

THE HORSE AS MEDIATOR AND PSYCHOPOMP: FROM MYTHOLOGICAL TRADITION TO RUSSIAN FOLKLORE

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Despite the enduring presence of the horse in the mythological, religious, and folkloric traditions of diverse cultures, its significance has most often been interpreted through discrete symbolic frameworks, including solar, martial, chthonic, or economic associations. Such an approach makes it difficult to explain both the remarkable persistence of this image and its recurrence across culturally distant traditions. The present study addresses this problem from a different perspective by attributing the longevity of the motif not to the stability of its symbolism, but to the preservation of a particular structural function. A comparison of mythological material with the Russian fairy-tale and bylina traditions demonstrates that the horse functions as one of the principal figures of transition, facilitating interaction between different levels of existence and accompanying changes in the hero's status. At the same time, Russian folklore substantially reinterprets this archaic model. Whereas in cosmological systems the horse is primarily associated with mediation and the crossing of boundaries between worlds, in fairy tales and epic narratives its role concentrates around the very subject of transition. The magical horse is involved less in the hero's physical movement than in the processes of personal formation, ordeal, and the acquisition of a new identity. This shift makes it possible to view Russian folklore not as a late reflection of ancient mythological conceptions, but as a space of active artistic transformation in which the mediating function of the horse receives its most consistent and anthropologically significant realization. From this perspective, the image of the horse emerges as a distinctive mythopoetic model of mediation and psychopompy, uniting diverse cultural traditions through a shared logic of transition and transformation.

Key words: *Russian folklore, horse image, fairy tale, bylina, mythopoetics, mediation, psychopomp, liminality*

Introduction

The question of boundary crossing belongs to the fundamental concerns of human culture. Every mythological system is compelled to model situations involving transitions between different modes of existence: life and death, the human and the superhuman, the profane and the sacred, chaos and cosmos, ignorance and initiation. Such transitions cannot be reduced to mere movement through space; rather, they involve a transformation in the

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Ստացվել է՝ 30.06.2026

Գրախոսվել է՝ 14.07.2026

Հաստատվել է՝ 22.10.2026

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very ontological status of the subject, the abandonment of a former identity, and the acquisition of a new one. For this reason, mythologies across cultures assign a special role to mediating figures that make possible the crossing of boundaries otherwise perceived as insurmountable.

Contemporary scholarship has accumulated substantial experience in the study of such mechanisms. In anthropology, they have been examined through Arnold van Gennep's concept of rites of passage and Victor Turner's theory of liminality; in comparative mythology, through the work of Mircea Eliade, who associated initiation with a radical transformation of one's mode of being; in the structuralist tradition, through the studies of Claude Lévi-Strauss, which demonstrated the persistence of deep mythological structures beneath the variability of narrative forms; and in narrative studies, through Joseph Campbell's concept of the monomyth, which interprets the hero's journey as a sequence of symbolic deaths and rebirths. Despite their methodological differences, all of these approaches share a common concern with the figures and structures that enable transitions between distinct modes of existence.

At the same time, existing scholarship has focused predominantly either on the description of specific ritual practices or on the analysis of particular characters within local cultural traditions. Considerably less attention has been devoted to mediating figures as an autonomous mechanism of mythological thought. Even rarer are studies aimed at identifying the structural unity of such figures across different cultural systems and examining their role in processes of symbolic transformation. As a result, many characters traditionally treated as elements of individual mythological narratives continue to be analyzed primarily within a semantic framework, while their functional significance remains insufficiently explored.

Particularly revealing in this regard is the figure of the horse. For millennia, this image has demonstrated remarkable persistence throughout the mythological, religious, and folkloric traditions of Eurasia. Most studies, however, have interpreted the horse primarily through the lenses of solar symbolism, warrior culture, economic practices, or specific national mythological systems. While such approaches illuminate important aspects of the image, they do not adequately explain its extraordinary recurrence across traditions separated by vast cultural and historical distances. Yet it is precisely the stability of the function performed by the horse, rather than the similarity of individual narratives, that invites consideration of a deeper mythopoetic model.

