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Pazyryk. A Method of Dechiphering Ornament

It is generally accepted that ornament appeared with a code, not because of it. The code (0) has no inherent ornament; it appears as a result of the juxtaposition of the code's symbols. The ornament springs from the connection between the lines drawn, and the basis of it is rhythm. If we draw parallels with other arts, appropriate choices would be music or poetry, since they are both rhythmic. It is impossible to guess a melody from one separate sound, or to guess the rhyme from one separate word. It is the same with ornament – it is impossible to guess the meaning of the ornament from one single element, it is only possible to consider it within the context of a system.

This ornamental art could be defined as “a system of visually perceived signs”.

To emphasise the importance of this new approach, I shall take as my subject the most ancient pile carpet from the Fifth Pazyryk Barrow (4th-5th c. BC) in the Altai Mountains. Attention will be concentrated on the central part of the carpet, which consists of precise cross shapes: four flowers with a square in the centre and 4 sepals, which are placed in rectangles (S. Rudenko 1968). (See illustrations No. 1-2.) I use the description by S. Rudenko for two reasons. In remembering the name of the discoverer we mark his contribution, but on the other hand, this definition is an example of a classic error. The cause of that mistake, in my view, lay in the tradition of investigating oriental carpets maintained primarily by Western explorers. It so happens that carpets are made in the East, but Westerners like them and value them.

The visual ideal of the European scholar is Apollonian clarity (Spengler), which he instinctively and unsuccessfully attempts to find in oriental ornament. Perhaps this is why S. Rudenko so easily identifies the presence of a vegetation motif with flowers and sepals in the zoomorphic ornament. He sees in this incomprehensible element a flower, but nothing else.

This Apollonian clarity assumes a clear connection between an object and the concept of that object. To achieve such simplicity and clarity is not merely difficult, it is impossible.

We claim that ornament is the special language used by ancient man to translate his ideas of Time and Space, Life and Death or the Cosmos and his place in it. Language has all the requirements of autonomy, namely syntax, grammar, lexis, semantics and even phonics.

“Language is the semiotic into which all other semiotics may be transformed”, according to Elmslev, the Danish linguist. Therefore, our task is to transform the incomprehensible language of ornament into the familiar language of painting.

The carpet from the Pazyryk barrow is an outstanding example of bilingualism, using as it does both the language of painting and that of ornament. The pictorial language is familiar. By understanding this text it is possible to guess the principles and laws of the “other language” – ornament.

Observe first the deer moving from left to right along the third border. This technique is based on painting. The ornament itself is the rhythmic pulsation which appears in the consciousness of the observer, as he follows the direction of the movement, or when he perceives this closed border as something whole, where in each fragment (in this case, the deer) is part of the whole, and this whole, in turn, is part of the greater whole, i.e. the entire carpet.

In the border with riders and dismounted men, the movement is in the opposite direction.

But what is in the central element of the Pazyryk carpet if not a flower? What does it mean? At this point we should hold our breath and pause – as we will discuss the most amazing element of all, one which is universally displayed in the ornamental systems of various nations. This is not a flower. This is a gryphon – a fantastic creature with the body of an animal (of the family *Felidae*) and the wings and back of a bird. Kazakh people call it *Italakaz* – a black and white dog-goose. Ancient tribes who lived in the Altai Mountains were known by the Greeks by the legendary name “Gryphons protecting gold.”

Using the principle of *pars pro toto* the artisans of the Pazyryk barrow rendered the most functionally significant parts of the gryphon as follows: along the vertical and horizontal axis – the paws of the predator (of the family *Felidae*: the snow leopard, tiger and lion) and along the diagonals

(intermediate) – wings (of an eagle, a cockerel and a phoenix). But why did the ancient Altaic people need to duplicate in one carpet the image of the gryphon (in the second and sixth borders) and the ornamental symbols for it (in the fourth border and central space)? The answer is hidden outside the carpet but is present in the context of the Pazyryk grave. I refer to numerous scenes where a gryphon is either tearing to pieces some ungulate animal or is being torn apart by some *Felidae* predators.

In the book by S. Rudenko *The Most Ancient Carpets and Fabrics* (Moscow, 1968) we find this motif in the following illustrations:

No 3 Tattoo on man's body, from the Second Pazyryk Barrow.

No 4 Eagle, gryphon tearing to pieces a mountain ram. Felt saddle cover. First Pazyryk Barrow.

