

Traces of Shamanism and the Scythian Mythology in the Koroglu Epic

The article examines and compares similar themes in the variations of the Turkic peoples' epic Koroglu (see also Koroğlu, Köroğlu, etc.) on the one hand, and in several versions of the myth of the Scythians' descent from Heracles, on the other. The research has concluded that the Koroglu epic addresses the same set of image and symbols present in the "Scythian" Heracles myth, both the epic and the myth providing powerful examples of ancient shamanic mythology. In order to trace the shamanic legacy in the epic and the myth, we used a method consisting in "breaking down" myths or legends to their smallest "constituent units" or mythemes, analyzing each individual unit, and comparing them. The recurrent themes that will "seep to the surface" in the course of comparison will reveal the archetypal layers of the myth.

Identification of the Storylines in the Koroglu Epic and in the Myth of the Scythians' Descendance from Heracles

The Koroglu epic is an All-Turkic epos that was preserved in the languages of many contemporary Turkic peoples. Various Turkic versions of the Koroglu epic have been written down and published for the first time in translation into Russian and English languages during the first half of 19th century (Derevnia Ogrudzha 1830; Chodzko 1842). The Koroglu epic combines two storylines – historical and mythological. The historical line of the epic, describing a military confrontation of two kindred peoples – "Royal Scythians" and Cimmerians in the 7–6th centuries BC, was investigated in the corresponding paper (Hasanov 2006). In this article we will examine the (more ancient) mythological line of the epic in the light of shamanism. While examining various versions of the Koroglu epic, we discovered parallels between the epic's storyline and the myth of the Scythians' origin from Heracles. When reflecting on the image of the "Scythian" Heracles, we did not refer to the Greek myths about Heracles. Although it was in the Hellenes dwelling of the north-ern Black Sea region that Herodotus heard the myth of the Scythians' descent of Heracles, we have all grounds to believe that the myth actually originates from the Cimmerian-Scythian mythology. First of all, the myth can be found in the Greek sources only in contexts referring to Scythians. Second, the theme of Heracles' belt with a golden goblet attached to its clasp has its archaeological confirmation in the Scythian burial mount known as Arzhan-2 (Parzinger 2002: 77).

Before we describe the parallels examined in this paper, we would like to present three versions of the myth of the Scythians' descent from Heracles: Herodotus' version, the version recounted in the "Greek epigraphic source," and the version of Diodorus Siculus.

Here is Herodotus' version of the myth, remarkable for the extensive details it provides. Driving the cattle of Geryon, Heracles arrived in Scythia, which was still an uninhabited land then. As he was caught in cold rough weather, he wrapped himself in a skin and fell asleep. Meanwhile his horses that were grazing disappeared. When he woke up, Heracles set off searching for his horses throughout the entire land of Scythia. Eventually he arrived in a cave where he found a serpent woman (her upper part the body of a woman, and the lower part that of a snake). The serpent woman promised that she would return the horses to Heracles if he mated with her. Heracles complied with the demand, and they conceived three sons: Agathyrus, Gelonos, and the youngest Scythes. Even before his sons were born, Heracles departed from Scythia, leaving his bow and belt with a golden goblet attached to its clasp to the serpent woman and telling her to give them to the son who would be able to stretch the bow and engirdle himself with the belt. This son was to stay in the land of Scythia, while the others, who failed the task, were to be sent away. Only the youngest son, Scythes turned out to be capable of achieving the requirements and stayed in Scythia, becoming the founder of the genetic line of all Scythian kings. As a memory of Heracles' golden goblet, Scythians would wear golden cups attached to their belts (Herodotus IV: 8–10).

Another version of the legend is laid out in the "Greek epigraphic source": "Having gone from here to Scythia, Heracles defeated Araxes in a battle and engaged in an intercourse with Araxes' daughter Echidna becoming by her the father of two sons, Agathyrus and Scythes" (Raevskii 1977: 25). The third version of the legend is told by Diodorus Siculus:

"...Consequently, the Scythian legends say, there appeared an earthborn maiden with the upper part of her body that of a woman and the lower part that of a serpent. Zeus copulated with her producing a son named Scythes. Scythes surpassed all his predecessors in his fame and dubbed his people by his own name, Scythians" (Diodorus II: 43).

The storyline in all versions of the myth of the Scythians' descent from Heracles remains unchanged. However, the image of the "Scythian" Heracles and some other aspects of the myth vary. Let us examine these variations.

