

Anthropomorphic and zoomorphic representations depicted as if X-rayed through the rib cage in which the ribs and spine are detailed are widely known in stone art, with anthropomorphic figures with a “revealed” internal structure being encountered more rarely than zoomorphic ones. In Russian historiography, such a style is known by different names – “X-ray style,” “skeletal,” “lattice,” or “anatomical.” The term “X-ray style” (*rentgenovskii*) is probably preferable, as it more closely corresponds with the scientific literature in English.

Anthropomorphic figures in X-ray style are known on such monuments of stone art as Sikachi-Alyan on the Lower Amur¹, Basynai on the Olyokma², the Ukyr mountain on the Kudin steppes³, Great Kada and Manzia on the Angar⁴, the bay of Aiya on the bank of Lake Baikal⁵, Tomskaya Pisanitsa on the Tom⁶, the Irbit engraved stone in the Middle Urals⁷, and so forth. A.P. Okladnikov connected such figures with “shamanic ideology,” with “legends about receiving the shamanic gift.”⁸ Important materials for interpretation of stone representations in X-ray style⁹ are contained in the extensive Siberian ethnographic literature.

For the Turkic people of Southern Siberia, it was characteristic to represent one’s lineage as “bones,” as “bones are what remain of a dead person, an ancestor. A bone is the minimum that preserves the essential characteristics of life – past and future.”¹⁰ As an intermediary between the world of the living and the dead capable of establishing a connection between them, the shaman dedicates himself, in the words of C. Rasmussen, to “his great task through that part of his body that is destined more than any other to resist the action of the sun, wind, and weather.”¹¹

The structural communion of the shamanic calling and rites of initiating ordinary members of the community has been noted by many researchers; in particular, attention has been focused on how the experience of death and rebirth is a leitmotif of all world religions, cultures, and myths¹². According to M. Eliade, “the crisis that a future shaman experiences many times leads to a collapse of personality and ‘madness’ and can be considered a symbolic submersion in the chaos that existed before the world, into the amorphous and indescribable state that has preceded every cosmology. But we know that, for ancient and traditional cultures, the symbolic return to Chaos amounts to preparation for a new act of creation.”¹³

For semantic deciphering of anthropomorphic stone representations in the X-ray style, the most important thing is the moment at which the shamanic gift is received, which is connected with the shaman’s body being dismembered by spirits, with the mystical experience of losing flesh and contemplation of one’s own skeleton. The uniformity of such representations among various peoples finds its expression in similar images made in the X-ray style. Having suffered the experience of death-rebirth was an extremely

important condition for receiving the shamanic gift. Only by going through this experience does a shaman reach a level at which a helping spirit will consider it possible to appear to him. Contemplation of one's own skeleton demands extremely intense concentration. No shaman is in a position to explain to himself the reason for and source of the supernatural ability to deprive his body of its ephemeral and transient flesh and blood.¹⁴

