff is far from being exhausted by that. On distaffs we may encounter compositions which evidence that it is a peculiar ancient calendar. For instance, on one of the distaffs of the XIX-th century (the Gryazovetsk district of the Vologda region) crowned with seven teeth, on the left side of the broad leg there is a wickerwork in the shape of a stylized wriggling seven-headed snake with triangular heads (Fig.III). All the details of the composition on this leg are ornamented with little triangles which number 368 in all. Probably, the snake, the most ancient symbol of eternity (it is not accidental that Aryan god Vishnu, the ruler of time is depicted in India today, too, as lying on a seven-headed snake), bears the markings of all the days of the year on its body. On another, also Gryazovetsk, distaff the total number of the triangles ornamenting it amount to 360. These peculiar calendars still await (Fig.III) their deciphering. Extremely ancient is the décor of one of the distaffs from Tarnoga kept in the funds of the Vologda preserve museum; it was made in 1890 (Fig.I,2). Judging from the numerical ratio of the elements of the ornament on the lopaska – it being multiple 7 (7, 14, 21, 28) one can suppose that we have here a peculiar calendar-cyclic scheme connected with the lunar calendar (1, 2, 3, 4, the weeks of the lunar calendar). But still more striking is by its antiquity the complex of the ornaments on the leg of this distaff. Nearly as high as the lopaska it differs by its fanciful shape characteristic for the Tarnoga distaffs. Immediately under the lopaska the leg takes a spindle-shaped outline and changes into a horizontally situated rectangle decorated with two radiant squares over which “a crown” is placed consisting of 31 vertical stripes. Further on there is a stylized image of a woman: at first a circle with a six-petalled rosette, the symbol of her head, then a small enlargement – the shoulders and the breast-ornamented with two radiant rosettes, a symbolic image of a male figure with a head as an eleven-rayed rosette. The arms are spread apart and lowered down, the legs are bent in the knees and widely apart, the indications of the sex are emphasized (Fig. I,2). But on

the rear side turned to the spinner the leg is ornamented in a different way. For instance, on the rounded side there are not a six-petalled, but a thirteen-rayed rosette, above it a toothed stripe, a sign of water, but below are 28 vertical stripes (Fig.I,3). On the end of the bottom is although a worn-out but easily readable inscription similar to those described above. On closer examination the leg of this distaff manifests a very interesting picture similar to what we saw on the bottom described above in the shape of a male half-figure. There the lopaska of the distaff grows out of the mouth of some deity, the forefather (probably, Rod), this lopaska bearing the picture of the Universe, the cyclic time, the harmonic, regulated existence. In this structure especially evident are the parallels between eastern Slavic Rod and Vedic Rudra: “Being Vedic, that is Aryan deity Rudra, probably, had become an object of the Aryans’ cult worshipping not in India itself, but had been known already in the pre-Indian period of their history”²². His name as is the name of Rod is connected with the Russian words “ruda” in the meaning of blood and “rudy”, “rdyany” in the meaning of the red colour; he (as Rod is) is the ruler of the skies, the creator of all living things, the angry deity of storms²³. One of the most ancient texts (Svetásvataropaniśad) unites Rudra and Shiva²⁴.

It seems that the man-bottom carved from wood by an unknown Russian peasant as if giving birth to the whole Universe from its mouth is by its functions much like the description of Rudra given above whose name in India has become one of the names-theonims of pre-Aryan god Shiva. Probably, the spinner, a woman performing the act of spinning a thread, a basically sacred act correlated with the creation of life, was in the role of the impersonal female Universal basis whose unity with the male primordial basis begets the whole Cosmos which has gone out of chaos, the eternal and immutable order of being. It is well comparable with what is briefly formulated by researchers: “God Shiva-Rudra is one but each female bosom on earth and the earth itself are prepared to accept his seed and beget life”²⁵.

The leg of the distaff from Tarnoga bearing a lopaska with a complex calendar-cyclic system has an anthropomorphic outline: it is the image of a woman. A rectangle adorned with two radiant

squares is her head-dress. The conclusion can presumably be drawn that it is a deity at least because the same head-dress crowns the goddess with a blossoming branch in her hand on the carpet of the VI cent. B.C. from the Altaic Pazirik kurgan (burial mound)²⁶. The evidence that a goddess is depicted here, too, is a six-petalled rosette, a symbol of the sun and the light energy of the Universe, which is her "head". But it is generally known that in Vedic hymns the bride-wife is called "Sun" (Surya), and the bridegroom-husband is called "Moon" (Soma). Such are they in a wedding hymn of Rig-Veda²⁷. The same are they in eastern Slavik folk tradition. Let us recall that in the Russian folklore the wife is "the beautiful sun" ("krasnoye solnyshko"), and the husband is "the bright moon" ("yasen mesyats")²⁸. Already F.I. Buslayev stressed in the middle of the XIX-th century that "the sun was a special deity and, besides, exactly a goddess"²⁹.

