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Original article



Caucasian Dagger in the Mirror of Culture

Besarion Ch. Meskhi✉, Sergey I. Lukiashko

Don State Technical University, Rostov-on-Don, Russian Federation

✉ sciphica@ssc-ras.ru

Abstract

Introduction. The Caucasian dagger is a vivid object of mountain culture. Its role is not limited to decorative and functional combat role. The Caucasian dagger vividly illustrates the influence of the object world on a person. The influence of the object world on a person is insufficiently studied, and the dagger provides the researcher with such an opportunity. This class of objects was formed in antiquity, but remains in demand in our time, which allows us to directly cognize the meanings embedded in the object by culture.

Materials and methods. The work is based on the comparative-historical method of research, coordinated with ethnographic methods, i.e. the study of literary and folklore sources, comparative-functional or cross-cultural observation. The phenomenon of the Caucasian dagger is examined against a broad ethnographic and chronological background.

Results. The research reveals the most important semantic role of the object as a sign of masculinity, readiness to protect oneself and one's clan. Thus, the dagger was a guarantor of order. Decorative design made it a status and even a sacral object, through which the style of a super-ethnos was expressed. The dagger was an iconic part of initiation rites. It reflected a young man's readiness to stand on the side of order and justice, from which grows the significance of the dagger as an instrument of revenge. The multivalent combat function of the object required strict regulation of its handling. To "take up the dagger" meant a threat, a warning.

Discussion and Conclusion. Polyfunctionality ensured the long existence of the object in culture. With the increasing role of state administration and judicial proceedings, the role of the dagger was reevaluated, and with it the object itself disappeared from the household, becoming an antique.

Keywords: Caucasian dagger, semantics, reflection in culture

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Научная статья

Кавказский кинжал в зеркале культуры

Б.Ч. Месхи✉, С.И. Лукьяшко

Донской государственный технический университет, г. Ростов-на-Дону, Российская Федерация

✉ sciphica@ssc-ras.ru

Аннотация

Введение. Кавказский кинжал – яркий предмет горской культуры. Его роль не ограничивается декоративной и функциональной боевой ролью. Кавказский кинжал ярко иллюстрирует влияние предметного мира на человека. Влияние предметного мира на человека недостаточно изучено, а кинжал предоставляет такую возможность исследователю. Этот класс предметов сформировался в древности, но остается востребованным и в наше время, что позволяет непосредственно познавать смыслы, заложенные в предмет культурой.

Материалы и методы. В основу работы положен сравнительно-исторический метод исследования, согласованный с этнографическими методами – изучением литературных и фольклорных источников, сравнительно-функ-

циональным или кросс-культурным наблюдением. Феномен кавказского кинжала рассматривается на широком этнографическом и хронологическом фоне.

Результаты исследования. Выявлена важнейшая семантическая роль предмета как знака мужественности, готовности защитить себя и свой род. Тем самым кинжал был гарантом порядка. Декоративное оформление делало его статусным и даже сакральным предметом, через который выражался стиль суперэтноса. Кинжал – знаковая часть инициационных обрядов. Он отражал готовность юноши стать на сторону порядка и справедливости, из чего вырастает значение кинжала как орудия мести. Многозначная боевая функция предмета требовала строгой регламентации обращения с ним. «Взяться за кинжал» обозначало угрозу, было предупреждением.

Обсуждение и заключение. Полифункциональность обеспечила длительное существование предмета в культуре. С увеличением роли государственного управления и судопроизводства роль кинжала переоценивается, а вместе с этим сам предмет исчезает из обихода, превращаясь в антиквариат.

Ключевые слова: кавказский кинжал, семантика, отражение в культуре

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Introduction. The Caucasian dagger has a prominent place in the history of edged weapons. It is not neglected in historical studies [1]. However, there are still underdeveloped aspects of the topic. We are going to focus on them.

The world of things does not exist by itself. It is a derivative of human activity and, despite this, it determines human behavior in many ways. This reciprocal influence is most often manifested in culture. Thus, without us noticing, clothing determines our behavior, while interiors and the external environment prescribe manners, movement, and even determine a person's speech. In this sense, every derivative of human activity has a reciprocal effect on the individual.

This influence in ordinary consciousness is reduced to moral and ethical norms, which gradually influence a person. The origins of this influence often lie in ancient times, when the formation of culture and the formation of ideas about norms took place. Our conclusion does not mean that the new world of things is denied the right to influence everyday life. We are talking about the fact that the semantics of a thing was formed in ancient times. And we often do not realize this meaning of an object ourselves. But the object besides our will influences a person. Thus, we do not notice that the language still translates the ancient idea of the sky as a water element. We say “clouds float”, we call spacecrafts “ships”, and these epithets do not cause us rejection. Or we call fire “tongues of flame”, translating the ancient idea of fire as an all-consuming mouth, peculiar to the common Indo-European antiquity.

