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O. S. Chastnyk, Cand. of Art Criticism, Associate Professor, Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, Kharkiv

stanchast@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5188-5097>

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE CIRCLE IN TRADITIONAL ART (UKRAINIAN-IRISH PARALLELS)

This paper explores a class of ornamental and epic texts of Ukrainian and Irish traditional art related to the graphical idea of the circle. In his research, carried out on a conditionally synchronic plane, the author employs methods of comparative and semiotic analysis. The study has shown a correlation between graphic and verbal symbols within each cultural tradition, as well as between traditional art symbols of Ukraine and Ireland. The semantic invariant of the circle (closed space and cyclic nature of time, 'sacred centre — profane periphery' opposition) is graphically visualised in ornamental texts as structural and distributional variants. In narrative traditional art, archetypal spatial and temporal themes are metaphorically represented by means of constant sets of symbolic codes, which are in general common for the two cultures.

Keywords: *traditional art, semiotic analysis, graphic and verbal symbols, circle, semantic invariant.*

О. С. Частник, кандидат мистецтвознавства, доцент, Національний юридичний університет імені Ярослава Мудрого, м. Харків

СИМВОЛІЗМ КОЛА В ТРАДИЦІЙНОМУ МИСТЕЦТВІ (УКРАЇНСЬКО-ІРЛАНДСЬКІ ПАРАЛЕЛІ)

Актуальність. У традиційному мистецтві прості графічні форми мають глибокий символічний зміст з прадавними уявленнями про структуру світу. Тому дослідження символіки на матеріалі таких знаків набувають особливої важливості в періоди осмислення нацією своєї культурної спадщини і можуть надати цікаві результати.

Мета статті — здійснити крос-культурне дослідження класу орнаментальних та епічних текстів українського й ірландського традиційного мистецтва, що належать до графічної ідеї кола.

Методологія. У цій розвідці, виконаній в умовно-синхронічній площині, автор послуговується компаративним, структурно-семантичним та архетипним аналізом.

Результати. Порівняльний аналіз засвідчив кореляцію між графічними та вербальними символами в межах кожної традиції, а також між символікою традиційного мистецтва України й Ірландії. Семантичний інваріант кола (замкнений простір та циклічність часу) графічно поданий в орнаментальних текстах як структурно-дистрибутивні варіанти. У наративному традиційному мистецтві мотив шляху з ритмічним повторенням «зупинок» і неодмінним поверненням героя після виконання його місії ізоморфний до графічного образу кола. Архетипні теми простору і часу метафорично представлені константним набором символічних кодів, спільних для обох культур.

Новизна. Стаття є першою спробою двопланового порівняння: з одного боку — орнаментальні та наративні тексти, а з іншого — ірландське й українське традиційне мистецтво.

Практичне значення. Матеріали і результати роботи можуть бути корисними під час підготовки курсів лекцій, присвячених компаративним і семіотичним дослідженням традиційного мистецтва.

Висновки. І стародавню Ірландію, і Україну-Русь можна розглядати як топологічно еквівалентні фігури з чіткою опозицією «центр — периферія»: обидві цивілізації були оточені ворожим хаосом океану та кочового Степу. Звідси вражаючий «космічний» символізм українського та ірландського традиційного мистецтва з популярним орнаментальним мотивом кола та епічною ідеєю виходу за межі замкненого кола (міста, острова) у загадковий відкритий простір («чисте поле», океан тощо).

Ключові слова: *традиційне мистецтво, семіотичний аналіз, графічні та вербальні символи, коло, семантичний інваріант.*

А. С. Частник, кандидат искусствоведения, доцент, Национальный юридический университет имени Ярослава Мудрого, г. Харьков

СИМВОЛИЗМ КРУГА В ТРАДИЦИОННОМ ИСКУССТВЕ (УКРАИНСКО-ИРЛАНДСКИЕ ПАРАЛЛЕЛИ)

Рассмотрен класс орнаментальных и эпических текстов украинского и ирландского традиционного искусства, построенных на основе графического образа круга. Исследование осуществлено в условно-синхронном плане с применением методик сравнительно-семиотического анализа. Обнаружена корреляция между графическими и вербальными символами в пределах каждой традиции, с одной стороны, и между символикой народного искусства Украины и Ирландии, — с другой. Семантический инвариант символа круга (замкнутость на себе пространства и цикличность времени, противопоставление сакрального центра и профанной периферии) реализуется в орнаментальных текстах в виде структурно-дистрибутивных вариантов. В повествовательном традиционном искусстве архетипные пространственно-временные темы также образно передаются с помощью устойчивых наборов символических кодов, в целом общих для обеих культур.