The question is natural here: how the six-petalled rosette can in one case be a bottom in the shape of a "fiery seed" and in another – the Tarnoga distaff leg – the head of a goddess. Probably it is worthwhile to recall that it was characteristic for the most ancient stages of mythological consciousness to join the male and female bases into a single whole. Such images remain in people's memory for a long time. There is no need to seek examples: in the Tripolye culture formed in the south of Eastern Europe in the IV-III-th millennia B.C. clay figures of women were often likened to the phallus by their shape or had phallus-like heads. Millennia have passed, but as in the past the craftsmen of toys from the town of Kargopol (Arkhangelsky region) give an odd phallus-like shape to painted clay "babas" (women). Coming back to our Tarnoga distaff let us note that the goddess depicted on its leg has two rosettes on the level of her breast: an eleven – and an eight-rayed ones. Here it is worthwhile to turn again to the Vedic hymns and the texts of the "fifth Veda" – Mahābhārata, which says many times that goddess Aditi (literally "not tied, boundless, earth, earth and sky") is the sky, mother and father and son, all the gods, everything what is born and so on. With seven (sons) did she go to gods, but she left the eighth one so that he would become the ancestor of all people and the first of the mortals. Be-

sides these eight sons borne by her³⁰, the Vedic texts speak about eleven rudras³¹.

Are not the eleven – and eight-rayed rosettes of the Tarnoga distaff of the end of the XIX-th century adorning the breast of the goddess, whose stylized image is depicted on the external side of the leg of this distaff, connected with these Vedic gods – the eight Vasu-creators (these are water, the Pole-star, the moon, the earth, the wind, fire, dawn and light) and the eleven Rudras, the destroyers (both are mentioned and described nearly in all the mythological dictionaries). A geometricalized, very symbolic image of the son – a male character with three phalluses – is placed under such a peculiar "breast" in the belly of the goddess. Here, perhaps, it is worthwhile to recall that in ancient mythology the deity of the producing forces of Nature, Priap, had the epithet "Triphallus" that is possessing three phalluses. He was considered the creator of the sea and land, the God of all things, the Holy one, father and king, benefactor and protector. Feasts in honour of Priap in March and June were accompanied by merry-making and games (as is the March – Shrovetide and the June feast of Ivan Kupala in the eastern Slavs – S.Zh.). Priap was often depicted on gravestones. Let us recollect that both the Shrovetide and Ivan Kupala of the Slavs are connected with the cult of the dead and fertility as well as with the phallus worship.

It is worthwhile to separately emphasize that the bottom of the North Russian distaff "kopylka" (that is made from one piece of wood) was either a root or a part of a very big twig of a conifer which were given a functionally required shape. And it was exactly on the bottom where that word of three words denoting phallus in the Russian slang mentioned above was carved or scratched in. It is interesting also that this deity (Priap) was closely connected with blood, the red colour, and it was depicted in a purple or deeply saffron-coloured tunic. Let us recollect that this colour was the necessary attribute of both Vedic Rudra, the creator of the sea and land, the God of everything, the father and king, the creator and destroyer, and of eastern Slavic Rod – the creator of the Universe, of Universal father, who performed the same functions as Rudra (and Priap).

Thus on the external side of the leg of the Tarnoga distaff we have, judging from everything, a stylized image of a goddess connected with the sun, of which the evidence are 31 incisions above her head (that is the number of days in a sun month), and embodying the light energy of the Universe, whose sign is also the six-petalled rosette. Her son is placed in the belly of this goddess; this son is the father of all, the forefather, the deity of blood relationship and of the productive forces of nature. One can draw such a conclusion after summarizing the above descriptions.

