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THE SYMBOL AND FUNCTION OF THE GOLDEN FLEECE ACCORDING TO CAUCASIAN-HITTITE DATA

In recent years interesting works have been dedicated to the ethno-cultural relations of the Kartvelian-Hittite world. The interest of the scholars is particularly deepened by the fact that that Hittite realm was founded and existed near the settlement of Kartvelian (Caucasian) tribes. This fact gave rise to the cultural contacts of the representatives of these worlds.

Juxtaposition of the rituals described in the Hittite written sources with the Kartvelian (and Caucasian in general) folklore and ethnographic material certifies the relations of these historic neighbors and may help reconstruct some ancient mythological and religious notions of Caucasians.

This time the paper will accentuate the symbol and ritual function of the Fleece, which must have played an important role in the religious system of the people residing in Asia Minor and the Caucasus.

In the legend about the Argonauts scholars pay particular attention to the symbolic importance of the Golden Fleece and plenty of opinions have been expressed on this issue. As a rule, the question of the fleece is discussed in respect with Colchis. The adventures of Jason and his friends take place in the realm of Aetes. The plot has no analogy in the Caucasian folklore because it is a part of Hellenic culture; it originated from Greek mythology and expresses Greek people's interests. The myth glorifies the heroism of the Hellenic boatmen; however, as the epos and mythos contain the historical elements as well, it also reflects the fragments of the Caucasian mythological and religious notions.

Both the folklore and the customs of the Caucasian people have preserved the fragments of worshipping sheep/goat and its hide. It embodied abundance and fertility. It is well described in fairy-tales where the sheep resists the poverty – it fills with its products every corner of a house and leaves no room to

poverty. In ancient customs of the Kartvelian and North Caucasian peoples, the participants used to wear masks and hide of a sheep/goat as a symbol of fertility (J. Rukhadze, 1999, 80).

In the Caucasian customs connected with sowing and plough, the key role belonged to a man dressed in a sheep hide personifying a sheep or a goat. His clothes and actions are obviously related fertility. This custom used to be called "walking with a goat's image". A man with a goat's mask used to walk from yard to yard escorted by others. In Kabardian rituals the central participant was Azhi Khapa – the dancing goat.

The archeological material, mural paintings and the artwork with the images of a sheep or a goat point to the importance of the sheep cult. Therefore, it is not surprising that Georgian words "tskhovreba" (life) and "matskhvari" (He who gives life – metonymy of Jesus) derive from "tskhvari" (a sheep). They originated in the period when sheep breeding was the leading branch of agriculture and occupied an important place in mythological and religious notions owing to its high productivity.

This information proves exceedingly valuable with regard to the symbolic implications of the Fleece mentioned in the legend about the Argonauts. The oral tradition and ethnographic material of the Caucasian peoples were recorded in the XIX – XX centuries. By that time, the old religious system, where a sheep/goat stood for a deity, had long been lost, and its fragments had acquired a grotesque shape; however, on the basis of these traces, one may be certain about the authenticity of the information from the Greek legend which says that a fleece that hang on the tree in Aetes' sacred orchard was under special protection. Owing to its particular (protective) role, a dragon was introduced in the legend. The beast had an important function in the ancient Caucasian religious system. Owing to the fact that the fleece was identified with deity bringing wealth and prosperity, Greeks perceived it as gold itself (in mythology, gold was the symbol of deity and fertility). Consequently, the fleece was called "golden" in the Greek legend.

For the better understanding of the symbol of the fleece, parallels should be drawn with the Hittite rituals – in particular, with the royal ones that employed a fleece. According to the texts, a fleece – a sheep hide – was displayed in the Hittite capital of Hattusa. It embodied the deity Inara or was her symbol. The principal function of the fleece was to protect the city. It was connected with fertility, in particular, with crops, i.e. agriculture. On festivals the fleece was taken from the capital to different cities. This must have embodied the encirclement of the sacral territory.¹ Afterwards it was brought

¹ In my opinion the symbol of a sheep hide or a deity used to define the border of the territory which belonged to this deity and it used to protect the welfare of the population. The chief

back to Hattusa and the rituals in honor of the cereals deity were held for three days. Apart from it, in the city KILAMI, a ritual sheep hide was put on a fellow. He led eight other fellows and howled as a wolf. That was the magic of fertility (similar elements were used in Caucasian rituals and "Berikaoba").