Ключевые слова: *традиционное искусство, семиотический анализ, графические и вербальные символы, круг, семантический инвариант.*

Problem statement. One of the main areas of study in contemporary cultural anthropology is the search for universal and specific features in various symbolic representations of the world. The study of symbolism as a phenomenon of traditional culture becomes particularly relevant at the time when a nation is rediscovering its cultural heritage. It is symbolic imagery that, to a large extent, makes a national culture unique, distinct from others. Equally important is comparative research that enables scholars to identify the position of a national culture (including traditional art) in the European cultural mosaic.

Previous research and the aim of the paper. As is well known, the information about primaevial conceptions of the world is encoded in the simplest graphic forms (circle, spiral, cross, and the like), or in their combinations (labyrinth, mandala, the 'Tree of Life'). In the course of time such elementary patterns acquire new meanings; in other words, the simpler the 'expression form' of a cultural symbol, the more complex is its 'content form'. For this reason, 'etymological' explorations based on the material of simple graphic signs can produce quite a number of interesting results. This is especially true of the decorative arts in which the idea of the spiral, circle, cross, etc. is graphically visualised in ornamental signs. In narrative art, on the contrary, the cosmological symbolism of elementary geometric signs is 'hidden' in the plot construction of the tale, in its themes and motifs.

Historical, culturological and ethnographic aspects of Irish ornament and epic tales been the subject of numerous interesting works (e.g. Ó hÓgáin, 2006; McCaffrey, , & Eaton, 2003; Meehan, 2007). However, little attention has been paid to comparative studies of Irish and Ukrainian traditional narrative and ornamental art. In view of an insufficient level of scientific exchange in this field, relevant further research seems very promising.

Research methodology. A suitable tool for a comparative analysis of national 'models of the world' is provided by the ideas of semiotics, structuralism, and the theory of cultural archetypes. From the semiotic point of view, all cultural phenomena like language, myths, rituals, symbolic imagery, art, etc. are integral sets of signs used in verbal/non-verbal communication and structured in a certain way. This approach makes it possible to compare traditional ornamental and epic texts (even distant in space and time) as correlated synchronic planes. The term 'text' is commonly defined as any semantically organised sequence of signs. The notion of 'epic' is viewed here in a wide sense — as the totality of hero-lore and folktales.

The main material. This study was conducted as a cross-cultural analysis of some ornamental and epic texts of Ukraine and Ireland. The choice of these geographically distant nations was prompted, first of all, by the obvious similarities of their historic and cultural background. But there is another,

even more intriguing similarity. Both early Ireland and Ukraine-Rus can be seen as topologically equivalent figures with a clear centre-periphery opposition: both civilizations were surrounded by the hostile *primaeval* chaos of the ocean and nomadic Steppe. Hence the impressive 'cosmic' symbolism of both Ukrainian and Irish traditional art with the popular ornamental motif of the circle and the epic idea of getting beyond the boundaries of a circular area (city, island) into an enigmatic open space (the 'wide prairies', ocean, etc.).

Traditionally, the circle is assigned symbolic meanings of unity and perfection, infinity and eternity, wholeness and world order (Zerbst, 2003, pp. 275-276). Archaeological studies have shown that solar signs such as circles, rosettes, swastikas, etc. occur on decorative objects on the territory of Ukraine as early as in the Bronze Age; they were probably used as magic symbols of protection. Predominant among the astral motifs in Irish traditional design in the same period was the spiral as the symbol of space and time unfolding into eternity. The 'Wheel of Life' or 'Sunwheel' popular in the contemporary tradition of Irish decorative art symbolised the rays of the sun, its path in space and time, and the eternal journey of life. As A. Meehan has put it, "...we tend to sense our lives as a line or path between birth and death. But while this may be so, the nature of cycles follows the pattern of a wheel, in which all that is born rises and falls in its turn. As the wheel leaves a track in the earth, time leaves a track in our minds. This track of memory has a beginning and an end. But to the wheel that makes a track, the beginning and the end are a single point turning round a hub, just as the passing ages of the world are like all the sunrises that ever were..." (Meehan, 1999, p. 47). The wheel and its track graphically correlate as the rosette and border in decorative ornaments: the rosette is closed, finite, rotationally rhythmic, whereas the border is translationally rhythmic, open and potentially infinite.