On the back side of the leg turned to the spinner everything is a bit different (Fig. 1,3). Here, too, there is a "divine" headdress in the shape of two radiant squares adorned with geometrical ornaments of triangles, but is crowned not a six-, but a thirteen-rayed rosette – "the head". Besides, above the rosette and on the level of the shoulders (where on the external side of the leg two rosettes – the breasts are placed) there are toothed and wavy lines – the signs of water. There are 28 vertical incisions below the lower sign of water. And finally the bottom of the distaff is marked by an extremely specific inscription (about which it was said above) and a carved relief image of a snake also belonging to the circle of images connected with the reproducing male basis. Thus there forms a fairly stable scheme in which the external side of the leg is a female solar deity with a son in its belly, and the back side is the male lunar and water deity, of which the evidence are the 13 rays (the number of the months in a lunar year) of the rosette-head, the toothed – wavy stripes – the ideograms of water; and the 28 incisions are the 28-29 days in a lunar month. Besides, since we have spoken above about the closeness of the images of Vedic Rudra and eastern Slavic Rod it is worthwhile to recollect also that Rudra is a deity of the lunar cycle (in Rig-Veda he is sung of together with Soma – the Moon)³² connected with the idea of fecundity, longevity, death and a new rebirth³³.

It seems that there are all the grounds to draw some summarizing conclusion: this Tarnoga distaff has preserved in its images the relics of the most ancient Indo-European, and particularly the Aryan, ideas about the structure of the Universe and about the very act of Universe creation. And it is exactly here that we come across a very archaic, known to many peoples, belief that at the

beginning of all beginnings there had been some divine bisexual creature, the first divine couple, the divine twins of different sexes. As an example it is worthwhile to recollect Vedic Aditi – the mother, father and son at the same time, in herself uniting the male and female bases from which all the Universe is created, Scandinavian Imir and, of course, Arian Rudra, about whom N.Guseva writes: "Attention should be paid to a Vedic tale according to which initially Rudra appeared as a creature consisting of a male and female halves (the cursive is that of the author, S.Zh.). Later in Indian iconography it was transformed into the image of Shiva-Rudra as Nara-Nari ("husband-wife") depicted in sculpture and painting in the shape of a human figure, whose left half is female and right half is male"³⁴. She also notes that in Sanskrit the word "rodas" denotes "earth and sky", that is the Universe, and if there is the source of the name of Supreme eastern Slavic deity Rod in this notion then he initially had also female and male bases in himself. In the Slavic (also in North Russian) tradition the expression: "The Sky – father, the Earth – mother" has reached our time. The notion about the initial bisexual character of the creating basis and its connection with the tree is traced in the Vedic texts where the question is asked: "What forest was it and what a tree from which the sky and the earth were cut?"; it is also traced in the hymn to Agni (the god of Fire) which speaks about the two bases – the female and male ones which are the two pieces of wood; being rubbed against each other they give the holy fire³⁵.

It is interesting that the Tarnoga distaff of the XIX century is made from wood that is a material which potentially bears fire in itself: for instance, in the eastern regions of the Vologda region people believe that "the live fire obtained by rubbing two pieces of wood against each other protects from illnesses". It is possible to see here the embodiment of the doubled male and female bases giving birth to a son and sung of already in the hymn of Rig-Veda. And as it is on the distaff so it is in the hymn to Fire divided by Myllennia: the necessary component of the sacred act of begetting life is yarn (that is what is produced with a distaff), the foundation of all the Universe, the "navel-string of movement and

rest". The sign of equality is actually put between the obtaining of "live fire" and the spinning of yarn.

Being connected with the symbolism of the producing male basis, with cosmogony and the calendar cycles and the cult of deities, the Creators of the world, the Russian distaff is most closely united with the cult of fecundity and the cult of ancestors.

Not only the phallic symbolism present on the distaff speaks about the tie with the cult of fecundity, but many other things, too. For example, in the 20-s the students of local lore, history and economy of Ryazan region got information that in this region maidens rolled on bottoms "on Pure Monday so that flax grow well"³⁶. Not only maidens but women and little girls rolled in this region on Pure Monday so that flax and millet grow "long and clean". "In the village Novinki women sit down on the bottom with their body naked. In the village Gublitsa they roll standing on the knees", - an informer noted. This custom had been stably preserved till 1928³⁷. But even in 1961 ethnographers observed one old woman rolling on the bottom of the distaff in the village Chernava of the Ryazan region during the Pancake (Shrovetide) week. They were told that "at fasting they went out with bottoms, put a pancake in the apron (pancakes as it is known were connected with the cult of ancestors - the author S.Zh.) and rolled so that flax grow better"³⁸. B.K. Sokolova notes that in the Vitebsk guberniya (province) before sliding on sledges at Shrovetide "the women must slide down hill onto a distaff; the longer such a slide the longer will flax grow. But if the slider falls, she will not reap the ripened flax"³⁹. She also emphasizes that on the whole "a magic meaning was initially ascribed to the downhill sliding. It can also be seen in the survival preserved in some places at the beginning of the XXth century - "to slide for the sake of growing flax". For instance, in the Vologda guberniya married women, too, slid downhill. It was done not only for the sake of entertainment. It was thought that of the slide was successful the flax would be good. In Shankursk uyezd (district), also near Vologda, on Pure Monday "wenches standing slid down-hill so that the flax would be soft". For the sake of a good harvest they slid downhill also on distaff bottoms; the same custom was fixed in the Belorussians, too"⁴⁰. It should be noted that Shrovetide (Pancake