- In the legend told by Herodotus the serpent woman copulates with Heracles and bears three sons: Agathyrus, Gelonos and Scythes, the youngest son that becomes a king (Herodotus IV: 10).
- The Greek Epigraphic Source refers to the image of the serpent woman that is presented in this case as the Echidna of the ancient Greek mythology, but at the same time referred to as Araxes' daughter. Unlike in Herodotus' version, two sons are born instead of three: Agathyrus and Scythes.
- In Diodorus Siculus' variation, Zeus replaces Heracles. The image of the serpent woman is preserved; however, she bears only one son, Scythes. The image of Araxes is not presented, while the serpent woman is referred to as born by the earth (Gaea).

Based on these premises and in order to elicit the storyline of the myth of Scythians' descent from Heracles in the Koroglu epic, we have used a methodological principle suggested by Claude Lévi-Strauss. The method in question consists in involving as many variants of the same myth as possible with the purpose of bringing forth the archetypal version of the myth. According to Lévi-Strauss' methodological principle: "If a myth is made up of all its variants, structural analysis should take all of them into account". He offers to analyze variants by reducing the myth down to its smallest "constituent units" (so called "gross constituent units" or *mythemes*), and examining each of them separately (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 431, 435; 1963: 211–213).

Let us try to break down the myth of the Scythians' origin from Heracles into small "mythemes" in order to bring forth the key storylines and images.

1. Heracles' horses disappear;
2. Heracles is asleep when the horses disappear;
3. The serpent woman takes the possession of Heracles' horses;
4. Heracles finds the serpent woman (Echidna) that has seized his horses;
5. Before finding the serpent woman, Heracles defeats Araxes in a battle;
6. Heracles engages in intimate relations with the serpent woman;
7. The serpent woman conceives a son (sons) by Heracles;
8. According to various versions, Heracles becomes the father of one, two or three sons;
9. Heracles' sons are conceived in a cave;
10. Heracles departs before the birth of his son (sons);
11. Heracles leaves his belt to his son;
12. Heracles leaves a golden goblet attached to the clasp of his belt for his son;
13. Heracles' son Scythes engirdles himself with his father's belt;
14. Heracles' son Scythes stretches the bow that no one apart from his father and himself can stretch;
15. Heracles' son becomes the king of his land.

Let us first examine the north Azerbaijan version of the theme regarding the birth of Koroglu's son in comparison with Herodotus' interpretation of the mythabout Heracles' sons.

1. In the chapter "Koroglu and Aypara," Koroglu's son is born. Before leaving his new-born son, Koroglu puts a bracelet on his wrist. Then the child is lost and found by a dog that suckles him. Subsequently, an old woman, the dog's owner, adopts Koroglu's son (Abbasli 2000: 260–261).
2. Chapter "Agjaguzu" recounts as Koroglu settles in a cave with his wife. His wife bears his son there. As in the previous chapter, the child gets lost and is found by a she-wolf that suckles him. Then an old woman finds the child, adopts him and sees Koroglu's bracelet on his wrist. The child is named *Agjaguzu*. On hearing of the old woman's adopted child, the ruler that is Koroglu's adversary decides to adopt the child. The old woman gives the child to the ruler asking never to take off the memorial bracelet from the boy's wrist (Abbasli 2000: 294–298).
3. Chapter "Parzad hanum's Arrival to *Chenlibel*" contains the following story. Koroglu's son has grown up. His adoptive father, ruler of an alien land and Koroglu's adversary, lets him go for long travels. Passing by *Chenlibel*, *Agjaguzu* encounters Koroglu in a hard-fought combat, which results in a truce between the two warriors (Abbasli 2000: 300–308). In this same chapter Koroglu encounters a maiden that reads out a spell trapping him in the ground as if in a vise and sending snakes to entwine around him, eventually turning into a snake herself (Abbasli 2000: 313–314).
4. Chapter "The Derbent campaign of Koroglu" also tells the story of the birth of Koroglu's son. Koroglu leaves his wife before his son is born, bequeathing his bracelet to the child. Koroglu's son grows up in a king's palace. Koroglu's wife puts the bracelet around her son's wrist once he grows to manhood. Koroglu's son sets off for a long journey and, on reaching *Chenlibel*, encounters Koroglu in an embittered battle. The fight of the two heroes lasts long with neither side winning. Eventually the father and the son conclude a truce (Abbasli 2000: 366–378).

In the north Azerbaijan version of the epic, the following parallels with the Scythian Heracles' myth can be traced back.