No 5 Tigers trampling upon mountain rams. Carving on Sarcophagus from the Second Bashadar Barrow.

Pictures of animals with twisted lower parts:

No 6 (b, c) Mountain rams, Third Pazyryk Barrow.

No 6 (d) Wolf, Second Pazyryk Barrow.

No 7 Elk in gryphon's claws. First Pazyryk Barrow. Knob with the head of a deer in the beak of an eagle, woodcarving. On the flat sides of the knob is the imprint of a goose in a gryphon's claws, Second Pazyryk Barrow.

The history of the Scythian-Siberian wild animal style is well documented. A lifetime would not be enough to read all the literature.

In the scene where the ungulate animal is being torn apart by the predator of the *Felidae* family lies the answer to all the puzzles which scholars and art explorers have been attempting to solve. The answer is that the animal with a twisted body is in its death throes. The animal is between life and death. The lower part, symbolising its physical essence, is twisting 180 degrees relative to its axis, indicating that the body is losing support in the physical world. Meanwhile, the upper part of the animal, symbolising its spiritual essence, remains in the real world to fight for its very existence.

An artistic interpretation does not reach the depths of this image. I postulate that this image runs through the entirety of world culture and the history of mankind and forms the archetype for all peoples – the image of the Spirit which separates from the Body after death and flies to another world.

According to ancient Turkic people, this process is not a rapid one; it stretches out over time with key periods on the third, fourth seventh or ninth

and 40th days after death, until the anniversary of death, when the funeral feast takes place.

According to A. Toleubaev, the Kazakh historian, it is interesting that the magic number 40 is present in the customs and beliefs connected with birth and death. The 40th day is one of the key stages in the formation of an embryo; on the 40th day after birth a child is to be washed in 40 spoonfuls of special water. Until the 40th day after childbirth a woman is considered unclean.

“According to the early ideas of the ancient Kazakhs, an embryo is like a clot, during the first seven-day period after which first stage of formation is complete. There is also the seventh day after death. It may be proposed that the first step of reformation of man and his spirit correlates to those first seven days. The 40th day after death is also worth noting. Maybe this day corresponds to the second step in the formation of a man, in the mortification of his spirit.” (Toleubaev, 1991)

In the light of the above, the Pazyryk carpet might be interpreted as the illustration of the steps of unforming, or of the dead person's steps to the spirit's mortification.

Such an interpretation would not be complete however, if we ignored the direction of this action – upwards. We will call it “the way to the mountain.” In the Pazyryk carpet this corresponds to the movement from the edges towards the centre. This we consider the unforming of the dead. The opposite direction, downwards, “away from the mountain”, thus corresponds to the movement from the centre to the edge, and might be viewed as the formation, conception or rebirth of the spirit.

The conceptual direction of movement is an extremely important factor and is displayed in the direction of linear movement in the borders. There is an absolute consistency to the different directions of movement along the borders of the Pazyryk carpet (in border 6, gryphons move from left to right, and in border 2 from right to left). If we compare the broad lines from the basic borders, in border No 5 (dismounted and mounted riders from right to left) and in border No 3 (deer left to right) then we again observe the different directions of movement. The same is true if we compare No 6 and No 2. The difference in direction is systematically planned and must mean something; indeed, it does. It is tied to the ideas of the Turks regarding the opposite orientation in the worlds of the living and the dead. A typical illustration of worlds as mutual mirror images may be the Kazakh fairy tale “Forty Fables”, in which the hero performs impossible feats.

This tale of a boy who told 40 lies and was rewarded with a khan's (rich man's) daughter for his wife occurs in variations in the folk art of the Kazakh, Kara-Kalpak, Tatar, Uzbek, Hakhas, Buryat and Mongol people. In all versions the narrative is based on acts and situations which are impossible in real life because of their absurdity. The hero is born before his parents, he chops ice with his head, he hammers a nail into the ground with his head, walks without his head putting both feet in one boot, weaves a carpet from a cobweb etc. (Tursunov, 1973).

In the light this, the twisted bodies of unglutesin agony can be seen differently, as a sign of passing from one state to another. This now appears to be the central motif, because this passage symbolises the process of flowing from one state to another. If we broaden the frames of the image we see an interpretation of Life which is generally considered to be a process of constant change.

Additionally, we humans inhabit the middle world – an interval between the upper and lower. We occupy the zone of transition or the zone where in the twisting lower part connects with the upper part.