week), "Maslenitsa" is the only big pre-Christian feast which is not connected with the Christian calendar and which has not got a new interpretation. And it was exactly at Maslenitsa wholly and absolutely connected with the ancestors cult that such ritual slides on bottoms were performed.

There are certain similarities to this custom of sliding on distaffs during the Pancake week ensuring fecundity for the beginning new agricultural year in the beliefs of the inhabitants of the Hindu Kush (Afghanistan), the Nuristanians, the descendants of one of the first waves of Indo-Iranians who in distant antiquity (III-II millennia B.C.) had reached the mountains of Afghanistan and who have preserved the rites, rituals, beliefs of their remote ancestors in their inaccessible mountain valleys. For example, the inhabitants of the Hindu Kush and the ideas about "women-rui" (werewolves) who flew over the mountains and valleys at nights increasing their fecundity and their horse was a chest or a distaff⁴¹. The connection of the distaff with the world of the dead is reflected in a very interesting custom which existed in mountainous Tajikistan, that is also in the descendants of ancient Indo-Europeans - the eastern Iranians. For example, if a man left his home and was missing the rite called "sargardon" was performed: "On the last Wednesday of the Safar month, at night when jumpings over fires were organized three-four women lacked themselves in a house trying to do it so that nobody would learn about it. They made the doll of a man - "mortiyak". This doll was made very carefully. The doll was put in a small bag and it was hung on a peg driven into a wall. Then they had a girl not yet at the puberty age sit in front of a distaff; she had to spin the distaff backwards until dawn all the time repeating: "Let him feel worry and soon come back..." It was believed that after it the missing man was to come back after a while. If the rite was performed by a mullah he wrote an incantation and hung it on a tree, and then "spinning a distaff backwards said a prayer"⁴². If after a week the man did not come he was considered to be dead. It has been noted many times that the Russian and especially the North Russian wedding by its rite side, melodies, texts and many details is astonishingly close to the funeral rite. To the customs of this circle, perhaps, also belongs the custom of burning tow on the bride's

distaff during the betrothal "as a sign of the final decision concerning the girl's fate"; this custom was known in the Novgorod guberniya⁴³. That this rite is ancient and, probably, goes back to the epoch common for all Indo-Europeans is testified by one of the episodes in the "History" by Herodotus where it is said that in Greece on the island of Delos girls cut a lock of hair before the wedding and, wind it round a distaff and put it on the grave of maidens who have come from the North with the gifts for gods from the Hyperboreans (that is from the coast of the Cronian ocean or the White Sea) and who have died on Delos.

The connection with the funeral cult of ancestors and the cult of fecundity is also manifested in the ornamentation of the lopaskas of the traditional northern Russian "kopylkas" – distaffs; mostly this ornamentation consists of different combinations of triangle, rosettes, rhombuses made by the method of three-edged hollowed carving. But we come across the same ornamental motifs being the symbols of fecundity and amulets on artifacts from stone and metal on the vast territories of the Eurasian steppes and forest-steppes in different historical periods. They occur on the weaponry of the II-I millennia B.C., on early Scythian artefacts of the turn of the VII-VI-th cents B.C., on the carved hammer from the Pastyrsk site of an ancient settlement (the middle Dnieper region). It should be noted that the ornament of radiant squares covering the surface of this hammer is absolutely identical with the décor of the lower part of the external side of the lopaskas of Tarnoga distaffs and, for instance, of the one described above. It is interesting that this published hammer has, in E.V. Yakovenko's opinion, an ornamentation which exactly testifies about the cult purpose of this object of its use "for some cult connected with fertility"⁴⁴. As amulets and the symbols of a future rebirth the ornaments consisting of triangles are constantly present on the Russian carved gravestones of the XIII-XIV-th cents from the excavations of the Moscow Kremlin. Ornamental Compositions on the medieval Russian grave stones are absolutely identical with the ornaments on burial stelae in Bosnia, Herzegovina and the regions which were part of the medieval kingdom of Herzegovina. Concerning the gravestones of the XIII-XIV cents from the Moscow Kremlin N.S.Shelyapina writes: "The reconstruction of the main