This study advances the hypothesis that the enduring significance of the horse in diverse cultural systems stems not from the persistence of a fixed symbolic meaning, but from its performance of a distinctive mediating function. The horse acts as a figure that facilitates passage between different modes of existence and accompanies processes of subjective transformation. In this capacity, it may be understood not only as an intermediary between worlds but also as a psychopomp associated with the transcendence of the limits of ordinary human experience, the passage through ordeals, changes in status, and the symbolic rebirth of the hero.

The methodological framework of the study combines comparative-mythological, structural-anthropological, and hermeneutic approaches. Particular importance is attached to the conception of myth as a system of stable structures developed by Vladimir Propp and Claude Lévi-Strauss, Arnold van Gennep's theory of rites of passage, Victor Turner's concept of liminality, Mircea Eliade's studies of initiation, and Joseph Campbell's model of heroic transformation. An additional heuristic perspective is provided by the philosophy

of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, which allows transition to be understood not as movement between fixed states but as a process of becoming through which new forms of subjectivity emerge.

The aim of this study is to identify the enduring mechanisms governing the functioning of the horse image in mythological traditions and Russian folklore. To achieve this aim, the following objectives are pursued: to determine the place of the horse within the system of mediating figures in mythological thought; to identify the principal forms of its mediating and psychopompic functions; to trace the transformation of these functions across different mythological traditions; and to establish the specific features of their artistic realization in Russian fairy tales and the bylina epic tradition.

Accordingly, the horse is examined as a distinctive mythopoetic figure that enables interaction between different levels of existence and serves as an intermediary in situations of ontological transition. It is this function that explains both the persistence of the image throughout world mythology and its exceptional role in Russian folklore, where ancient patterns of mediation acquire new artistic forms. In this way, the study shifts the analytical focus from the symbolic semantics of the horse image to its functions within structures of transition, mediation, and becoming.

Main Part

Tracing the functioning of the horse image across different mythological traditions reveals that similarities emerge not so much at the level of narrative motifs as at the level of the functions it performs. In Claude Lévi-Strauss's terms, what is at stake is not the repetition of identical narrative elements but the reproduction of stable relationships that persist despite changes in characters, cultural contexts, and religious systems. For this reason, a comparison of Classical, Norse, ancient Indian, and Near Eastern material is valuable not as a search for direct borrowings but as an attempt to identify recurring structural patterns.

Classical mythology provides one of the earliest manifestations of such a model. Arion, born of Poseidon and Demeter, combines divine, chthonic, and animal dimensions; his ability to speak places him beyond the limits of the conventional zoomorphic code. Pegasus, emerging from the blood of Medusa, is likewise constructed through the conjunction of opposing planes: death becomes the condition of birth, a monster serves as the source of a winged creature, and the strike of a hoof opens a space of poetic inspiration. The episode concerning the creation of Hippocrene demonstrates not a merely decorative but a generative function of the image: "I've heard the rumor of a new spring / Medusa's flying horse broke open with his sturdy hoof"¹.

The similarity between the examples discussed above is determined not by the recurrence of individual motifs but by the reproduction of a common structural model: "the true constituent units of a myth are not the isolated relations but bundles of such relations"². Within this perspective, Arion and Pegasus emerge not as variations of a single image but as distinct manifestations of a similar structural function. Both figures arise at points where heterogeneous principles converge and are associated with the emergence of a new order – natural, cultural, or poetic.

A different variation of the same model can be observed in Norse mythology. Sleipnir, Odin's eight-legged horse, is significant not merely as an attribute of the supreme god but

¹ Ovid. (2022). *Metamorphoses* / trans. with an introduction by Stephanie McCarter. – New York: Penguin Books, p. 192. – 560 p.

² Lévi-Strauss C. (1955). The Structural Study of Myth. *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 68, No. 270, Myth: A Symposium, p. 431. – P. 428–444.

as a means of communication between different levels of the cosmos. He links Asgard, Midgard, and Helheim, enabling movement between realms that ordinarily remain separated: “Odin’s steed, Sleipnir, has eight hooves, and it is he who carries his master, and even other gods (e.g., Hermodhr), to the underworld. Now, the eight-hoofed horse is the shamanic horse par excellence; it is found among the Siberians, as well as elsewhere...”³. Sleipnir’s origin, itself the result of supernatural intervention, further underscores his exceptional status. Born through an act of cunning deception and supernatural transformation, he embodies a liminal being whose very genesis reflects the crossing of established boundaries, thereby reinforcing his role as a mediator between worlds⁴.