Likewise, the heroic epic or folktale journey can be regarded as a linear sequence of spatial-temporal points (threshold, gate, crossroads, well, bridge, cave, crystal palace, encounters with magic helpers and evildoers). Each of such points correlates with the next revolution of the imaginary 'wheel of life'. A revolution of this imaginary wheel is equivalent to the complete calendar cycle: "...he walked and he walked for a whole year" (Ivanko the Bear); "...he roamed the kingdom for more than a year" (The Silk Kingdom); "... they ride on for one week, two weeks, three weeks but the cudgel is nowhere to be seen!" (Ivan the Peasant's Son). The length of the hero's journey is described in the same way: "...he walked on the hilltop for seven miles" (The Silk Kingdom). In the folktale tradition, the length of the journey is usually measured (if measured at all) not in miles but in spatial and temporal milestones ('loci'). A similar pattern occurs in Irish folktales as well, e.g. "...

the raven flew away with him over seven bens, and seven glens, and seven mountain moors” (The Battle of the Birds).

Worth mentioning in this connection is the plot of *The Children of Lir*, one of the most popular sagas of the Mythological Cycle. The second wife of Lir, one of the heroes of the underground kingdom of the sí, is jealous of his four children from his previous marriage. She enchants the children, transforming them into swans (the traditional motif of a wicked stepmother the sorceress). The life journey of Lir’s children — Finnola and her three brothers — is depicted as a sequence of three spatial-temporal ‘loci’: three hundred years on Lake Derravaragh in Ireland, three hundred years on the Sea of Moyle between Ireland and Scotland, and three hundred years on the Isle of Glora out in the ocean. The archetypal image of water is associated, among other things, with chaos and death, thus each revolution of this ‘wheel of fate’ can be viewed as a kind of the Circle of Hell. Moreover, each subsequent ‘locus’ is situated further west from the children’s home, which enables us to interpret this plot as a verbal representation of the idea of a spiral with its ‘escalation of tension’. Very interesting in this tale is the national imagery of the ‘Wheel of Life’: a westward journey out to sea with stops on a lake and an island, each part of the journey lasting for three hundred years (the sacral points of space and time combined with the mythological symbolism of the number three).

Unlike Irish heroes, the epic bohatyr of early Ukraine-Rus goes on a journey out into the ‘open country’ (‘wide prairies’), the symbolical character of which is isomorphic to the symbolism of the sea: the inhabited, ordered, protected centre (Rus) is opposed to the chaotic, uninhabited, dangerous space of the Steppe in the same way as the island of Ireland is opposed to the chaos of the ocean. Natural space markers (predictable stops in the ocean) are represented by islands. On equally uninhabited flat plains of the ‘open country’ the same function is performed by other natural waymarks, namely rivers and hills. Islands, as well as rivers and hills correspond to the sacral points of discrete mythological space and time (they were thought to have some connection with the otherworld); in fact, we can talk of ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ epic zones rhythmically following one after another. The hero overcomes the space in leaps and bounds without lingering in ‘profane’ zones (one leap of the horse being equal to one revolution of the ‘Wheel of Life’). For instance, the bohatyr’s horse leaps from one river bank to another, “some of the rivers being 15 miles wide” (Mykhailo Kazarenin); he jumps “from one hill to another” (Ilya of Murom and Nightingale the Robber). The rhythmic sequence of the cyclic flow of time and spatial changes in epic tales can easily be associated with the rhythmic repetitiveness of ornamental motifs. Thus we can say that the verbal metaphors in epic tales and the non-verbal

imagery of ornamental texts are mutually interpretative. The rhythmic alternation of spatial-temporal 'loci' creates order in the epic world in the same way as ornament harmonises the object, subconsciously correlating it with the universe.