If this is applied to the symbolism of an anthropomorphic, vertically oriented body, the central zone topographically corresponds to the waist, where the division, or connection, is marked by a belt. The belt, embroidered and richly decorated, is the most important part of any national costume.

If the lower part is the past, the middle is the present, and the future is the upper part – the heavens to which trees aspire. A tree is destined to live with its crown in all shades of the present, rolling it up into the memory of annual rings. A tree, like man, strives towards the future but the only route is through the present.

Turning to the decorated tape ("baskur" in Kazakh), the characteristic feature is its vertically oriented pattern. The Turkmens have a similar tape. The sample to be considered is taken from the book by Khassin and Hofmaster 1988 (Tent Band-Tent Bag). This sample is typical of all Eurasian nations, so this interpretation applies for all structurally similar ornament. Comparing the ornament with the symbols of a man and a tree in the "baskur" one can see the sophistication of the mirror image similar to the reflection of a tree in the water. The conventional line of division is the horizontal, which is identified with the earth's surface. The opposite of the tree's crown are its roots. Woman is the opposite of man, and the antipode of a living person is a dead one. Thus, the line dividing upper and lower, right and left,

black and white, may by extension also divide alive and dead, right and wrong, good and bad.

But the line can also join the opposite sides. From ancient times the joining of the opposite origins of horizontal and vertical has been associated in man's cognition with the holy matrimony of Earth and Sky. The joining of heat (vertical sun ray) with cold (horizontal line of world waters) is the focus and mystery of holy matrimony. The result is Homo sapiens. Of all living creatures only man is able to foresee his death, and therefore to understand his cosmic origin and submit to his divine destiny.

The vestibular apparatus which man has allows him to distinguish between upper and lower as well as the horizontal and the vertical.

It was impossible for our ancient ancestors to mix such clear definitions of space and the arrangements within it since to them order was everything.

From our knowledge of physics we know that a spoon put into a glass of water creates the optical illusion of a bend. The same is true of sunshine, which, meeting the earth's surface at a right angle, pierces the water and deviates from its hypothetical axis. The angle of displacement of the newly formed line depends on the density of those media through which the light passes, and this newly inclined line belongs equally to both horizontal and vertical, as it is their product.

In our case the diagonal or 45 degree line will be perceived as a medium state between the vertical, which corresponds to life, and the horizontal, or death.

This might lead to two interpretations depending on the specific context. If the movement is directed upwards – the way to the mountain (as we said with reference to the Pazyryk carpet) then it will correspond to death. If it is directed downwards – away from the mountain – then it might be connected with life, or divine grace bestowed on man.

The diagonal (at an angle of 45 degrees), irrespective of its direction, is seen as the grammar-syntax marker, which represents in ornament the idea of movement from one state to another, recreating (twisting) the positive into negative and vice versa, as well as a more general idea of movement. This movement portrays life as a process of constant change, and, drawing another analogy the role of the diagonal in ornament is that of a verb in linguistics.

In ornament the diagonal line is the key to all puzzles and mysteries, and there are no structures or constructions which are not subject to it. It is now obvious that the diagonal line in ornament is allied by its function and

meaning to the zone of twisting in the ungulate body in the iconography of the Scythian-Siberian style.

Returning to Pazyryk, I would like to reveal the sense of the central element of the carpet through its pictorial representation of the eagle gryphon. Focusing on illustration 27 (wooden knob with engraved deer's beak, Second Pazyryk Barrow), the eschatological motif is clearly seen. Since eating was considered equal to dissolution in Space, the bible hero who fed himself to the lions was sure of his future reincarnation. (Akishev, A.)

The numerical correlation between 24 gryphons expressed by ornamental symbols and 24 deer passing along the third border might be considered a not entirely casual coincidence. Does this mean that the fate of each deer is predetermined by the gryphon waiting for his time? If so, the gryphon is seen as the envoy of the Upper World (note his wings) into the Middle World. He is not only the envoy but the agent of fate. The sharp beak and claws are the arms of retribution. The eagle who daily ate Prometheus' liver performed just such a dual function by the order of Zeus. This analogy must be enough to impress upon us the archetypal connection between the gryphon and its functions – to be an executor of some divine purpose. Pazyryk and Prometheus are now visible as parallels.

The wooden knob is interesting because there are three gryphons on it. They are oriented according to three sides of the World. On two sides there are two geese in gryphons' claws and a third on the knob.