The Caucasian dagger is of great interest in this respect, having become a hallmark of the culture for centuries. There are two types of daggers in the Caucasus: the kama and the bebut. The more widespread type of Caucasian dagger, the kama, will be the focus of our attention.

Materials and methods. The semantics of the thing has been historically shaped, which prescribes us to use a comparative-historical method of research supplemented by ethnographic methods, including the study of literary and folklore sources, comparative-functional or cross-cultural observations. The phenomenon of the Caucasian dagger is examined against a broad ethnographic and chronological background.

Results. The fact that the dagger is derived from a cutting tool, the knife, is beyond doubt. The most ancient daggers are known to be made of stone. Bright examples of this line of development are the famous Aztec daggers.

The first metal execution of this weapon is known to us from the burial of Aannepad, king of the first dynasty of Ur, 16th century BC. Several other daggers with golden blades were found in the tombs of Ur.

The progressive nature of this new weapon led to its rapid spread throughout the world. Different cultures embodied the idea in different forms. The origins of the Caucasian dagger are connected with the Middle East, where similar forms of weapons appeared as early as the 17th century. The kama dagger came to the Caucasus at the end of the 17th century and became most widespread in the 19th century.

The second line of cultural influence goes back to the Iranian culture, from which a directly borrowed form of dagger, the bebut, came to the Caucasus via Central Asia and the Southern Caspian.

Knives in many cultures have been associated with the phallus and, as an accessory of man, mean literally that a man without a knife is a man without a penis. This very ancient universal code has been preserved in different ways in different cultures. A.Y. Alekseev convincingly proved that the design of the Scythian akinak handle contains phallic symbolism [4, p. 271–280]. In the Scythian culture even wearing a dagger was tied to the designation of this productive function. The idea had a natural continuation in the design of the scabbard, and putting the dagger into the sheath and pulling it out semantically meant coitus. In these ideas it is easy to see one of the bases of human thought, i. e. a binary opposition, where death and birth are opposed to each other, but at the same time constitute a dialectical unity. This meaning of the dagger in the culture denoted, on the one hand, masculinity (i. e., gender) and, on the other hand, masculinity of the owner.

A.A. Miller in 1928, having found a stone sculpture in one of the burial mounds near Elizavetinskaya station on the Don, paid attention to the way of carrying a dagger in front on the belt, similar to the way of carrying a dagger in the

traditions of the mountain culture [5]. The study of the burial site of this settlement confirmed the correctness of the researcher's observations. In all burials with a dagger, the akinak lies across the pelvis with the hilt towards the right hand.

Further development of the topic led the researchers to the conclusion that akinak handles had a phallic shape, which is confirmed by vivid examples on Scythian anthropomorphic steles. In the system of Scythian traditional culture, the akinak dagger was an embodiment of the god of war, and its form was a sign of manliness, a sign of readiness to fight.

Masculinity, or rather masculinity, in culture was expressed through male productive power. Therefore, the phallic scheme was quite suitable for designating this function. On this basis, and the place of the dagger was in front on the belt. In other cultures, in Sarmatian, for example, the dagger was worn on the thigh or on the shin.

The location of the dagger in the mountain culture is a vivid example of the preservation of this masculine significance of the object. In the mountain culture, the dagger was a dueling weapon, and as a dueling weapon it signified readiness to defend honor and dignity, continuing, in fact, the line of responsibility for order that we outlined earlier. The dueling rules were extremely severe. To deviate from the duel meant to lose honor and dignity not only of the individual, but also of the kin. At the same time, stabbing blows were forbidden in duels. Death from a stabbing blow was recognized as murder. Different nations had different dueling rules: Ossetians, for example, blindfolded duelists and fought blind. Chechens fought on a spread burka, and it was forbidden to go beyond it. A violator was allowed to be killed. Revenge for someone killed in a duel was forbidden. The fight ended with the death of one of the duelists, and the incident was considered over.

The Caucasian dagger is much more than a good blade, it is a *sacred* thing. And this word is very appropriate here. In former times, a mountain warrior received his first dagger on his birthday, and at the age of fourteen he had to be able to handle the adult version, which has quite a decent weight. The dagger was never parted with neither in the field nor on the hunt. In addition to combat needs, if necessary, he could perform a lot of household chores. The dagger was the most expensive men's gift, and in this sense not much has changed. A blade with a good finish, especially antique, even today is very expensive. Therefore, a dagger is a *status item*, the quality of the weapon and the finish determines the status of the owner.

To characterize the role of the dagger in Caucasian culture, it is not enough to define it as a sacred object; it is not just a sacred attribute, but part of the style and culture of a super-ethnos. Children were accustomed to wielding weapons even from a small age. A child saw the first blood in his teenage years, when he had to slaughter a small animal or a bird with a dagger given to him. This was an *initiation* rite, dedicating the child to adolescence and proving that he could stand up for himself and his family.