The ceremony of "dissection," "hacking apart," of the body as part of the rite of confirming a shaman has been described in great detail as it exists among the Yakuts by G.V. Ksenofont¹⁵. "They say that someone who needs to become a great shaman lies down for five or six days without speaking, as if he were dead," Ksenofont writes. "During this time, his whole body is covered with purple sores. They say about this person that 'he is lying down, being dissected.' '... I was condemned to unhappiness (by you), my fate was ruined!' He sings much about his misfortune in this spirit...'"¹⁶ The initiate, who is in an ecstatic state, is in a secluded place by which no one passes. He undergoes the torments of decapitation, laceration of the body with iron hooks, separation of the joints, removal of the flesh from the bones, etc. They remove both eyes from their sockets and put them in different places. G.V. Ksenofont's information that chosen shamans endure dissection three times, and "bad" ones only once, agrees with the data on the various levels of shamanic initiation, each of which is marked with a particular symbolic object – a sign of the shaman's status¹⁷. During the ritual, it was necessary to observe a series of taboos and restrictions of dietary and ritual nature, for instance, on referring to parts of one's body in everyday language as opposed to a special, holy one. The meaning of dismemberment consisted in matching the parts of the skeleton with their shamanic purpose. "During the period of torture of the shaman, a detailed investigation of his body takes place, with the spirits examining the bones of the chosen ones to determine if they all correspond to his elevated purpose; in some cases, the presence of an extra bone in a shaman hinders his being selected, while in others, on the other hand, it is demanded that there be an extra shamanic bone."¹⁸ The "shamanic bone" is a material manifestation of the spiritual abilities of the candidate. In the case in which one bone is missing, the shaman might have had to pay with the life of one of his relatives. In addition to the absence (or presence) of a bone, a broken bone might serve as a sign of a shaman, and the spirits are also able to add up the muscle fibers of the initiate while searching for extra ones. A bone might be lost before the future shaman senses the call to a *kamlanie* (shamanistic ritual)¹⁹. N.P. Dyrenkova adduces the story of an old Teleut woman about the reasons that she was not initiated as a shaman. "She had a vision: several people were cutting her body into pieces along the joints and putting them into a kettle for boiling. Then two more people came. Again they sliced, cleaned, and boiled her flesh. Then they took the meat from the kettle, put it on an iron board with iron talons, and looked at the parts of her body for a long time intensely and determined whether her bones and muscles were appropriate for shamanic service. There was one little bone too

many, and so she was unable to become a shaman.” With his spine, or, more precisely, the spirit inhabiting it, the shaman builds a dam “in the river of disaster and death,” “as if the shaman were building this dam with his own vertebrae.”²⁰

The theme of the specificity of a shaman’s skeleton reverberates with representations of the inhabitants of the other world, a sign of whom is often precisely an incomplete or unique skeletal structure, and any unusual abnormality served as an indicator of inhuman nature differing from the norm to a greater or lesser extent. These “unpeople” either do not have enough fingers or toes (three or four toes) or their bones are overly flexible or inverted. It may be that the characteristics of the inhabitants of the other world are transferred to the shaman, inherent in him as a mediator and go-between between the world of people and the mythical world of the spirits. It should be noted that, on the hands of the figures from Sagan-Zaba bay that are believed to be shamans, there are not enough fingers. Another characteristic of them is of interest – a massive, extremely large and powerful body with a triangular outline. Folk tradition attributed to monolithic character to the bones of the heroic ancestors from the mythic past, in this way opposing them to mortals²¹. It may be that the exaggerated monolithic character of the Sagan-Zabin figures conveys that they are of inhuman nature.

The initiation of a priest in the Bon religion in Tibet was conceived of as a liberation of him from his flesh down to the skeleton and the acquisition of new flesh and blood. Hohimoy – characters in the Lamaist Cham mystery in Nepal, Mongolia, Buryatia, and Tuva – wore skull masks and dressed in a costume painted to look like a skeleton. They personified the middle state between death and new birth. “It is striking,” M. Eliade wrote, “to what degree these Tibetan masks and costumes in the form of a skeleton resemble the costumes of the shamans of Central and Northern Asia... Until more extensive information can be gathered, we are inclined to believe that this type of meditation is archaic, pre-Buddhist in its spirituality, which was founded on the ideology of hunting tribes (the sanctity of bone) and had the goal of ‘ripping’ the soul out of its body for a mystical journey, that is, ecstasy.”²² In a medieval Tamil poem, the culminating moment of revelation of the genuineness of a king who has been initiated into Buddhism is connected with his seeing his own skeleton²³. M. Eliade distinguishes the meaning of shamans seeing their skeletons among hunters and agricultural peoples and meditation on the skeleton in Tantric Buddhism and Lamaism. He emphasizes that “for the former, its goal is to re-experience the original source of animal life and share being with it, while at the same time, for Indo-Tibetan monks, it means to contemplate the eternal cycle of existence arranged by karma...”²⁴

According to R. Walsh, if a shaman undergoes the experience of dismemberment as an involuntary and difficult ordeal, for the tantric practice of Chod the experience is considered to be a conscious visualization of the dismemberment of the body and its

being given to angry deities and hungry spirits to be devoured²⁵. The symbolic meaning of the skeleton is connected with overcoming the opposition of life-unlife both in shamanism and in Buddhism.