But we are concerned with the orientation of a four-sided world which contains the World Mount and has the focus of the Highest Powers at its summit. To illustrate the ancient basis of the motif, we will move to Egypt in the 13th century B.C., the eighteenth dynasty, and the golden throne of Tutenkhamon, which is sculpturally bilingual (in the sense in which we used the word for the central element of the Pazyryk carpet).

Four lions' paws are the four legs of the throne – the symbol of wisdom in the midst of ignorance. This represents the highest power. The throne of the pharaoh towers above the mountain from where he, the son of the sky, surveys his estates. The arms of the throne are in the shape of birds' wings and, as one can see from the picture, the back of the throne is supported by their beaks.

Before we discuss the wings and birds, I wish to point out that some such wooden sculptures were discovered in the Second Pazyryk Barrow, and they form the legs of a table in the shape of a tiger.

Now, about the birds.

The image of the bird is one of the most important symbols not only for the ancient Altaic people, but for all Eurasian nations. I will quote one authoritative reference: "The ethnographic dates are evidence of the special meaning of a swan. In the Kalevala, the Karel-Finn epos, the swan is called a sacred bird. Northern people do not kill and eat swans" (Maslova). An Ugrian people who lived near the Ob River considered the swan their totem (Chernetsov, 1939). The Kazakh word *kaz-ak* is interpreted as consisting of two words: *kaz*, meaning 'goose', and *ak*, meaning 'white'.

The duck is also an honourable bird for the Karel people and their neighbours. It is an important figure in cosmogonic myths. The Kalevala tells us that the duck laid an egg from which the World appeared.

"From the egg, from its lower part,
 Mother Earth appeared
 From the egg, from its upper part,
 The sun arose from the yellow of the upper part,
 The moon appeared from the white of the upper part"
 (Kalevala, rune 1).

Birds are connected with the upper world. In the image of a bird, or on a bird's wings, man's spirit flies to the sky (the way to the mountain). Thus, birds take the spirits of the dead and also bring newborns to earth (away from the mountain), hence the popular myth that children are delivered by a stork.

On the Karel towels' embroidery (1859) we can see a classic scene: a woman holding birds in her raised hands. This motif is amazingly constant in the ornament of practically all Eurasian people. We attribute it to the ornaments which are modelled on the anthropomorphic structures discussed above ("baskur", Cassin, Haffmeister).

What is the connection between all of this and the central element of the Pazyryk carpet? The appearance of the anthropomorphic figure with raised hands provides us with an opportunity to focus on the symbolism of a human body. If we divide the human body geometrically, the axis which lies at 45 degrees to the horizontal and vertical lines fits the arms and legs, the vertical carries a head and reproductive organs, the horizontal divides the body into upper and lower parts. So arms and legs lying along the diagonal execute the instrumental functions. (Zeus' eagle, the gryphon, the messenger from the upper world, or the numerous citizens executing the will of the pharaoh).

The horizontal and vertical are the basic conditions for the diagonal which reflects the idea of movement and constant change. Four planes made by crossing the vertical and horizontal lines correspond to the basic elements – fire, water, earth and air. The combination of these elements is endless. “Tetra” (four parts) is the main principle of organisation in sacral Space and Time: four sides of the world, four periods in day and night, four elements, four legs of the throne.

However, all investigations are missing the fifth point. But to be precise it is this point that is the focus of the other four, as it presents the image of Man at the top of a mountain – the point to which all men aspire.

If we divide the square by two diagonal lines, and imagine that the point at which they cross is the top of a tetrahedral pyramid, we will have the universal model of the World Mount which is the pyramid of Cheops. The map of this mountain from a bird's eye view is the Pazyryk carpet. There is nothing unusual in this comparison if we remember the motherland of the plumed serpent Quetzalcoatl, where pyramids were constructed out of giant steps. In the myths of many nations, including the Turkic peoples, the top of the World Mount is a plain. Each step of ascent to the mountain is a symbolic tier, and if we imagine the Pazyryk carpet as a tiered pyramid, the wide borders can be seen as the vertical planes and the interim borders narrow dividing lines of the horizontal planes. Then we get not only a giant pyramid, but the sense and hidden meaning.

Each step from the foot to the top of the mount unforms the spirit of a dead person until the condition of pure *prana*, and vice versa, each step from the top to the foot allows the soul to form some physical body (the riders etc. representing the human community). From this point of view the distance from the supreme point is essential and is represented in human society by a man's proximity to the throne.