God Lugh, the personified sun, as well as his son Cúchulainn are depicted in the Irish tradition with such solar attributes as a chariot and the 'shining wheel'. In one of the episodes of the Cattle Raid of Cooley (Táin Bó Cuailnge) Cúchulainn, wishing to obtain magic knowledge from a supernatural woman-warrior named Scáthach, sets out for her fortress on a remote island. His journey to the fortress across the Plain of Ill-luck and the Land of Shadows with their desert plains, boiling seas, monsters, bridges, mountains and gorges can be seen as an artistic representation of the idea of the labyrinth, whereas Scáthach's land is analogous to the otherworld. The 'sun wheel' received by Cúchulainn from Lugh plays the role of Ariadne's thread that connects this world with the otherworld.

Associating the wheel with the sun is common for the traditional culture of Europe. According to prehistoric perceptions, the sun 'rotates', 'rolls' in the sky. During the 'sun festivals' like Ivan Kupala (John the Baptist Day) or Masliana (Pancake week) it was customary to roll a flaming wheel down a river bank into the water, thus imitating the path of the sun in the sky. In decorative art, images of the rotating sun frequently appear in the form of the Segner's wheel and rosette. The spokes in the Segner's wheel are bent in one direction thus symbolising sunbeams and the movement of the sun. The sacral meaning of this solar sign is revealed in the context of 'sun festivals', the festivals of perpetual rebirth. In the Irish variant of this sign, traditionally designed as a triskele enclosed by a circle, spiral elements are accentuated.

Another popular ornamental motif that semantically and syntactically can be regarded as a derivative of the circle (wheel) is the rosette. This sign, typical of Ukrainian ornament, is a closed figure of full rotational symmetry. The axial symmetry creates the impression of an intensive rotary motion. Rosettes are believed to be associated with the solar cult because of their resemblance to the sun and their central location in the syntax of many ornamental texts. Semiotically, Ukrainian rosettes can be considered as good examples of mutual interpretation with the epic symbol of Lugh's 'sun wheel', the latter being a text from another culture and another category of art. By the way, there is evidence that rosette designs were used in early Celtic ornament as a symbol of the sun as well.

Early Slavs used to make a furrow around their settlements with their ploughs to ward off evil and protect the crops. Epic hero Nikita Kozhemiaka even makes the captured Dragon do the same thing (apparently to sacralise the territory won back from the chaos of the 'open country'). Early Celts used

to perform similar actions related to the symbolism of the circles. Before the battle the druids drew a magic circle (Airbe Druad) around their army creating an invisible protective barrier. We can find descriptions of such ritual actions in Irish epics as well. Queen-sorceress Medb rides three times around her camp in a chariot (The Cattle Raid of Cooley), which provides a triple protective effect (the sign of the wheel, Airbe Druad plus the magic symbolism of the number three). In another (semiotically more complicated) text Cúchulainn makes a pillar, puts it on a stone, cuts a message in Ogham characters on a hoop of an oak sapling, and wraps it around the pillar as a warning and challenge to Medb's army (The Rising of the Men of Connacht). Each sign of this text signifies (in its own way) the 'sacred space' of Ulster opposed to the hostile chaotic element personified by the sorceress. Cúchulainn, the son of sun-god Lugh, is an embodiment of 'light' cosmic forces; the pillar and stone are sacralised markers of borders, whereas the hoop is used here as a symbol for protection (magic circle) of the pillar and Ulster as a whole. Ogham characters symbolise links with the otherworld, because in the Early Middle Ages the alphabet was associated with magic, supernatural origin.

Here we have a typical case of information transmission in the process of communication. The sender (Cúchulainn) encodes his message (warning to the enemy) with magic symbols. The stability and invariance of symbolic codes within the same culture enables the addressee (the enemy from a related Irish ethnic group) to decode and adequately perceive the information sent to him.

In this context, we can also mention the folktale theme of the hero 'encircling' an enchanted city; as a result, the inhabitants of the city are redeemed from a curse and come alive (The Little Wanderer, Ukrainian folktale). A similar motif (with the opposite sign polarity) is found in The Dream of Aengus, in which Aengus, an Irish god of love, and Caer, a girl from the otherworld, turn into swans and fly three times round a lake sending the pursuers to sleep for three days and nights.

In Ukrainian fantastic tales the idea of the 'magic circle' is represented, in particular, in the form of a magic waistband, the 'belt of good' (The Magic Pot) or, more often, in the form of a golden ring (e.g. About a Poor Lad and the Tzar's Daughter). The motif of the ring as a means of putting a spell on people is known in the Irish fantastic epics as well. In one of the sagas of the Fenian Cycle, a fairy from the mound of Slievegallion turns him into a feeble old man with the help of a magic ring. Such transformations can be treated as a contact with the otherworld resulting in a distortion of spatial and temporal dimensions of the earthbound life. As we can see, the ring represents the idea of the two worlds united in a single closed circle.