- The theme of Heracles' leaving his belt to his son corresponds to the theme of the bracelet bequeathed by Koroglu to his son.
- The storyline of the conception of Heracles' sons in a cave parallels the story line recounting the conception of Koroglu's son in a cave.
- The theme line of the claims to royal power formulated by the sons of Heracles in their country is parallel to the theme presenting Koroglu's son as the hereditary prince of his land.
- The story of Heracles' parting with his sons before their birth corresponds to the story of Koroglu's parting with his son before the son is born.
- One of the chapters about Koroglu's son refers to a woman that grips Koroglu in the ground as if in a vise with her spells and sends snakes entwining around him, eventually turning into a snake herself. This image from the Koroglu epic is similar to the image of the serpent woman of the Scythian myth.
- The storyline about the upbringing of Heracles' sons by the serpent woman parallels the story of Koroglu's son being brought up by a she-wolf, whose image is subsequently replaced by the image of an old woman. In both cases, we appear to be dealing with an image of a half human half animal.

In order to establish the implications behind the old woman's image, let us turn to the Turkmen variant of the epic and juxtapose it with the myth of the Scythians' descent from Heracles.

1. An old woman steals Koroglu's horse. The old woman lures Koroglu to her place in a rather bizarre manner: she undresses and slithers on the ground like a snake so as to leave a trace for Koroglu to follow her. Later she sends him to sleep. After waking up, the epic hero sets off in search for his horse. He crosses the river of Araz (Araxes) and finds the old woman. Then Koroglu makes an attempt to engage in an intercourse with her, subsequently killing her and finding his horse (Karriev 1983: I, § 834, 825, 835–841, 921–922, 927).
2. Koroglu gets old and, being cursed by spirits, departs for the underworld. Koroglu gets married in the underworld and has a son. Then Koroglu leaves the underworld, returns to Earth, where he encounters an old woman that kills him and sucks out his blood. The old woman is conceived with Koroglu's son by his blood she had sucked out (Karriev 1983: 27).
3. Koroglu uses a spell to stretch a bow that nobody else is able to stretch (Karriev 1983: I, 89; XII, 1145).
4. Koroglu's father bequeaths a golden cup to him (Karriev 1983: I, 38; III, 224.).

As we see, the two Turkic versions of the epic retained various aspects of the same storyline. The first part of the story is about Koroglu's horses being stolen by a creature that slithers on the ground (the old woman), while the second part deals with the subsequent birth of a son of Koroglu by the old woman.

Beyond doubt, the image of the naked slithering old woman can be seen as equivalent to the image of the half human half serpent creature. The old woman here is presented as a human transforming into a reptile.

	Heracles	Koroglu
1.	– Heracles falls asleep before his encounter with the serpent woman.	– The old woman is represented as a reptile that sends Koroglu to sleep.
2.	– The serpent woman takes possession of Heracles’ horses while he is sleeping.	– While Koroglu is asleep, the old woman steals his horse.
3.	– Heracles starts his search for his steeds after waking up.	– Koroglu sets off to look for his horse after waking up.
4.	– Heracles receives his horses back after copulating with the serpent woman.	– Koroglu engages in an intercourse with the old woman, after which he finds the horse
5.	– The “Greek epigraphic source” says that Heracles defeats Araxes in a fight, subsequently engaging in an intimate intercourse with his daughter Echidna.	– Setting off to search for his horse, Koroglu crosses the river of Araz (Araxes), and then he engages in an intercourse with the old woman.
6.	– The serpent woman bears Heracles’ sons.	– The old woman bears Koroglu’s son.

Thus, we have elicited the key storylines of the Turkmen and north Azerbaijan versions of the Koroglu epic that parallel the storyline and images pertaining to the myth of the Scythians’ descent from Heracles. As we have seen, there are many themes in the epic that recur in multiple variations. Claude Lévi-Strauss explains recurrent sequences in myths as follows: “repetition has as its function to make the structure of the myth apparent”. He concludes that “a myth exhibits a ‘slated’ structure which seeps to the surface, if one may say so, through the repetition process”.(Lévi-Strauss 1955: 443). In other words, myths expose a structure, which – by way of numerous repetitions – allows filtering down the archetypal layers of the myth. The analysis of the repetitions that we have discerned has allowed us to reconstruct the archetypal mythological layers of the Koroglu epic and to discover their parallels to the myth of the Scythians’ origin from Heracles. We have identified the following parallels between the myth of the Scythians’ descent from Heracles and the Koroglu epic:

	Heracles	Koroglu
1.	Heracles’ horses disappear;	Koroglu’s horse disappears;
2.	Heracles is asleep when his horses disappear;	Koroglu is asleep when his horse disappears;