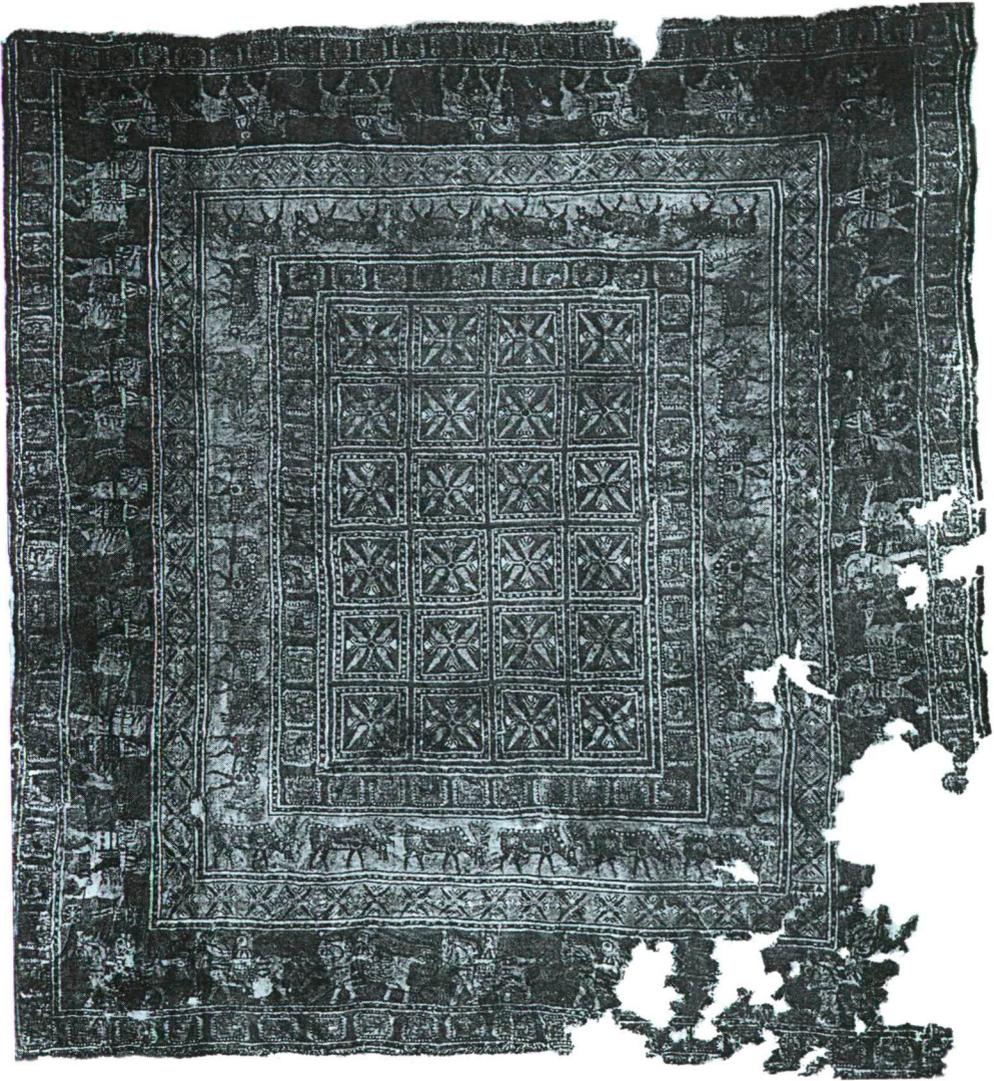
Now we have come to our main conclusion. The central motif of the Pazyryk carpet is the translation of the body's substance into a new non-physical reality through the consistent stages of unforming.

That is why the transition to the centre from the borders – specific, visible riders, deer, gryphons – moves towards abstract symbolism (the central element) and vice versa. From that point of view, the way there and back coincides with the classic myth of the hero travelling to the land of the dead and there gaining immortality or some specific knowledge of the future before returning.