The ancient Indian tradition radicalizes this model by transforming the horse into a cosmological form. In the “Brihadaranyaka Upanishad”, the sacrificial horse appears as a cosmomorphic being whose body reproduces the structure of the universe itself: dawn constitutes its head, the sun its eye, the wind its breath, the sky its back, the seasons its limbs, and the stars its bones⁵. The horse thus functions not as an individual character within a mythological narrative but as a principle of cosmic organization, integrating the various elements of the universal order into a single symbolic whole.

The Christian tradition preserves the archaic functions of the horse image while reinterpreting them within an eschatological and soteriological framework. Whereas in Classical and Norse mythology the horse is primarily embedded within systems of cosmological relations and mythological journeys, the biblical tradition emphasizes its role in the enactment of divine will and in mediating between the human and the transcendent. This function is most vividly expressed in the Old Testament account of the Prophet Elijah’s ascension. The fiery chariot and horses of fire do not merely serve as a means of transportation but signify a radical transformation of the human condition: “And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven”⁶. What is essential here is not the ascent itself but the transformation of the prophet’s mode of presence in the world. The horse becomes part of a symbolic mechanism through which biblical consciousness conceptualizes the crossing of the boundary separating the human from the divine.

A comparable function is performed by the horses in the vision of the Prophet Zechariah. Their significance lies not in participation in action as such but in their capacity to establish connections between different levels of the cosmic order: “I saw by night, and behold a man riding upon a red horse, and he stood among the myrtle trees that were in the bottom; and behind him were there red horses, speckled, and white”⁷. As divine messengers traversing the earth at the Lord’s command, they embody a particular form of mediation in which movement itself becomes the means through which divine will is manifested within the terrestrial realm. Significantly, in both cases the horse image is associated neither with military, economic, nor everyday functions but with the transcendence of the

³ **Eliade M.** (1972). *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* / trans. from the French by W. R. Trask. – Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 380. – 610 p.

⁴ See: **Lindow J.** (2001). *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*. – Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, p. 41. – 365 p.

⁵ See: **Krishnananda S.** (1983). *The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Chapter I. First Brahmana: The Universe as a Sacrificial Horse* [Electronic resource]. Available at: https://www.swami-krishnananda.org/brdup/brhad_I-01.html (Accessed: 19.06.2026).

⁶ The Holy Bible. (2018). *Authorized King James Version*. – Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson. 2 Kings 2:11. – 3327 p.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Zechariah 1:8.

boundary separating human experience from sacred reality. In this way, the biblical tradition preserves the ancient mediating function of the horse while simultaneously investing it with new religious meaning.

In Islam, the function of the horse acquires a new embodiment in the figure of Buraq, a hybrid creature whose very nature is associated with the transcendence of boundaries. Whereas in earlier cosmological systems the horse enables movement between different regions of the cosmos, in the tradition of al-Isra and al-Mi'raj it becomes the condition for a vertical transition linking the human and the divine. What matters here is not movement itself but the possibility of ascent to another level of the cosmic order.

This vertical model is not confined to Islamic tradition. In the religious beliefs of the Khanty and Mansi peoples, the white horse is associated with the celestial sphere, lunar symbolism, and the figure of the Heavenly Rider. This complex of representations has also been linked to the ancient Iranian religious tradition⁸. Regardless of the nature of cultural influences, the white horse here likewise signifies not the animal as such but the function of ascent and connection with the higher levels of the cosmic order. In the Buddhist tradition, this tendency assumes a more abstract form. Lungta (“Wind Horse”) largely loses the characteristics of a mythological character and becomes a symbol of spiritual movement. The horse is thus displaced from the sphere of narrative myth into the domain of religious experience while preserving its fundamental function: facilitating passage to another mode of existence.

The Armenian tradition offers a different modification of the model under consideration. Whereas the Islamic material centers on the motif of ascent, the epic “Daredevils of Sassoun” foregrounds ordeal as the condition for the hero’s subsequent transformation. It is within this framework that the figure of Kurkik Jalali acquires its significance. The horse’s emergence from the depths of the sea emphasizes its belonging to a realm beyond the boundaries of the human order. Yet its function extends far beyond that of a miraculous helper. Kurkik Jalali accompanies the decisive moments in the destinies of Sanasar, David, Mher the Elder, and Mher the Younger, becoming an indispensable participant in those trials after which the hero can no longer remain the same. Its presence should therefore be understood not as an episodic motif but as a structuring element of the epic narrative itself.