If one assumes that a sheep hide had the same importance in Colchis, the reason and aims of the task Aeetes set to Jason will become clear. He assigned the Greek prince to plough the land which had not been an ordinary plot of land but the field of Ares, the war deity. This means that Jason on the one hand had to show his skills in agriculture (in finding means of existence for his people) and on the other hand, he had to resolve the conflict peacefully and thus protect his people. Apparently, it was the necessary condition to become the king. In this respect parallels can be drawn with the Hittite spring rituals called Haššumaš which represented the initiation of a prince.

This ritual is particularly interesting because it involves yoking of bulls and performing the ritual plough of land. Perhaps, the initiation of a prince had similar elements in Colchis; so Aeetes' trial was equivalent to his coronation – lets us bear in mind that the ultimate goal of Jason's visit to Colchis was to obtain the royal power.

In this respect, particularly interesting is the Hittite ritual of enthronement, which was occasionally performed by the incumbent king. His aim was to maintain and prolong his power. In the course of the ritual, the king conversed with throne. The ritual text makes it clear that the throne was the king's ally as it had brought him power from the sea. However, the text points as well to the conflict between them. The king expels the throne from his country and says to it: "Go beyond the mountains, to your house, protect it from within the mountain . . . you don't come to my home, and I won't come to yours." In this ritualistic dialogue there is a conflict between the nether world and the earth (the middle world in tripartite system), which correspond to the king and the throne.

In scholars' opinion, this conflict resembles the plot of the fight between the god of thunder and the snake (V.Ardzinba, 1982,87). The text does not say what the throne embodied, but as it appears from the sea and, correspondingly, represents the nether world, it may be connected with a snake or a serpent i.e. it corresponds to the royal power. It is assumed that similar to the

priests and accordingly, the executor of the will of the deity was the king who had to take care of his people. The symbol of the deity of fertility at the same time provided the strength of the royal power. That's why it is not accidental that taking the fleece from city to city was the part of the royal ritual. Apparently, this function of the hide generated one episode in fairy-tales: a crafty hero cuts the hide in narrow stripes and thus expands the plot of land given to him as a present. From the history of religions it is known that part of the ritual that has lost its function, continues its existence in narrative folklore as a plot or a motif.

Elamian tradition, the Hittite royal throne was shaped as a spirally twisted dragon or bore serpentine images. This can be related to a sacred mystery. The snake/ dragon endowed the king with its power; that is why he calls it "the ally". He received the royal power from the snake and expects his protection. This information came from Hattians, but Hittites either did not understand the sacral essence or as the time passed Hattian mystery mixed with religious elements of Indo-European tribes (Hittites were the best compilers), which altered the old plot; as a result, the classic model of snake fighting was developed. The traces of the archetype plot are observed in the Hittite religion and Caucasian folklore (K. Sikharulidze, 2002,152).

Taking into consideration the analogy with the Hittite mythological religious notions, one can assume that in Colchis the fleece, the hide of the sheep, was believed to be the patron of not only the country, but also of the royal power, it is by no means accidental that the fleece was protected by the dragon. From this point of view, it is important that the image of the fleece is engraved on the megalithic monuments discovered on the territory of the Caucasus. It is similar to the ancient mythological religious plot (the serpent giving royal power to the king protects the fleece – the patron deity of the king and his country). It is possible that some elements of the mythological religious system of the Kartvelian tribes were shaped in the consequence of the relations with Hattian-Hittite world, which were reflected in the legend about the Argonauts. In the description of the Hittite royal rituals it is said that the fleece used to be taken out of the city through the gates which at the same time was the site where the king administered royal justice. From this point of view, particular attention should be paid to the words "bche" ("councilor") which also means "entrance" and "bchoba" ("discussion", "argument"). Apparently, the language has preserved the archaic custom which is lost to daily practice but revived in Christianity with a deeply symbolic sense of "gates".

In the Hittite ritualistic texts there is more interesting information in respect with the Kartvelian and in general, Caucasian mythological notions. Research of these parallels may provide additional arguments to certify the existence of common cultural traditions of the people residing in Asia Minor and the Caucasus.