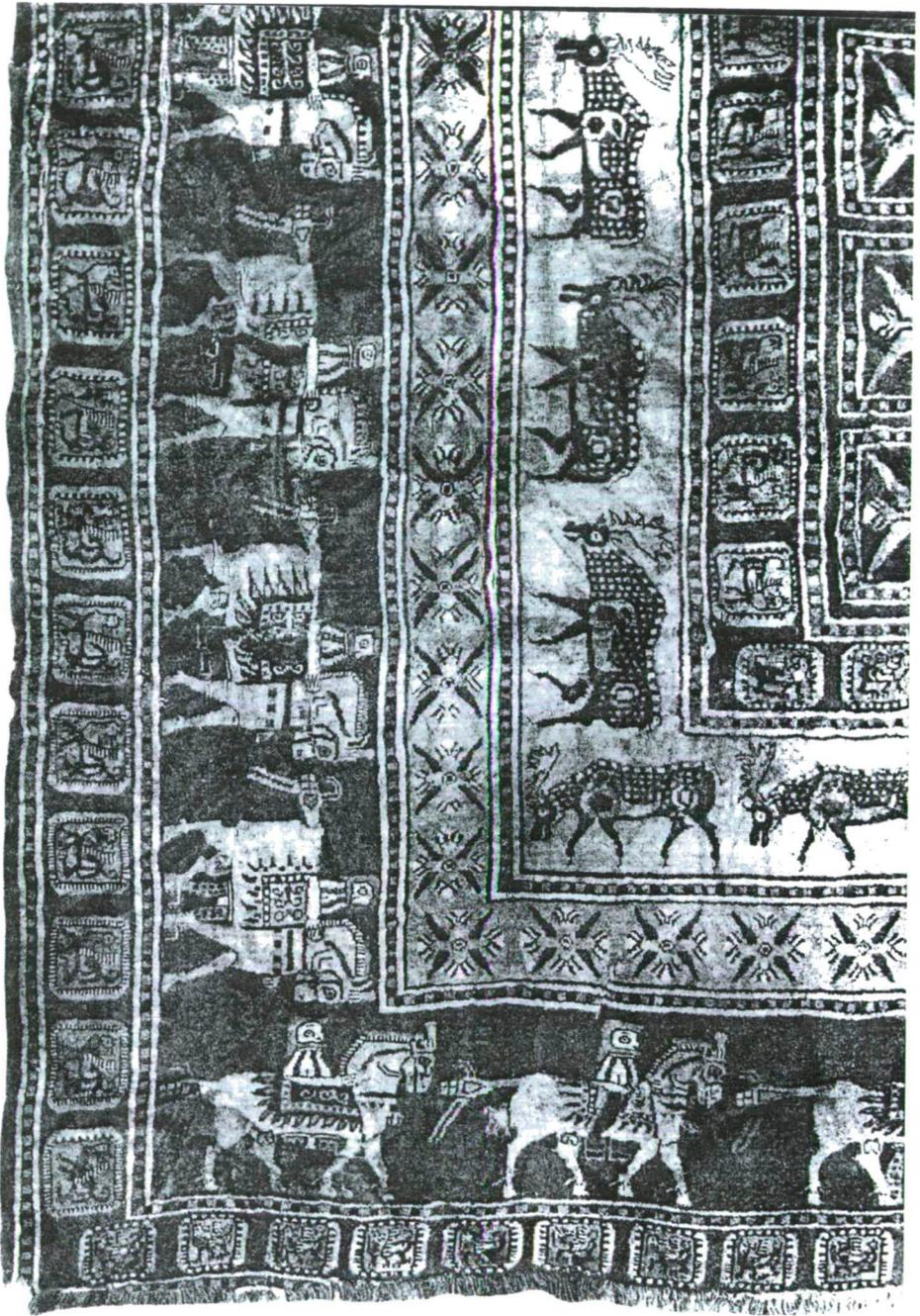
The complicated border system of the Pazyryk carpet is a pictorial comment on the central element. It contains the quintessence of the basic ideas held by ancient man, represented by means of graphic formulae in the shapes of definitive correlation. This is the visual archetype.