	Heracles	Koroglu
3.	Heracles' horses are taken by the serpent woman;	Koroglu's horse is stolen by the old woman (slithering on the ground naked, resembling a snake);
4.	Heracles finds the serpent woman (Echidna) that has seized his horses in to her possession;	Koroglu finds the old woman that has taken his horse;
5.	Heracles' encounter with the serpent woman is preceded by a fight with Araxes, in which Heracles defeats the other;	Koroglu finds the old woman that has taken his horse after crossing the river of Araz(Araxes);
6.	Heracles engages in intimate relations with the serpent woman;	Koroglu engages in an intercourse with the old woman; the magician maiden casts a spell on Koroglu sending him into a vise-like grip of the earth, the maiden herself turning into a serpent and entwining Koroglu with other snakes;
7.	The serpent woman is impregnated with the son (sons) of Heracles;	The old woman bears the son of Koroglu;
8.	According to various versions, Heracles becomes the father of one, two or three sons;	According to various versions, Koroglu becomes the father of one or two sons;
9.	Heracles' son (sons) are conceived in a cave;	Koroglu's son is conceived in a cave;
10.	Heracles departs before his son is born;	Koroglu leaves before his son is born;
11.	Heracles bequeaths his belt to his son;	Koroglu bequeaths his bracelet to his son;
12.	Heracles leaves a golden goblet attached to the clasp of his belt for his son;	Koroglu inherits a golden cup from his father;
13.	Heracles' son Scythes stretches the bow that no one apart from his father and himself can stretch;	Koroglu stretches the bow that no one else can stretch;
14.	Heracles' son becomes the king of his land;	Koroglu's son is the hereditary prince of his land.

We believe that the research of the Turkic epic legacy should be continued with the prospect of discovering themes and images parallel to those contained in the myths about Heracles. New findings will help construct a comprehensive conception of Heracles' image in the ancient Turkic tradition.

Elements of Shamanism in the Koroglu Epic

In the course of our search for the elements of shamanism in the Koroglu epic, we examined the following issues: the initiation of a shaman, a shaman's journey into the centre of the world, a shaman's descent to the underworld, a shaman's symbolic death, shamanic poetry, attributes and qualities of a shaman.

Shaman's Initiation

The ceremony of a shaman's initiation in the Turkic peoples' folk narratives includes the following key rites: a symbolic death of a candidate shaman, which involves the dissection of his body and renewal of his inner organs; and the candidate's communication with gods or souls of the dead shamans. We will give a short account of the key rituals included in the initiation ceremony, which have been described in the literature, and compare these rituals to corresponding themes from the Turkmen version of the Koroglu epic:

	Shamanism	Koroglu
1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The candidate shaman sets off for asymbolic journey into the centre of the world, to the sacred tree, where he encounters spirits. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Following the instructions given to him by his grandfather, Koroglu is to set off for a trip to reach a tree. Koroglu spends an entire day and night by the tree. By dawn, <i>Erens</i> (spirits) and the prophet Hizir gather and take a decision: "While everybody is here, and no one has left yet, let us see him (Koroglu) off to his destination" (Karriev 1983: I, 62–64).
2.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The candidate shaman receives a drink that causes loss of consciousness or hypnotic sleep (Eliade 1972: 65). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The <i>Erens</i> (spirits) deprive Koroglu of his senses, or, in other words, send him into a hypnotic sleep (Karriev 1983: I, 65)
3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The candidate shaman is being symbolically buried, and carried to asymbolic underworld. The candidate shaman's body is subjected to a symbolic dismemberment (Eliade 1972: 65). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The <i>Erens</i> (spirits) dismember the body of Koroglu, take out his liver, purify the inner organs with light, eventually putting the organs back into the body and returning the hero into his original condition. After that they bestow their blessing upon the hero. When the epic hero wakes up, the <i>Erens</i> give him a cup of wine, which intoxicates him and sends him into an unconscious state again.

		Erens bless him, and then Koroglu rises again (Karriev 1983: I, 65–66).
4.	– The candidate shaman learns a new language (Eliade 1972: 65).	Koroglu asks the Erens to teach him new languages (Karriev 1983: I, 71)
5.	– The candidate shaman acquires new robes and a symbolic flying steed (Alekseev 1984: 118).	– The Erens give Koroglu new garments and a flying horse (Karriev 1983: I, 67)
6.	– Shamans that have already undergone the initiation would acquire a special “feature of the body.” There was a spot on a shaman’s body that could be pierced with a knife without causing harm to the man. According to N. A. Alekseev, experienced shamans would have up to nine spots protected in this way (Alekseev 1984:121).	– Koroglu asks the Erens to teach him how to heal his multiple wounds in the light of stars (Karriev 1983: I, 70).
7.	– As a conclusion of the ceremony, the candidate shaman acquires a new name (Eliade 1972: 65).	– Eventually, the Erens give a new name to the hero of the Koroglu epic (Karriev 1983: I, 72).
8.	– “Forgetting the previous life is the goal pursued in all these rituals.” On his return home, the candidate shaman “pretends to have lost his memory” (Eliade 1972: 65).	– When Koroglu returns home, he appears to his grand father in an absolutely new, “humble” mage (Karriev 1983: I, 74).