This interpretation is consistent with Joseph Campbell’s observations concerning ordeal as an obligatory stage of the heroic journey, associated with the symbolic death of a former state and the subsequent acquisition of a new identity. As Campbell notes, the hero’s transformation requires a zoomorphic helper who acts as a mediator⁹. In this context, Kurkik Jalali is connected less with the hero’s physical movement than with the process of inner transformation. Significantly, Armenian scholarship has drawn parallels between Kurkik Jalali and Pegasus, Arion, and Sleipnir – beings capable of traversing the boundaries between different spheres of existence¹⁰. Yet the Armenian epic shifts the emphasis away from the act of boundary crossing itself and toward the transformations that emerge as a consequence of that experience.

⁸ See: **Бортникова Ю.А., Науменко О.Н.** (2022). Мусульманский «Белый конь» и обско-угорский «Белый олень»: точки соприкосновения в религиозной культуре коренных народов Севера // *Genesis: исторические исследования*. – № 1, с. 76. DOI: 10.25136/2409-868X.2022.1.34712 [Electronic resource]. Available at: <https://surl.li/vegaxz> (Accessed: 19.06.2026).

⁹ **Campbell J.** (2004). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. – Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 90–93. – 418 p.

¹⁰ **Туманян Г.С.** (2023). Жертвоприношение коня в погребальных обрядах (по данным погребений эпох бронзы и раннего железа в Армении) // *Российская археология*. № 1, с. 71. – С. 70–83 [Electronic resource]. Available at: <https://surl.lt/cuqhwm> (Accessed: 19.06.2026).

The evidence of epic tradition is further supported by archaeological and ritual materials. The conception of the horse as a psychopomp is reflected in funerary practices in which the sacrificial animal is expected to carry its master across the boundaries of the cosmos¹¹. Horse burials, as well as their symbolic substitutes – skulls, individual bones, and elements of harness equipment – demonstrate the remarkable persistence of these beliefs across time and cultural contexts.

Depictions of horses alongside the World Tree on the monuments of Metsamor and Noratus further expand this context. Such compositions may be interpreted in connection with the cosmological models analyzed by Vladimir Toporov in “Myth. Ritual. Symbol. Image” and “The World Tree: Universal Sign Systems”¹². In this framework, the horse is incorporated not into an individual narrative but into a broader system of representations concerning the cosmic structure of the world. The widespread appearance of winged horses on the monuments of the Gegham Highlands can be understood in a similar way, as the capacity for flight signifies a departure beyond the limits of ordinary human experience.

The Armenian material makes it possible to clarify one of the most important functions of the mythological horse. Whereas in the traditions discussed above the emphasis is generally placed on the act of movement, passage, or ascent itself, the Armenian epic “Daredevils of Sassoun” associates the horse primarily with the hero’s transformation. What acquires significance is not the destination attained but the individual who returns from the ordeal in a fundamentally altered state. In this respect, Deleuze’s concept of the event is particularly illuminating. As he argues in “The Logic of Sense”, an event derives its meaning not merely from what occurs externally but from the transformative process through which it is affirmed, reworked, and integrated into an individuating path¹³. Accordingly, the decisive factor is not the action itself but the change it produces in the subject who undergoes it. This model will prove especially important for the later Russian fairy-tale tradition, where the magical horse accompanies not so much the hero’s physical movement as his inner transformation.

In the Slavic material, the mediating function of the horse acquires a broader cultural expression. Here, the horse is not confined to a single mythological narrative but is embedded in multiple levels of the traditional worldview, including cosmological conceptions, family and calendrical rituals, divinatory practices, and folklore texts. Such ubiquity allows the horse to be understood not merely as a bearer of discrete symbolic meanings but as a stable figure of connection between the sacred and the everyday order.

The horse’s distinctive position within the Slavic mythopoetic tradition is rooted in the logic of an archaic worldview in which the boundaries between the profane and the sacred are never entirely closed. In “The Sacred and the Profane” and “Patterns in Comparative Religion”, Mircea Eliade emphasized that traditional cultures perceive the cosmos as a sacralized and ordered space in which every meaningful action is related to a primordial mythic act. Within such a system, the horse is important not as an individual character but as a mediator involved in situations of disruption, restoration, or renewal of order.