elements of the ornamental compositions of the gravestones has made it possible to establish that they are the initial designs for the decorating of white-stone gravestones of Moscow and the Moscow region in the XVI-XVII-th cents. Chronologically and stylistically they precede the widely-spread types of gravestones with epitaphs. The placement of an ornament of triangles, rosettes, stripes and lines dividing the space into several zones on the surface of a gravestone of the XIII-XIV-th cents rules out the possibility to place an epitaph on it (the cursive is the author's, S.Zh.)⁴⁵. But in this case the ornament itself functioned as an epitaph and an amulet and in the same quality it was also on the gravestones and burial stelae of medieval Bosnia. We can find a sufficient number of examples when the ornamentation of the lopaskas of Slavic distaffs is almost identical with the décor and amulet on gravestones. Such a coincidence does not seem to be accidental, and many facts convince of this. For instance, N.N. Veletskaya in her work "The Pagan symbolism of Slavic archaic rituals" gives the samples of traditional Ukrainian wooden sepulchral monuments which are completely identical by their shape with the Russian and first of all North Russian distaffs⁴⁶. The closeness of distaffs by their shape to sepulchral monuments as well as using them as such monuments has been noted by N.I.Tolstoy who emphasized that: "The sepulchral monuments interesting for us are fixed in the regions where there is a lot of stone, but they are *without fail wooden*, which is, presumably, connected with the cult of trees (the tree of life, etc.)". To learn how prevalent they were in the past very valuable is this kind of evidence: "In 1743 Serbian bishop Pavel Nenadovich ordered his congregation to put crosses on the graves and not to follow the custom and to erect plain wood with a distaff"⁴⁷. It should be noted that in the Christmas rites of the eastern parts of the Vologda region a custom had been preserved till the 30-s of the XX-th century when young men snatched distaffs from girls and carried them to graves. Of an indubitable interest is the fact that the shape of the leg of the Tarnoga distaff described above (on the whole typical for the distaffs of this region) is absolutely identical with the traditional gravestones of Upper Balcaria and Karachay (the North Caucasus) which for their initial sample have the

wooden sepulchral monuments of an archaic type similar to those which exist in some villages of mountainous Balcaria till today⁴⁸. In our case it is necessary to speak not about a simple similarity of the Tarnoga distaff leg to stone and wooden sepulchral monuments of the North Caucasus but about the analogies even in the details of the ornament (Fig.I,4). This circumstance may seem strange and inexplicable.

It is known that among the peoples of the Northern Caucasus the representatives of the Indo-European linguistic family are the Ossets who had come from the southern Russian steppes, and who are the descendants of an ancient people called the Alans. Outstanding Soviet linguist V.I.Abaev speaking about the Scythian languages (to which the Alan language belongs, too) notes that by comparison with the Slavic languages it is remarkable to observe the "abundance of specific Scythian and Slavic coincidences;" by the number of these coincidences the Scythian and Slavic links "far exceed... the links of the Scythian language with any other European language or a linguistic group"⁴⁹. he also is of the opinion that very many Ossetic words in the Balcarian language, the extraordinary closeness of the appearance of the Balcarians to the type of the neighbouring Ossetic people of Digortsi (in whom the percentage of fair-haired and bright-eyed persons is very considerable), the tsonkanie, that is pronouncing "ch" as "ts" characteristic of Ossets and Balkars – "*all these should certainly be considered as the Alan heritage*"⁵⁰ (the cursive is of the author, S.Zh.). Besides, V.I. Abaev notes that "many cases have been discovered *when the Ossetic language comes close to the North Russian (Onega, Archangelsk) dialects evading the South Russian ones*"⁵¹.

Thus the kinship between the ancient population of the north of Eastern Europe which was called "Alans" or "Russoalans" (But the famous linguist N.Ya.Marr called them "North Sarmatians" or "Russes") and the descendants of the Alans – the Ossets and the Balkars, is, judging from everything, closer than it can seem at first sight. Therefore it is not surprising that there is much in common between the Ossetic language and North Russian dialects, and that the leg of the Tarnoga distaff is so like the Ossetic and Balkar (that is Alan) gravestones. We have here the evidence

of the ancient migrations of kindred tribes and peoples to new territories when they leaving their initial homeland and migrating to the south carried their rites, beliefs, myths, traditions and culture with themselves.