The Shaman’s Journey to the Spring in the Centre of the World

The north Azerbaijan version of the epic cites the following theme. Koroglu is endowed with poetic power and with an immense strength in the course of his journey to the “centre of the world.” In the “centre of the world,” there are “dual springs” located on the top of an insurmountable cliff by a “bizarre tree” near a “milky lake” formed by the waters of the “dual springs” (Abbashi 2000: 64).

In the perception of Siberian shamans, the Cosmic Mountain, “sacred tree,” and “milky lake” represent distinct markers of the “centre of the universe” or the “cos-mic umbilical cord” (L’vova-Oktiabr’skaia-Sagalaev-Usmanova 1988: 123). A journey towards the “centre of the universe” is also included in the symbolic journey ritual that constitutes a part of the shaman initiation (Eliade 1972: 119).

Some aspects of Koroglu’s journey to the “centre of the world” are of primary interest. For example, the epic says that many made attempts to reach that place (the centre of the world) but never managed (Abbashi 2000: 63). There is a parallel to this statement in the story of one shaman from Altai, who departs for a journey to the centre of the world, and – while on his symbolic ascend to the summit of the sacred mountain that reaches the Heavens – he sees the bones of other shamans that “did not have enough strength to reach the summit” (Eliade 1972: 202).

The epic says that “every seven years two stars from the east and west move towards each other until they meet in the sky. Then the water in the “dual springs” starts frothing. One that will immerse himself in the foam will become invincible, while one that will drink the water will be endowed with poetic power and become a bard with a mighty awesome voice (Abbaslı 2000: 63). After immersing himself in the waters of the “dual springs,” the epic hero acquires his musical instrument: *kobuz* or *saz*. That *kobuz* is one of the instruments used by shamans is a well-known fact in the dedicated academic field. For example, the Kyrgyz *bakšī* (*bakši*; shaman) use a *kobuz* rather than a drum for entering trance states (Eliade 1972: 173).

The theme of the spring’s miraculous power can be traced in the beliefs of the Tuva shamans too (Van Deusen 1998: 70). The “milky lake,” a place where benign deities dwell, is analogous to the miraculous spring (L’vova – Oktiabr’skaia – Sagalaev – Usmanova 1988: 123).

We can see, therefore, that the Turkmen version of the epic describes the process of the shaman initiation, which involves the hero’s communication with spirits along with the candidate’s symbolic dissection, while the north Azerbaijan variant of the epic deals with the candidate’s journey to the “centre of the world” and his acquiring particular features of the body, and poetic power.

The Shaman’s Descent to the Underworld

The Tashauz-Chovdor version of the Koroglu epic [an unpublished Turkmen version] contains the following story. Koroglu gets old and – since he has been cursed by spirits for impaling seven trees with an arrow – has to descend to the under-world together with his horse. There he appears to the underworld king as a “giant hero,” after which he returns to Earth.

1. In this part of the epic, Koroglu descends to the underworld with his flying horse (Karriev 1983: 27), which has direct parallels to shamanism, since a horse is one of the transport means used by shamans in their ecstatic travels to another world (Eliade 1972: 149).
2. The trees that Koroglu impaled with an arrow are an unmistakable allusion to the “sacred tree.” We should note here that the sacred tree of shamanic mythology is located in the “centre of the world,” constituting the cosmic axis and piercing all the way through Earth, heavens and the underworld (Hoppál 2001: 85–86). The sacred tree is in essence the door to other worlds, including the underworld.
3. Koroglu is represented in this epic as a “giant hero.” “This is a hyperbolic portrait of Gër-oglu” (Karriev 1983: 27). We are faced here with mythological concepts of the Turkic peoples of Siberia, in which the “heavens” and the “underworld” are represented as copies of the matrix of the “middle world.” The difference, however, is that the upper and lower worlds are modelled according to the principles of either hyperbolizing or reversing the features of the middle world, i.e. of the world where human beings dwell (L’vova– Oktiabr’skaia – Sagalaev – Usmanova 1988: 16, 28).

Consequently, the story about the descent of Koroglu with his flying horse to the underworld, combined with Koroglu’s hyperbolic embodiment and the image of the tree, clearly refers us to the epic’s shamanic roots. The “life journey of a human” in the folklore of the Turkic peoples of Siberia “is bound to involve a return” (L’vova – Oktiabr’skaia – Sagalaev – Usmanova 1988:72). Based on the fact of Koroglu’s return to Earth from the underworld in the above-mentioned epic story, we can conclude that this is about a shaman’s journey to the underworld, rather than about the death of the epic hero.