Traveling in the Caucasus, Vasily Ivanovich Nemirovich-Danchenko describes a chance encounter with a boy carrying a bundle of brushwood. On the child's belt, there was a large dagger, which was practically dragging on the ground. A grin ran across Vasily Ivanovich's face, and then the Highlander accompanying him remarked: "You are laughing in vain. This boy fought off a wolf with this dagger last year" [6].

The use of a dagger in resolving disputes was a rule and did not cause condemnation in society. V.I. Nemirovich Danchenko tells such a story:

"You may be a good man, yes, urus (translator's note: urus means a warrior)", he says on behalf of the Caucasian guide. "You all have strong hands but chicken heart. Is it good for a man to be afraid of blood? Isn't it fun with swords ringing around and the smell of gunpowder? Oh, what a time it was! Brave men didn't need a reason to use a dagger". There was a story: three hundred people were slaughtered because of a whip.

– "How can it be? I was involuntarily surprised" – writes Vasily Ivanovich.

– "Because before there were real men. A neighbor took a whip from his neighbor, but forgot to turn it back. The master scolded him, he grabbed his dagger. And at that time people were coming from the mosque. The whole village was divided into two parties. Some took the side of the owner of the whip, others to his neighbor, and the fight began. Three hundred dead were picked up by evening.... What a time it was!..." – Magoma concluded sorrowfully [6].

"What a time it was!" – concludes the narrator. This intoxication with battle is not just akin to, but fully copy of Germanic-Scandinavian culture. A special kind of ecstasy was felt in battle. Valkyries in Germanic-Scandinavian culture enjoyed battle (berserkers – Scandinavian warriors who fell into ecstasy, turned into wolves or bears – howled, growled, gnawed shields with their teeth, etc.) In Russian language a verb «упиваться» means literally "to drink" (blood). In the ideas of popular culture, a dagger drawn from its sheath demanded blood.

This example shows that the use of the dagger without restrictive measures turns the dagger from a *guarantor of justice and order* into its opposite, capable of destroying social order. A man with a dagger turns into a wolf. A direct parallel was drawn between the male warrior and the wolf. Warriors, going on a campaign, were called a pack. In Iranian culture, the army was referred to by the term "spada", literally a pack. Turning into a wolf was taken literally in the culture.

In Ossetian culture, military campaigns were the norm, a kind of initiation. After the wedding night, a young man would go on a campaign from which he would return as a man, a full-fledged member of the "spada". These initiation campaigns were a part of the common Indo-European culture as it happened in Spartan culture.

Possession of a dagger did not only oblige to follow certain norms of behavior, but also imposed restrictions on the

owner. These restrictions were conveyed in metaphorical form. There are many tales in which a sword-dagger drawn from its sheath required blood, otherwise it would not enter the sheath. Franco Cardini, in "The Origins of Medieval Chivalry", gives several examples of how the sword reacted to idle drawing. This is a supra-cultural phenomenon, and its existence in Caucasian culture is not an accident [7].

Having exposed the blade, you are obliged to act, the exposed blade will demand blood. This action is expressed by the formula that was engraved on the blade: *"do not take it out without need, do not put it in without glory"*. In cultural history, this cult of the blade can be traced back to Scythian antiquities, where the Scythian god of war Ares was honored in the image of the akinak-dagger, and is described by Herodotus. On the top of a specially constructed hill a sword was placed, the blade of which was doused with the blood of human victims killed at the foot of the hill.

So, culture required restrictions in the use of the dagger, and its use was regulated by norms of behavior. The most important function of the dagger in culture was to establish justice in society. For the violator of moral norms, the dagger was a tool of revenge. It was this function that Russian poets saw in the dagger:

"The god of Lesbos forged you
For the hands of immortal Nemesis" – as A.S. Pushkin wrote.

He is echoed by M.Y. Lermontov:

"I love thee dagger mine, thou sure defence
I love the beauty of thy glitter cold,
A brooding Georgian whetted thee for war,
Forged for revenge thou wert by Khirgez bold".

This peculiar role of the dagger in the mountain culture was the same role played by the "colt" in North American culture. The degradation of this role began with the bans on daggers by the Russian administration at the end of the Caucasian wars, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the appearance of firearms devalued the dagger and the art of dagger wielding.

Discussion and Conclusion. The dagger in the mountain culture was a sign of military maturity, a sign of a man who had undergone initiation, a guarantor of integrity, a defender of honor and dignity. The important role of the dagger in the culture and its functional qualities made it popular outside the mountain territories. Wearing a dagger imposed a certain range of duties on a man. In modern culture, these duties have been forgotten, and the decorative function of the object has come to the fore.