Representations of contemplation of the skeleton and its depictions are not connected only with the Siberian and Indo-Tibetan group of cultures. They are spread throughout the polar zones of North America and further to the South up to the tropical Amazon. In the Eskimos' understanding, upon receiving the shamanic gift, an initiate must mentally free himself from the flesh and see his skeleton from the side. Among the Igloolik Eskimos, obtaining the shamanic gift is connected with undergoing one's own mystical death and resurrection. "And then a bear will enter from a lake or glacier and you will die. But you will regain your flesh, you will awaken and your clothes will fly to you."²⁶

Insects and worms, it appears, bring a similar semantic load into mythology. The theme of the body being cloven apart, out of which then vipers squirm, is encountered in a transformed guise in the mythology of the peoples of Northern Asia and the Far East. The inhabitants of the ravines of North America believed that one of the guardian-spirits or assistants of an initiate, which may be present at the time of initiation, possesses the supernatural ability to catch the flying harmful spirits of diseases, which have the appearance of worms, and cast them onto its enemies, who will immediately die²⁷. In fairy tales, the theme of dismemberment of the body and passing through fire often merges with the theme of obtaining a helper. The graduate loss in the tale of the original sense of dissection of the body leads to a monster, cannibal, or harmful creature being hacked apart and burned, out of the bones of which insects, worms, or reptiles appear²⁸. It is likely that is a very late interpretation, in which worms – inhabitants of the underworld, eaters of flesh who liberate the skeleton – have merged together with the form of a supernatural being.

The numerous zoomorphic representations in the X-ray style in the framework of this theme are deliberately not examined, but it is impossible to avoid noting the representations of hunters of the preservation of the lives of animals by means of keeping their bones or specific parts of them. The skeleton and the bone, as a part of it, are "the quintessence of life," the pledge that it will be eternally renewed, its source and receptacle. This representation of the inhabitants of the taiga regarding the skeleton is based on their everyday experience. Hunters returned the bones of animals to nature for future rebirth. "When they kill an animal, they don't break open its shoulder blades, but bury them by the roots of a tree in the taiga. If the they split open animals' bones, the animal will stop coming."²⁹

Attention is drawn to zoomorphic figures in the X-ray style that have spirals depicted on the body in addition to a skeleton. This has been considered as stylization, the loss of the

original meaning of the depicted elements. However, it can be suggested that in such figures the spiral, serving as a symbol of the uninterrupted cycle of the renewal of life, reinforces the theme of the bone and the skeleton as a pledge of rebirth.

The mythological theme of the body being “split open,” the sources of which are traced in anthropomorphic shapes preserved on rocks, were transformed over time into subjects for epics or story-telling. Thus, in the mythology of the early states, the theme of dissection is preserved in a changed form: a god or hero suffers being split open, not a shaman.

Many archaic themes connected with bone as a pledge of rebirth are encountered in fairy tales that tell us how a slain hero appeared from a preserved bone. There is an intriguing parallel in worldview on the mythological representations of Africans who live in Rwanda, who believe that when the sun sets in the West, people run after it who dismember it and share its body among themselves. At result, only one “bone” remains of the sun that travelled at night to the East, then was victorious in a battle with the moon, and was reborn as a “young man.”³⁰

Since ancient times, people have observed that the skeleton is the longest-lasting part of a living thing and perceived it as a pledge of reincarnation, of a return to a new earthly life. M. Eliade wrote that, for peoples who hunt, bone symbolizes the original root of animal life, the matrix from which flesh constantly renews itself. Animals and human beings are reborn beginning from bone. They remains for their allotted period in a fleshy state, and when they die, their lives are distilled down to the essence, which is concentrated in the skeleton. From it, they are reborn in accordance with the uninterrupted cycle of eternal return³¹.

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¹ Okladnikov A.P., *Petroglyphs of the Lower Amur*, 1971, table 73.