The Comparison of Koroglu's Death and a Shaman's Symbolic Death

One of the Turkmen versions of the epic describes Koroglu's death. Koroglu's wife takes the hero to a cave in the mountains, where they observe "a miraculous appearance of a hundred white birds" and a spring. Koroglu's wife tells him: "You have now joined the Erens" (spirits and shamans' protectors). Before parting with her, Koroglu gives a "magic mirror that can show anything happening in the world" to his wife, and then the wife "departs to her mountain of Kap" (Karriev 1983: 26).

In this part of the epic, the hero leaves this world and joins the Erens. Besides, he parts with his shamanic attribute, the "magic mirror." According to M. Eliade, the shamans believed that a mirror helped them see the world. The mirror did play a significant role in the shamanism of the Mongol, Tungus and Manchu peoples (Eliade 1972: 153; Alekseev 1984: 155–156).

This part of the Turkmen version of the epic contains a reference to a miraculous emergence of a spring, a parallel to the life-giving foam of the "dual springs" in the north Azerbaijan version of the epic; and to a miraculous appearance of a hundred white birds, a parallel to the Yakut legends, in which the mother of shamans, a huge predatory bird with an iron beak, will appear during the shaman's spiritual birth and in the time of his death (Eliade 1972: 34).

Koroglu's entering the cave and the links of this part of the story to shamanic mythology will be discussed below.

Koroglu's Poetic Power and Shamanic Poetry

Poetic power and the gift of a bard are among special abilities possessed by shamans. According to E. V. Revunenkovna, it was precisely shamans in many cultures that were poets, singers and narrators of legends and epics. She emphasizes that the functions of a shaman and a poet have been unified among the Turkic peoples of Central Asia until recently (Revunenkovna 1989: 393). M. Hoppál states that a similarity of motives was traced in the shaman songs and epics of the western Tuva people, Buryats, and Mongols (Hoppál 1984: 203–213). Yakut researchers identified a close relation between shamanic rituals and the epic poetry of the Yakut people (Balzer 1993: 79). M. B. Kenin-Lopsan believes that the Tuva shamanic poetry and epics are closely related (Van Deusen 1998: 69). A. L. Siikala, who reconstructed a broad range of shamanistic concepts in the Kalevala epic, thinks that the epic could have been created by a shaman (Siikala 1986: 223–237).

In all parts of the Koroglu epic, the main epic hero himself is the author of all the poems he performs. Koroglu possesses two qualities at the same time. First, he is an invincible warrior. Second, he is a great poet, bard and narrator with an unrivalled powerful voice.

J. Pentikäinen remarks that shamanic actions are typically described as poetic contests between epic performers. He refers to the "singing competition" between Joukahainen and Väinämöinen from the Kalevala epic as an example (Pentikäinen 1989: 99). The theme of poetic contest between Koroglu and other warriors and poets runs through the entire Koroglu epic.

The Elements of Shamanism in the Myth of the Scythians' Descent from Heracles

As a result of this research, we have established that the plot of the myth of the Scythians' descent from Heracles, along with the parallel storylines in the Koroglu epic has distinct shamanic roots.

Many archaic attributes present in the myth give us grounds to date its early archetypal rudiments back to the time of the formative stage of shamanism. This idea is suggested by the combination of four

components in these narratives: cave, bow, belt, and serpent. All of these, as we will demonstrate below, belong to the earliest attributes of shamanism. Let us examine these components one by one.

Cave

The cave plays a significant role in shamanism. There is ample evidence of shaman initiation ceremonies held in caves, or of the image of a cave playing an important part in the ceremony. This evidence can be found in the shamanic rituals of the Araucans in Chile, Eskimos, North American tribes (Eliade 1972: 52), and the Avam peninsula Samoyeds (the Nenets people) (Popov 1936: 84 ff.).

In shamanism, a cave is a clear symbol of a shaman's descent to the underworld. M. Eliade, who relates the first archaeological evidence of shamanism to the Palaeolithic period, believes that the cave did play a considerable role in the religion (Eliade 1972: 51, 501).

Å. Hultkrantz believes that some shamanistic myths date back to the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic periods. At the same time, he warns the reader against dating all shamanistic myths back to the archaeological periods in question, since many shamanic stories pertain to the culture of developed shamanism (Hultkrantz 1995:147, note. 7). We agree with this view and consider it necessary to examine all components of each individual shamanic myth and compare these components before drawing conclusions regarding the period when the myth appeared. It was based on this principle that we addressed the issue of studying the myth of the Scythians' descent from Heracles. The presence of the image of a cave (along with a bow, snake and belt) in the myth is a direct indicator of the myth's roots in a very ancient period.