As the borders of the Russian Empire reached the Caucasus and especially as a result of the Caucasian wars, the easy-to-use weapon proved its worth. The Russian officers serving in the Caucasus were the first to adopt this type of weapon, and they showed off with daggers and Circassian coat (translator's note: long-waisted collarless outer garment). At the same time in the course of Caucasian wars the military administration banned the wearing of daggers by civilians. But already well-established production of daggers found a new market: this weapon began to be adopted by Cossack linemen, and since 1904 the dagger became a statutory weapon of Cossacks. Through officers who served in the Caucasus, the dagger entered Russian culture. Interestingly, the Russian perception of the dagger in poetic form attributed to it the function of a vigilante, the avenger of justice against villains:

(translator's note: Hereinafter interlinear translation of a poem)

The god of Lemnos bound thee
for the hands of the immortal Nemesis,
Freedom's secret guardian, the punishing dagger,
the last judge of Shame.

(the poet praises the dagger as a weapon of vengeance.)

Where Zeus' thunder is silent, where the sword of the Law slumbers,
Who embodies curses and hopes,

.....

(It is a quiet silent avenger from which there is no escape.

And then there is a succession of examples where the dagger established the Law and avenges its violators)

"Beneath Cæsar the cherished Rubicon murmurs,
The power of Rome is fallen, aw well as the law;
But a free-loving Brutus, has risen:
Thou hast slain Cæsar, and now – dead – he can see
Pompey's marble".

(A curious assessment of betrayal)

"Rebel spirits raise an angry cry:
Despicable, gloomy and bloody,
Over the headless corpse of Liberty

An ugly executioner appeared.
The apostle of doom appointed sacrifices,
with his finger to the exhausted Hades.
But the high court sent him
Thee and the maiden Eumenides”.
(A.S. Pushkin. *The Dagger*. 1821)

The central thought of the poet was the idea of the dagger as a just avenger. In M.Y. Lermontov's poem, the dagger also acquires lyrical connotation:

I love thee dagger mine, thou sure defence
I love the beauty of thy glitter cold,
A brooding Georgian whetted thee for war,
Forged for revenge thou wert by Khirgez bold.
A lily hand, in parting's silent woe,
Gave thee to me in morning's twilight shade;
Instead of blood, I saw thee first be-dewed
With sorrow's tear-pearls flowing o'er thy blade.
Two dusky eyes so true and pure of soul,
Mute in the throe of love's mysterious pain--
Like thine own steel within the fire's glow,
Flashed forth to me--then faded dull again.
For a soul-pledge thou wert by love appointed,
In my life's night to guide me to my end;
Stedfast and true my heart shall be forever,
Like thee, like thee, my steely hearted friend!
(M.Y. Lermontov. *The Dagger*, 1837. Trans. Martha Dickinson Bianchi)

The dagger is personified, it is given the properties of its owner. Cultural evolution has led to a reassessment of the dagger's significance. This is how the Balkar poet Kaisyn Kuliev sees the significance of the dagger from within the mountain culture in the middle of the 20th century:

(translator's note: Hereinafter interlinear translation of a poem)

«You, forged by masters,
served good and evil,
For what you were blessed and cursed
By the mothers in the villages...»
The dual nature of the dagger evokes the poet's ambivalent feelings:

«Understand the reason of these two feelings,
And don't be sorry for it.
Bravery stabbed you in the chest,
And cowardice stabbed you in the back
You fought the enemy in their land,
But you killed the hero also
With your jealous and villainous.

.....
You've been both glorious and insignificant
Depending on who
pulled you out of your sheath
And who killed whom with it.

.....
I am not one of the indifferent,
I've earned a different fame.
But I hate and I love you,
The Caucasian dagger.

(Kaisyn Kuliev. 1961, p.19)

The contradictory role of the dagger as any weapon in society should not prevent us from seeing behind the weapon, on the one hand, the role of its owner, on the other hand, the culturally generating component of this object of material culture.

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About Authors:

Meskhi Besarion Chokhovich, D. Sc. (Engineering), Professor, Rector, Don State Technical University (1, Gagarin sq., Rostov-on-Don, 344010, RF), sciphica@ssc-ras.ru

Lukiashko Sergey Ivanovich, Head of the Department of Archeology and Cultural History, Don State Technical University (1, Gagarin sq., Rostov-on-Don, 344010, RF), [ORCID](#)

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Об авторах:

Месхи Бесарион Чохоевич, доктор технических наук, профессор, ректор, Донской государственный технический университет (РФ, 344010, г. Ростов-на-Дону, пл. Гагарина, 1), sciphica@ssc-ras.ru

Лукьяшко Сергей Иванович, заведующий кафедрой Археологии и истории культуры, Донской государственной технической университет (РФ, 344010, г. Ростов-на-Дону, пл. Гагарина, 1), [ORCID](#)

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