² Okladnikov A.P., Mazin A.I., *Carvings of the Olekma River and Outer Manchuria*, 1976, table 19.

³ Mikhailov T.M., *Buryat Shamanism: History, Structure and Social Functions*, 1987, p. 97.

⁴ Okladnikov A.P., *Petroglyphs of Angara*, tables 159, 168.

⁵ Okladnikov A.P., *Petroglyphs of Baikal: Monuments of the Ancient Culture of the Peoples of Siberia*, tables 21, 25, 26.

⁶ Okladnikov A.P., Martynov A.I., *Treasures of Tomsky Carvings*, 1972, fig. 216.

⁷ Chernetsov V.N., *Rock Drawings of the Urals*, 1971, figs. 51-2, 4.

⁸ Okladnikov A.P., *Petroglyphs of Baikal: Monuments of the Ancient Culture of the Peoples of Siberia*, 1974, pp. 81, 82.

⁹ Ksenofontov G.V., *Legends and Tales of Shamans among the Yakuts, Buryats, and Tungus*, 1930.

¹⁰ Sagalaev A.M., *Ural-Altai Mythology. Symbol and Archetype*, 1990, p. 39.

¹¹ Eliade M., *Aspects of Myth*, 1996, p. 92.

¹² Eliade M., *Aspects of Myth*, 1996, pp. 86-89; Novik E.S., *Ritual and Folklore in Siberian Shamanism. An Experiment in*

Juxtaposing Structures, 1984, p. 200; Walsh R., *The Spirit of Shamanism*, 1996, p. 65.

¹³ Eliade M., *Secret Societies: Rites of Initiation and Dedication*, 2002, pp. 230, 231.

¹⁴ Walsh R., *The Spirit of Shamanism*, 1996, pp. 62, 74.

¹⁵ Dyrenkova N.P., *Receiving the Shamanic Gift in the View of Turkic Tribes*, 1930, pp. 273, 274; Ksenofontov G.V., *Legends and Tales of Shamans among the Yakuts, Buryats, and Tungus*, 1930; pp. 9-15, 44-57; Popov A.A., 1947, pp. 282-293; Alekseev N.A., 1975, pp. 135-138.

¹⁶ Ksenofontov G.V., *Legends and Tales of Shamans among the Yakuts, Buryats, and Tungus*, 1930, p. 53.

¹⁷ Mikhailov T.M., *Buryat Shamanism: History, Structure and Social Functions*, 1987, pp. 99-103.

¹⁸ Dyrenkova N.P., *Receiving the Shamanic Gift in the View of Turkic Tribes*, 1930, p. 274.

¹⁹ Dyrenkova N.P., *Receiving the Shamanic Gift in the View of Turkic Tribes*, 1930, p. 274.

²⁰ Ksenofontov G.V., *Legends and Tales of Shamans among the Yakuts, Buryats, and Tungus*, 1930, pp. 55, 57.

²¹ Lvova E.L., Oktyabrskaya I.V., Sagalaev A.M., Usmanova M.S., *The Traditional Worldview of the Turkic Peoples of Siberia*, 1989, p. 65.

²² Eliade M., *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, 1998, p. 322.

²³ Zhukovskaya N.L., *Lamaism and Early Forms of Religion*, 1977, p. 16.

²⁴ Eliade M., *Aspects of Myth*, 1996, p. 93.

²⁵ Walsh R., *The Spirit of Shamanism*, 1996, p. 66.

²⁶ Eliade M., *Aspects of Myth*, 1996, p. 90.

²⁷ Okladnikov A.P., *Petroglyphs of the Lower Amur*, 1971, p. 69.

²⁸ Propp V.Ya., *The Historical Roots of the Magical Story*, 1986, pp. 99-103.

²⁹ Lvova E.L., Oktyabrskaya I.V., Sagalaev A.M., Usmanova M.S., *The Traditional Worldview of the Turkic Peoples of Siberia*, 1989.

³⁰ Iordanskii V.B., *Chaos and Harmony*, 1982, p. 110.

³¹ Eliade M., *Aspects of Myth*, 1996, p. 92.

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