Therefore, we have concluded that:

- The cave is one of the earliest features of shamanism;
- The cave plays an important role in the shamanism of many peoples;
- In shamanism, the cave represents a specific symbol of a shaman's descent to the underworld.

Bow

The bow has a special significance in shamanic rituals and mythology. A bow and an arrow are often used to strike spirits. A bow with an arrow is also a metaphor for an "impregnated womb of nature" (L'vova – Oktiabr'skaia – Sagalaev – Usmanova 1988: 134).

Å. Hultkrantz makes a note that there is an enigmatic link between a shamanic drum and a shamanic bow among Siberian shamans (Hultkrantz 2001: 6). Shamans of the Sagay tribe often used a drum as a magic bow (Alekseev 1984: 167). In the sacral vocabulary of the Turkic peoples of South Siberia, the same word is used to refer to the metal rim of the drum and a bow-string (L'vova – Oktiabr'skaia – Sagalaev – Usmanova 1988: 108). M. Eliade states that a bow represents a one-string musical instrument employed by a shaman to enter into a trance state with the help of a magic tune. The Lebed Tatars' shamans use a bow, rather than a drum, as a magic musical instrument (Eliade 1972: 180)

There is another sphere in the Turkic people's shamanism where a bow has a special meaning. Namely, the practices of divination and sorcery. The shamans of Western Siberia used a bow for fortune telling and sorcery exclusively among their relatives. Based on this and many other facts, E. L. Lvova, I. V. Oktyabrskaya, A. M. Salagayev, and M. S. Usmanova concluded that the bow and arrow belong to the mythologemes that "had a special significance in shamanic myths and rituals" being the oldest attributes of genealogical shamanism (Lvova – Oktyabrskaya – Salagayev – Usmanova 1988: 134).

We have concluded therefore, that:

- –The bow has multiple functions in shamanism;
- The bow belongs to the oldest attributes of genealogical shamanism.

The Serpent

Based on the fact that the image of the serpent was widely spread geographically since early times, R. Heinze relates references of this image to the mythological or proto-religious period (Heinze 2002: 39, 53).

The meaning of the serpent in shamanism is rather controversial. A serpent can feature as a shaman's means of transport (Eliade 1972: 149), a shaman's protector (Alekseev 1984: 155–156), or sometimes even a shaman's adversary (Hultkrantz 1995: 148). As we can see, there is some ambivalence in the interpretation of the serpent's mythological image in shamanism. Let us try to examine the essence of this ambivalence and its possible origins. According to M. Hoppál, "mythopoetic thinking" has the tendency of juxtaposing objects or polarizing them into two extremes. He refers to the shamans of tundra. They see the upper world as an embodiment of the male principle, while the lower world or underworld, or the lower part of the body for that matter, is construed as an epitome of the feminine, or – in traditional Nenets terms – of the impure (Hoppál 2001: 75, 84). This is apparently the source of the myth about the serpent woman, whose lower body part symbolizes the underworld.

The Belt

M. Hoppál suggests that various elements of the shaman's robes symbolize different levels of the universe. For example, the footwear of Siberian shamans symbolizes the lower world; the headwear stands for the upper world; and the belt represents the borderline between the lower and upper worlds. M. Hoppál writes that shamans cannot practice "in ordinary clothes, and at least a belt must be put on." For example, the Nenets shamans used a belt for travelling to the underworld (Hoppál 2001: 84). In other words, a belt performed the function of a drum. Among the Altai shamans, a belt was used for a shaman's protection. The Tuva shamans used a belt with small pendant bells along with other objects attached to it, serving as protection against evil forces (L'vova – Oktiabr'skaia – Sagalaev – Usmanova 1988: 182).

M. Hoppál concluded that metal objects attached to a shaman's belt perform a protective function during his ecstatic travels (Hoppál 2001: 84). Heracles' goblet attached to his belt must have performed a similar protective function. The goblet embodies the milky lake (a vessel of nature) located in the centre of the world in Turkic peoples' tradition. N. A. Alekseev suggests that the milky lake represents a mythical object of the middle world (Alekseev 1984: 169). The shaman's belt is also a symbol of the middle world (L'vova – Oktiabr'skaia – Sagalaev – Usmanova 1988: 182), since it stands for the dividing line between the lower and upper worlds. It appears that the reason why these two objects, the belt and the goblet were united is that they both represent the middle world. According to Turkic peoples' tradition, the ability to wear a belt on their waist was the "key distinctive feature of the people of the middle world; inhabitants of the heavens would wear it under their arms, while dwellers of the underworld would wear it on their hips." In Turkic folklore, the acquisition of a belt by a hero would signify that the hero reached adulthood and it would also serve as an indicator of the hero's social status (L'vova – Oktiabr'skaia – Sagalaev – Usmanova 1988: 182, 183)