Not only the gravestones of the North Caucasus but also the ancient monuments of Central Asia give the grounds for such conclusion. For instance, a clay vessel for the bones of the dead (the ossuary) of the VII-IX cents B.C. found in the excavations of the Krasnorechensk site of an ancient settlement (Saryta) was adorned with a carved ornament surprisingly similar to the décor of the Tarnoga distaff lopaska. There were the same rosettes, compositions of triangles, twigs. The significance of such an ornament can be seen not only in that it was on an ossuary, but also that the design of the carvings in rooms of ancient Saryta was different; it was not geometric, it was vegetable. Besides, the Krasnorechensk ossuary is adorned with small sculptured figure of men in a characteristic posture, the arms crossed on the breast⁵². And here again we have to recollect the bottoms of the Russian distaffs in the shape of a male half-figure with the arms crossed and a six-petalled rosette on the torso. It should be noted that in Tajikistan the three-edged-hollowed carving similar to the north Russian carving has from the earliest times been prevalent on the mazars – the "tombs of the saints" – that is the objects connected with the cult of ancestors and fecundity (Fig.III, 1,3,4).

For the sake of a comparison it is worthwhile to turn also to the cultural traditions of the inhabitants of the Hindu Kush mountains (Afghanistan), the descendants of the first Indo-European immigrants who had come here from their initial East European homeland long before the beginning of the II millennium B.C. There is still a tradition prevalent in them to make carved wooden memorial boards in honour of the distinguished deceased in the shape of a pole adorned with a three-edged-hollowed carving and ended in a figure of a horse or a rider of a one-or two-headed horse. K.Yettmar is of the opinion that the latter image (on a two-headed horse), apparently, was "the highest degree of honour which one can only imagine"⁵³. But K.Yettmar notes: in North

Kafiristan "horses were not kept", although as sepulchral monuments... the statues of riders were often put"⁵⁴. One of such images kept in the National museum of Kabul is an absolute analogy with the North Russian "shveika" (a prop for sewing by hand, very close to distaffs by its décor) which, too, often ends in exactly the same riders by their structure and modeling. It should be noted that the Nuristanians' anthropomorphic characters carve in wood depicted only dead people; as for deities they are represented by boards covered with the geometric carving of a certain type sometimes "resembling human figures by their outline". It is worthwhile to recollect here that the symbol of the supreme female deity of the Kalashes (one of the peoples of Nuristan) was a carved board, and it was considered that *the main meaning was exactly expressed by a three-edged-hollowed ornament placed in the centre of this board*. Besides, in the Kalashes the carved pole covered with this geometric carving is "the religious centre not only for home but for the family, too"⁵⁵. In connection with what is said above let us note that the Kalashes' carved pole as well as some types of carved memorial boards in the shape of a pole are absolutely identical by décor and shape with North Russian "shveikas" which as a rule have a phallus-like shape. As for the carved board, which is the symbol of the Nuristanians' female deity, it practically repeats both the décor and the shape of the distaff lopaska (Fig.IV).

It is impossible to be in attentive to everything said above about the functioning of distaffs as gravestones on the territory of the kingdom of Bosnia (where instead of crosses till the middle of the XVIII-th cent (!) wooden distaffs were put according to the custom) as well as about the North Russian custom to carry distaffs to the graves at Christmas and even lower them into the newly dug grave pits. We can suppose that the community of the shape and decor of Hindu Kush carved boards, North Caucasian gravestones, the legs and the lopaskas of North Russian distaffs and shveikas is to a considerable degree the result of the ancient unity of the functions of, as it might seem, different objects and of the kinship of the peoples which used the same familiar shapes with a similar meaning. If it is the case the further study and dif-

ferentiation of the types of the distaffs and their décor will probably give researchers a very wealthy material for the study of the ethnogenetic and migratory processes which were taking place on the vast territories of Eurasia during a long historical period. Probably, exactly because of such ethnogenetic and migratory processes whose reality is confirmed also by anthropological data there took place the consecration of a certain technique of the carving on wood, of a similar or very mutually similar set of the geometric elements of the carved wooden décor. The hypothetical conclusion is that the mentioned peoples are connected by the unity of origin, by genetic kinship.