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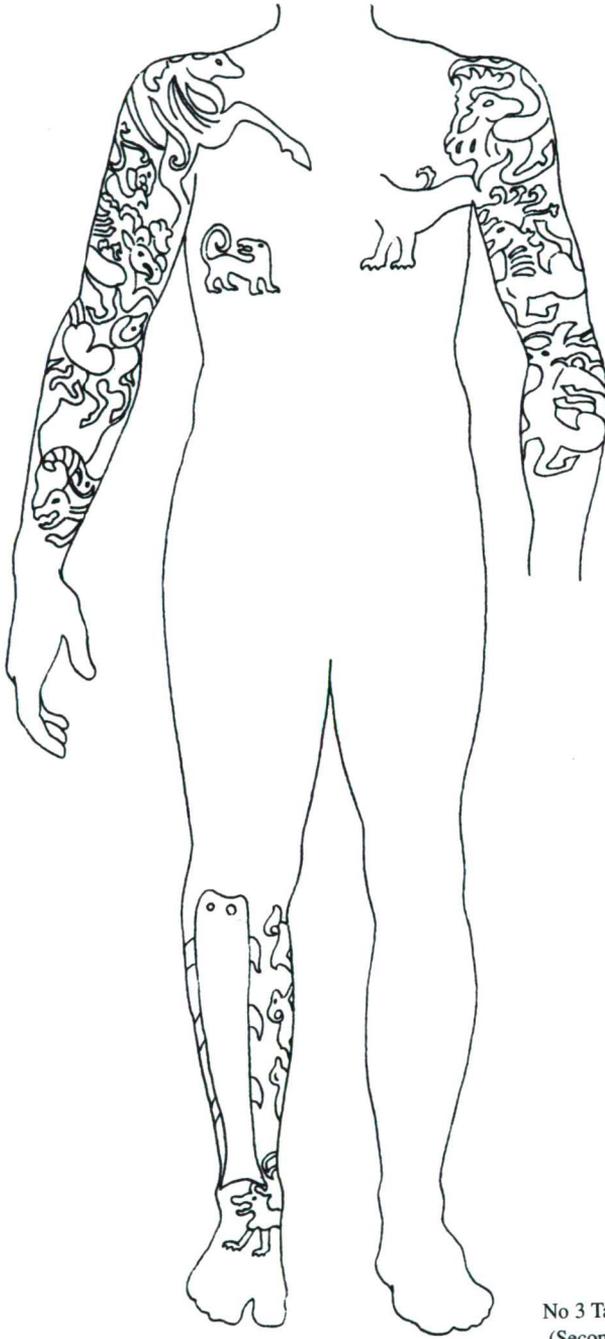
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No 1 Ancient pile carpet (Fifth Pazyryk Barrow)



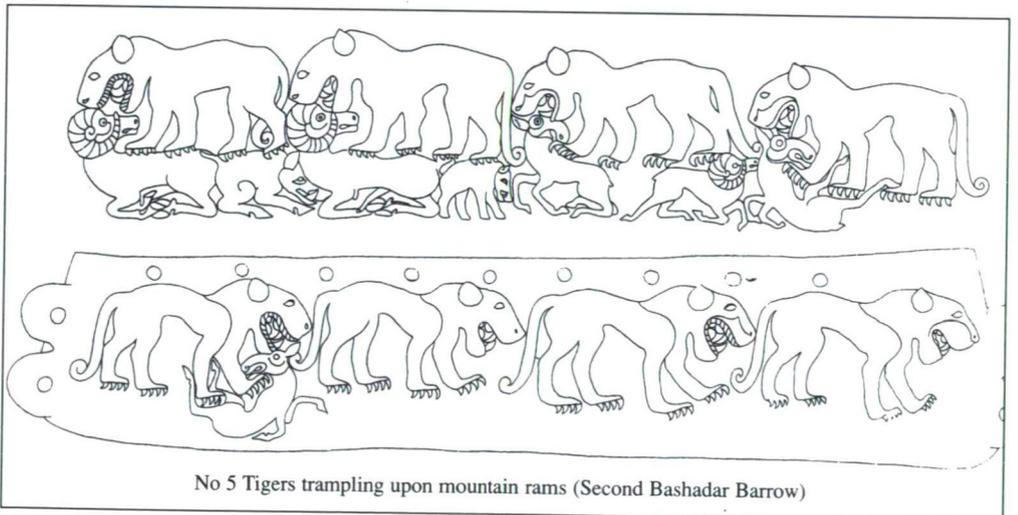
No 2 Ancient pile carpet (Fifth Pazyryk Barrow)



No 3 Tattoo on man's body
(Second Pazyryk Barrow)



No 4 Eagle, gryphon tearing to pieces a mountain ram. Felt saddle cover (First Pazyryk Barrow)



No 5 Tigers trampling upon mountain rams (Second Bashadar Barrow)



No 6 (a-c) Mountain rams (Third Pazyryk Barrow), Wolf (Second Pazyryk Barrow)



No 7 Elk in gryphon's claws (First Pazyryk Barrow)