We can therefore make the following conclusions regarding the myth of the Scythians' descent from Heracles:

- The belt symbolizes the border between the upper and lower worlds;
- The belt is one of the earliest constituents of a shaman's ritual robes;
- The goblet attached to the clasp on Heracles' belt, and the belt itself stand for the middle world;
- The goblet attached to the clasp on Heracles' belt functions as a shaman's protector during his ecstatic travels.

The Cult of a Hero

The version of the myth of the Scythians' descent from Heracles represented in the "Greek epigraphic source" construes Heracles as a progenitor hero that defeats Araxes in battle (Raevskii 1977: 25). When describing Heracles' encounter with the serpent woman, Herodotus depicts the hero as a forefather that sets conditions for his sons (Herodotus IV: 8–10). Further on, when referring to Scythia, Herodotus speaks of Heracles as a giant hero, recalling Heracles' gigantic footprint that was shown to him near the Tiras river (Herodotus IV: 82). In the version of the myth recounted by Diodorus Siculus, the character of Heracles as a forebear is replaced by that of Zeus (Diodorus II: 43). In other words, Heracles is depicted as a deity. How can we explain this process of gradual hyperbolizing and deifying Heracles' image? Å. Hultkrantz believes that tendencies towards exaggerating the hero's qualities and ascribing special features to him are typical of the cult of a hero. Incidentally, the longer the time passed since the hero's death, the more powerful and enigmatic his epic image will become. Å. Hultkrantz examines the cult of a hero within a shamanic context, coming to the conclusion that the cult of shamans is a form of the cult of ethnic heroes, widely spread among the Siberian peoples and the peoples of the Volga region (Hultkrantz 1995: 149, 150). J. Pentikäinen suggests that it is mythical heroes that are often seen in shamanic cultures as proto-shamans (Pentikäinen 1989: 98). The Yakut myths represent the first shamans as sons of the God of Heavens. In Buryat myths the first shaman is born by an earthly woman and by an eagle, an envoy of gods. In many myths of the Altai peoples, the first shamans are of divine origin (Hultkrantz 1995: 150–151). Comparing these observations with the information we have about Heracles, we can conclude that the deification of Heracles fits into the framework typical of the mythology of the Altai and Yakut peoples. In the above-cited ancient sources, Heracles is identified with the God of Heavens (Zeus). He and an "earthly woman" (the earthborn serpent woman) conceive a child, to whom he bequeaths shamanic attributes: a bow, belt and goblet. Thus, comparing the myth of the Scythians' descent from Heracles with the Siberian peoples' myths (in which the first shaman is typically conceived by an earthly woman and a deity), we can infer that the image of Scythes conceived by Heracles is nothing else but the image of the first shaman (ancestor of the first shaman).

The Herodotian description of Heracles' gigantic footprint parallels the part of the Koroglu tradition, in which the epic protagonist is described as a giant hero when he descends into the underworld (Kariev 1983: 27). The Siberian Turkic peoples' mythology provides an explanation for this storyline, too. As we have already mentioned, objects of the "heavenly" world and "underworld" are constructed by means of either hyperbolizing or reversing the qualities of the objects existing in the "middle" world (L'vova – Oktiabr'skaia – Sagalaev – Usmanova 1988: 16, 28). Needless to say, that the gradual alteration and contortion of Heracles' image should be explained based on Å. Hultkrantz' suggestion concerning the tendency of hero cults to hyperbolize and ascribe special qualities to the hero (Hultkrantz 1995: 150). On the other hand, however, M. Eliade's argument that a shaman's "ecstatic experience" is subjected to contortions to a greater extent than any other religious experience (Eliade 1972: 11) should also be taken into consideration as a factor that contributed to the change of Heracles' image over time.

As a conclusion:

- The myth of the Scythians’ descent from Heracles is one of the earliest sam-ples of shamanic mythology we have today.
- The myth dates back to the early formative stages of shamanism.
- The myth represents the story of Heracles’ bequeathing shamanic power and attributes to his son.– Heracles is construed in this myth as a shaman progenitor, this image later transformed into the image of a deity.
- Heracles’ son is represented as the proto-shaman.
- The image of the “Scythian” Heracles and the corresponding mythical storyline are reflected in the most comprehensive way in the Turkic Koroglu epic, the latter simultaneously representing one of the most encompassing epics associated with shamanism.

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