Ornament designs on metalwork, pottery, weapons dating from the Bronze Age all over Europe often contain concentric circles; even today this motif occurs in folk ornamentation, for example on decorated plates in Hutsul land, Ukraine. Most researchers associate such images with solar symbolism; however, the number of meanings of each symbol is potentially endless, particularly in the case of *primaeval* cosmologic signs. Systems of concentric circles can also be viewed as graphic symbols for 'multiple protection' at all levels of universal order. At the macrocosm level the universe can be encircled by the 'world serpent' feeding on its own tail. The level of mesocosm consists of several 'circle – centre' subsystems: the country's borders – the capital; the city's circular rampart – the king's palace; one's home with its fence and walls – hearth (oven). Decorated clothes with waistbands, bracelets, rings and other amulets in the form of a circle provide protection at the microcosm level. Before his last battle, Cúchulainn puts on magic clothes presented to him by Manannán, the sea-god (by the way, it was Manannán who enclosed Ireland with a circle of his own element). In the epic world the sacred space of Ukraine-Rus with its cumulative centre 'Kiev – king's palace – shrine' is opposed to the disorganised, uninhabited space of the 'wide prairies'. The wilderness of the 'open country' is frequently mentioned in epic songs, e.g. "They didn't come across a bird of passage, nor could they see a beast on the prowl" (Aliosha Popovich and the Dragon).

Ireland herself was treated as the centre and the model of the macrocosm (the schematic image of this island is isomorphic to the circle). Tara, the seat of Ireland's high kings and the country's political and religious centre, was situated on the territory of County Meath, roughly in the middle of the country. Seven rows of walls surrounded the royal palace thus creating an internal protected space. Incidentally, pre-Celtic people used to enclose their sanctuaries with protective circles, too; megalithic structures (stone circles) and 'hollow hills' (tumuluses) were built like this. The tumulus at Newgrange is encircled with a ditch and rampart, followed by a wide circle of standing stones. Thus, structures at different levels of cosmic hierarchy are placed one inside the other like a *Matrioshka* doll. To Cúchulainn, the sacralised centre is represented by Emhain Macha, the capital of Ulster; the hero's home kingdom constitutes the nearest circle around this centre; further outside comes the borderland (neutral territory), still further outside is the rest of Ireland (enemy kingdoms), the shores of which can be regarded as the next circle; the last outer circle is made up by the hostile chaos of the ocean followed by the otherworld.

In contrast, the human world in Ukrainian folktales is usually depicted as an abstract closed space enclosed by something that is likewise vaguely called 'the wide world'. However, to the hero his kingdom (home) is the

centre of the visible universe, since all other 'kingdoms' are far away — 'at the world's end', that is, on the periphery of the folktale space. In some cases the hero's kingdom is called 'Rus': "If you obey me, we'll come back safely to Rus, but if you don't we'll all perish." (Ivan Holyk and his Brother). This motif is probably influenced by the epic theme of Ukraine-Rus as a sacred land, sacral centre.

Finally, the hero's journey itself can be regarded as an open circle that is closed on the hero's return. In the plot of an epic tale the symbolism of the circle is combined with the symbolism of the spiral: having completed his journey (a circle) and having gone through all the stages of the archetypal transformation chain 'life — death — rebirth', the hero comes back home as a different, morally and/or socially 'higher' person.

Conclusion. All these facts of interrelation and mutual interpretation of symbolic forms in Ukrainian and Irish traditional art (both countries being geographically distant, and both cultures being genetically not related) suggest that there exist cultural areas sharing similar symbolic forms of traditional art. The results of this study make it possible to assume that Ukraine and Ireland belong to one of such areas. The limited volume of the research material (two categories of traditional art and two cultures) justifies only some tentative assumptions; more categorical statements concerning the existence of traditional symbolism areas could be made in the process of a much broader study. Further research in this field could yield interesting results which may be used for reconstructing original meanings of traditional symbols as well as for evaluating prospects and forms of traditional art functioning in our time marked by two contradictory trends — the growth of national identity and the globalisation of culture.

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