The absolute identity of the technical methods, of the elements of ornaments and even of their combinations characteristic of Central Asian and North Russian carving on wood testify to the common ethnic sources of this tradition and to the fact that it could originate exactly where there were abundant forests and where from generation to generation people had been elaborating the methods of wood treatment and had created a single world of geometric images so meaningful for them that their descendants have preserved this images' for at least three-four millennia.

All this once again testifies to the highly sacral significance of the three-edged-hollowed ornament exactly in the Indo-European, specifically Slavic-Indo-Iranian environment; on the basis of the prevalence and preservation of such an ornament in modern peoples often living rather far from each other now we can judge about their probable ethnogenetic kinship. Exactly the three-edged-hollowed ornamentation is linked by researchers to the symbols of the good and fecundity of the ancient Indo-European population of Eurasia of the III-II-rd millennia B.C. And most vividly and widely such a three-edged-hollowed ornament is represented exactly on North Russian distaffs which as we have found out above were not only a simple tool for getting thread. They were the symbols of the male basis which took part in the spinning of thread, the analogue of life, fate, thought, posterity; they were the embodiment of the Tree of life on its branches carrying the Eternal Time – the past, the present and the future; they

were sepulchral monuments and unified the world of the living and the world of the dead, of the ancestors and the descendants.

Being the embodiment of the Upper Initial Deity the distaff was the symbol of the fecundity of all the living things on Earth. Exactly in it in the best way embodied was the idea of the eternal harmony of existence, with its endless flowings of life into death and death into life⁵⁶.

And in this its quality the distaff has preserved in itself that complex of world outlook structures which was inherent in the phallic cult formed in the depths of millennia.

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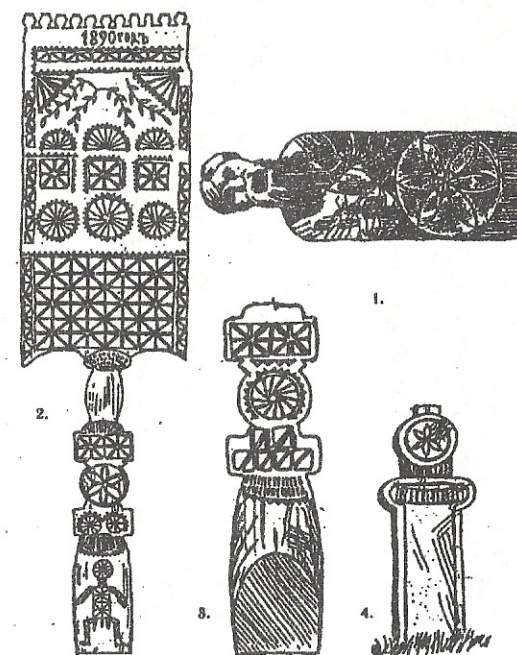


Fig.I 1. The bottom of a distaff, XX cent.

2. Distaff. Tarnoga, 1890.

3. The internal side of the distaff leg,

4. Gravestone. Balkar region. North.

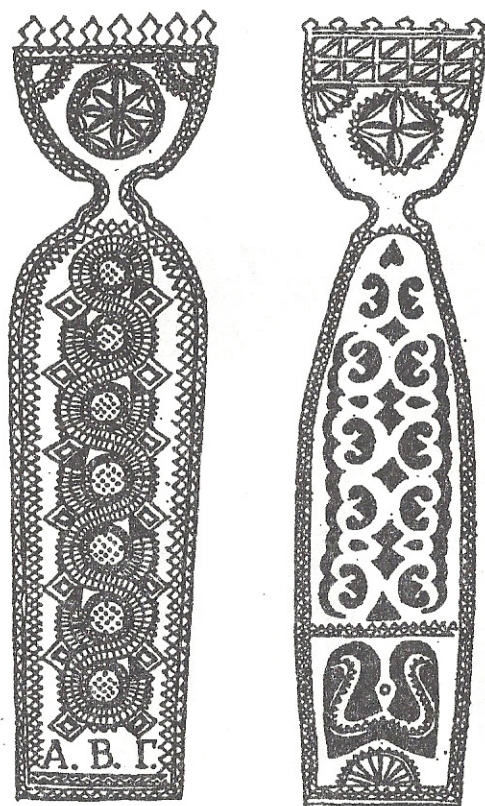


Fig. II Distaffs, 19 cent. the Gryazovetsk
uyesd (district), Vologda gubernya (province).

