

URAL BRONZES

IN 1933 the Museum acquired by exchange with several Museums of the U.S.S.R. a considerable collection of small bronzes from various regions of Siberia. Not only are these artistically of great interest, but their place in a study of the ethnology of this area is of importance. A group from the Ural Regions are here described by Dr. Eugene A. Golomshtok who arranged these exchanges for the Museum, and who endeavours to give an idea of the primitive religious significance behind the representations on these bronzes.

MANY of the primitive peoples of the world imagine, as indeed our ancestors did, that the universe is inhabited and controlled by two opposing forces, good and evil, which are continually waging war. Every action of man is subject either to the displeasure of a good spirit, or the hate and revenge of an evil one. This difficult and almost unbearable situation is rendered somewhat easier through the existence of specially endowed individuals possessing extraordinary powers, which enable them to enter into direct communication, carry on negotiations, and in some instances actually engage in combat with these supernatural forces.

These mediators or go-betweens have an almost universal existence. The fetish man of Africa, the medicine man of the American Indians and the priest-magician of more organized religions are essentially the same. Perhaps the most picturesque and dramatic role of this mediator or Shaman, is the one played among the Siberian natives. The arctic tundra, dark and impenetrable taiga, long stretching desert wasteland, the mighty rivers and lakes, overtopped by high mountain ranges, all the things that compose the Siberian topography, proved to be an important factor in forming the exceedingly complicated pantheon of deities and spirits that makes up the native Siberian religion.

By securing a supernatural blessing, or more often obeying a special supernatural command, which he cannot resist, the Siberian Shaman devotes his life to gaining the esoteric knowledge concerning the innumerable spirits that inhabit his native surroundings. Often the Shaman takes sides with one or the other group of spirits. Assisted by his spirit protector, he is able to transform himself into a bird "with iron claws and steel beak" and fly to any of the seven underworlds chasing an evil spirit which has caused sickness by stealing a soul.

Dressed in a special mantle and hat, the Shaman utters magic



Above: Animal figure with moose head

PLATE VIII

Ural Bronzes, acquired by the Museum through exchange with several Museums of the U.S.S.R.

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Above: Plaque in the form of a human face



Below: Plaque in the form of a human face

Above: Plaque with two human figures



Right: Animal figure which may have been an amulet worn by a hunter of large animals

incantations with the accompaniment of a large drum that he beats while he dances. His dress and accompanying paraphernalia are fashioned after a long-established custom, and are decorated with figures of metal and wood that represent realistically or symbolically his spirit protectors and servants.

Bird worship plays a very important role in the Siberian religion, usually symbolizing the good spirits of the sky. They are the protectors and helpers of the Shaman against the evil forces of the lower regions, with whom they have an ancient feud. Such is Haza-Suruk-Tojon, "one having a terrifying appearance," the Thunder God of the Yakuts, who lives among the clouds and always wages war on the Abasi, evil spirits of the underworld.

Our knowledge of the religion of the early inhabitants of Siberia is very limited. Lacking written records, archaeologists have to deduce the bulk of their information by drawing analogies between the objects excavated and those now used by the natives. The group of bronze plaques from the Ural Mountains provides some data for such reconstruction. This general region of Northeastern European Russia and Eastern Siberia has been the source of a large number of metal objects representing birds, animals, human figures and mythological beings in various combinations. Although they are similar in certain respects to the objects of the so-called "Animal Style," which are found all the way from Hungary to Eastern China, the Ural Bronzes are much more primitive, and therefore perhaps preserve in purest form the original functional characteristics, before subsequent stylistic development had obliterated their original purpose and design.

Though a certain number of these figures are purely surface finds, a large quantity of them have been found in excavating the several settlements along the rivers of the Ural range, usually associated with typical Shamanistic places of sacrifice.

The similarity between some of these objects and the conventional representations of the Thunder Bird of the American Indians has been previously pointed out. (See the *Museum Bulletin*, Vol. 5, No. 2.) The group here illustrated represents further development of the motif of the eternal struggle between the spirit of the sky and the spirit of the earth. Usually, as is the case among North American Indians, the creature of the upper world is pictured as an enormous bird, producing thunder by clapping its wings, and shooting lightning arrows by

opening and closing its eyes. The earth spirit lives either in the ground or in the water and is imagined as a snake, a fish, a whale or an underground monster.

In its later development, the sky spirit gradually assumes anthropomorphic aspects, only partly preserving its bird characteristics. Thus the animal figure (above left in the plate) made of dark bronze-like alloy, represents a being with the long head of a moose with its typical curved muzzle and a hump on the nose. It is anthropomorphic in general treatment, but its legs are too short and end with the hoof-like splits. The whole animal is standing on a lizard or water monster with a pointed head, oval eyes and four-toed feet. It is unquestionably a modification of the bird-monster battle motif, the attacking animal acquiring half-moose, half-human features. The two dimensional treatment and incised decorations link it with the "Gliadenovo type" which is dated between the seventh and ninth centuries A.D.

The other figure of this type (lower right in the plate) has lost most of its animal or bird characteristics, retaining only bird-like claws for hands and feet. As the battle motif is absent it may represent one of the spirit-helpers of the Shaman or an amulet worn by hunters for large animals. Its date is hard to determine, though the more relief points to a later date than the first figure.

The three plaques, portraying human figures and faces, represent still further the evolution of the "sulde" or a bird-spirit. At this stage of development, the anthropomorphic characteristics have so completely displaced the former animal features that only by analogies with the rest of the existing material, which permit the arrangement of a complete series of the gradual development, is the genetic relationship with the bird motif established. The plaque with the two figures has likewise an honorable ancestry in the series of double bird representation, corresponding with the wide-spread conception of Twin Brother Thunder Birds found in the New World. The accumulating evidence seems to point out that the wide-spread motif of two fighting animals goes back to the dualistic conception of the universe, a very old idea having many ramifications with such distant echoes as heraldic oppositions, the official seal of Mexico and Siegfried-St. George spearing the dragon. The final proof, however, is still needed for this fascinating and all too tempting assumption.

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