This function is most clearly manifested in the solar complex of beliefs. The horse’s movement across the sky is interpreted as a metaphor for the course of the sun – from

¹¹ Ibid., p. 76.

¹² **Топоров В.Н.** (1995). Миф. Ритуал. Символ. Образ: Исследования в области мифопоэтического. Избранное. – М.: Издательская группа «Прогресс» – «Культура». – 624 с.; **Топоров В.Н.** (2010). Мировое дерево: Универсальные знаковые комплексы. Т. 1. – М.: Рукописные памятники Древней Руси. – 448 с.

¹³ **Williams J.** (2008). Gilles Deleuze’s Logic of Sense: A Critical Introduction and Guide. – Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 13. – 256 p.

sunrise to sunset¹⁴. Yet the meaning of this model extends far beyond astronomical symbolism. In archaic consciousness, the sun undergoes a daily passage through alternating states of light and darkness, presence and absence, life and temporary death. The horse associated with this movement thus becomes not only a symbol of solar energy but also an image of cosmic renewal. The changing color of the celestial horse – from white at dawn to red at midday and gray at sunset – expresses the idea of cyclical transformation, in which the completion of one order creates the possibility for another.

The same logic underlies ritual practices that inscribe equine symbolism into the space of human habitation¹⁵. Images of horse heads were placed on the roofs of houses, horse skulls were buried beneath building foundations, and miniature horse-shaped pendants were used as protective amulets. These objects cannot be reduced either to decoration or to a vestigial survival of an ancient animal cult. Rather, they mark the boundary between the domesticated space of the home and the outside world, between the protected human order and forces perceived as alien or dangerous. Even a detached part of the animal retains its apotropaic function, remaining associated with the liminal zone of the threshold.

The horse's participation in rites of passage is of particular significance. In "The Rites of Passage", Arnold van Gennep interpreted marriage, death, initiation, and other critical moments of human life as a ritual system structured around a sequence of separation, liminality, and incorporation into a new status. The appearance of the horse precisely in such contexts is therefore highly revealing: it accompanies wedding processions, participates in funerary rites, forms part of calendrical ceremonies, and figures prominently in divinatory practices associated with Yuletide. Its function remains independent of the specific content of the ritual; the horse appears wherever an individual or a community finds itself suspended between an old and a new order.

Divinatory practices are especially illustrative in this regard. In the cult of Svantovit, the horse's movement between spears planted in the ground was interpreted as a prediction of the outcome of a military campaign, while in later folk customs the direction of a horse's movement was associated with future marriage prospects or an individual's destiny¹⁶. In such practices, the horse functions as a mediator between the visible and the hidden order of things. Its movement is perceived as a sign through which the future momentarily becomes accessible to human understanding.

The exceptional place occupied by the horse in Slavic culture makes it possible to regard it not merely as a character within individual mythological narratives but as one of the most enduring images of the traditional worldview. Conceptions associated with the horse are found in cosmological models, calendrical and family rituals, folk beliefs, and folklore, attesting to the deep roots of this image in the collective imagination. Particularly relevant in this respect is Victor Turner's concept of liminality, according to which special importance is attributed to figures that accompany individuals during periods of uncertainty and transformation. It is precisely this cultural memory of the horse that ensures the preservation of the image within the later fairy-tale tradition, where ancient mythological functions acquire new artistic forms.

One of the most influential explanations of the origins of the fairy-tale horse was proposed by Vladimir Propp in "Historical Roots of the Wonder Tale". The acquisition of a

¹⁴ Рыбаков Б.А. (2013). Язычество древних славян. – М.: Академический Проект, с. 527. – 640 с.

¹⁵ See: Морозова Т.П. (2019). Конь-солнце в славянской языческой мифологии // Вестник славянских культур. – Т. 52, с. 53–64 [Electronic resource]. Available at: <https://surl.li/vlnrhn> (Accessed: 19.06.2026).