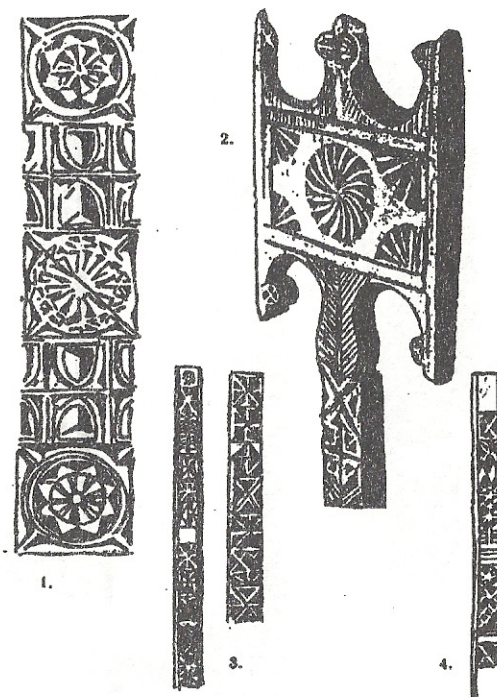


Fig. III 1. Mountain Tajikistan.
Carved wooden cross-beam (matitsa), XIX cent.
2. Distaff. The Vologda gubernya, XIX cent.
3-4. Pamir. Wooden architectural details.

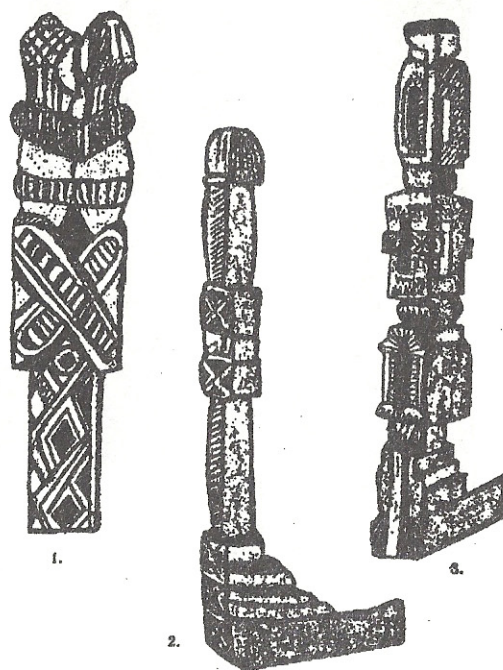


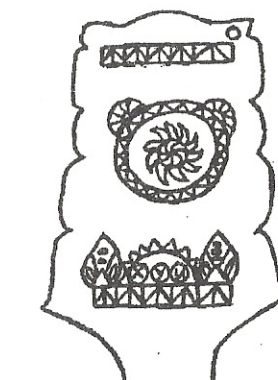
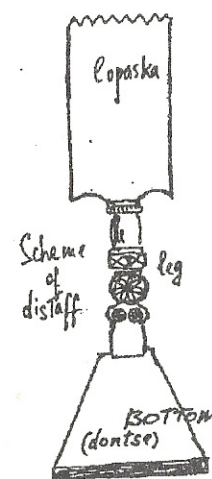
Fig.IV. 1. Afghanistan. Hindukush
Carved wooden pole, XIX cent.

2-3. Shveika. The Vologda gubernya, XIX cent.

The Vologda local preserve museum

Out of more than 500 distaffs of the museum collection
(in 1984-1985) 124 have such inscriptions (scratched,
worn down, carved in, written in paint)

Three samples are given below: in Tables I, II, III.



A distaff from
the Verkhovazhsk district,
Inventory № 17745
(The inscription is on the front side as
a component of the carved ornament)

An inscription is on the bottom
(scratched on)

XV
/A

Inventory № 27560/54 (exhibit of 1983)

1. On the internal side of the distaff (on the left) it is carved from above downwards. There are traces of a paint layer in the inscription.

2. A second carved inscription is placed on the internal side of the distaff (under character Y).

Xy
X
N

3. An inscription on the internal side above, under red paint.

HYX

T.II

T.III

Inventory №5602 dated to 1900

1. It is scratched on the internal side of the bottom (at a distance of 21 cm from the end of the bottom)

X
X
X

2. At a distance of 21 cm from the beginning of the bottom it is pressed in.

Y X H

3. At a distance of 26 cm from the beginning of the bottom it is scratched on.

X
X
X

4. On the external side of the leg (along all its leg it is deeply pressed in (the characters are blackened).

+ + +

5. On the external side of the bottom over all its breadth

Y X N

6. On the external side of the lopaska under the depiction of a clock with hands (fine carving) characters are carved (a mirror inscription).

N X

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