¹⁶ Ibid.

magical helper is not a random episode within the narrative but derives from archaic ritual structures: “The acquisition of a magical horse is one of the most stable motifs in the structure of the fairy tale, alongside the acquisition of a magical object...” Moreover, the animal typically does not belong to the world of the living: it is bestowed by a deceased father, concealed in a cellar, buried beneath a stone slab, or kept within a crypt, all of which testify to the funerary and liminal nature of its origin¹⁷. The fairy-tale horse does not emerge from a neutral space but comes from the realm of the ancestors and the world of the dead. Its very origin determines its exceptional status. Through the horse, the hero gains access to power and knowledge whose source lies beyond ordinary reality.

Equally revealing is the motif of nurturing the foal. On a superficial level, it may be interpreted simply as the transformation of a weak creature into a powerful one. Within the logic of the fairy tale, however, the hero does not merely raise a future helper. Rather, he demonstrates the ability to recognize hidden value where others perceive only weakness or insignificance. Particularly noteworthy is Propp’s observation concerning the feeding of the animal “on twelve dews” or with “white spring millet”¹⁸. The numerical and temporal organization of the motif places it beyond the sphere of everyday activity. Dawn marks moments of transition in the order of the world – the passage from night to day and from day to night. Consequently, the ritual nurturing of the horse acquires a symbolic dimension. A similar logic underlies narratives in which the horse is received as a gift from a deceased father. In such cases, the hero acquires not merely a means of transportation but also the inherited strength of the lineage, the memory of the ancestors, and the right to perform heroic deeds. The horse thus functions as a mediator between generations and as a bearer of sacred knowledge associated with the ancestral realm.

Particularly significant are those narratives in which the magical horse initially appears weak, inconspicuous, or hidden from others. This model can be observed both in the tale of Sivka-Burka and in the bylina narratives concerning Burushka. At first glance, these stories seem to depict the gradual strengthening of the animal. Yet the narrative is structured in such a way that transformation affects both participants in the relationship. As the horse’s latent power is progressively revealed, the hero’s status is transformed as well. What occupies the center of attention is not the final result but the process of becoming itself. In this context, the concept of becoming developed by G. Deleuze and F. Guattari proves particularly productive: “since this kind of combination is indicative of imitation rather than becoming”¹⁹, the hero neither reproduces a pre-existing pattern nor advances toward a fixed model of heroism. On the contrary, interaction with the magical horse opens a field of new possibilities that are gradually realized throughout the narrative. The horse therefore emerges not as an external helper but as an indispensable participant in the process through which the hero’s potential is actualized.

The bylina tradition further develops this model within the framework of the heroic epic. It finds particularly clear expression in the figure of Burka, the horse of Ilya Muromets. It is no coincidence that A. N. Afanasyev associated the figure of Ilya with ancient conceptions of Perun²⁰. In folk tradition, Ilya is linked to the celestial sphere, and his horse

¹⁷ See: **Пропп В.Я.** (2000). Исторические корни волшебной сказки. Раздел «Загробные дарители». 20. Умерший отец. – М.: Лабиринт, сс. 121–123. – 336 с.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 143.

¹⁹ **Adkins B.** (2015). Deleuze and Guattari’s A Thousand Plateaus: A Critical Introduction and Guide. – Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 160. – 272 p.

²⁰ **Афанасьев А.Н.** (1865). Поэтические воззрения славян на природу. Опыт сравнительного изучения славянских преданий и верований, в связи с мифическими сказаниями других родственных

participates not only in heroic but also in cosmological symbolism. Significantly, Burka Veshchii (Burka The Prophetic) initially appears as a weak and inconspicuous foal²¹. This motif reproduces a characteristic folkloric model of latent power that must be recognized and brought to fruition. Consequently, the nurturing of the horse should be understood not merely as preparation for heroic exploits but as a necessary condition for the realization of the hero's own latent potential.

The subsequent fate of the horse image within the Russian cultural tradition is of considerable interest. Whereas in mythological, epic, and fairy-tale narratives the horse retains its connection with the sacred sphere, proverbs and sayings reveal a gradual process of demythologization. The horse loses its status as a mediator between worlds, yet it does not disappear from cultural consciousness. On the contrary, it becomes one of the most enduring instruments through which human character, behavior, and social standing are evaluated.

The materials collected by Vladimir Dal demonstrate that the horse continues to perform an important meaning-generating function. Through the image of the horse, traditional culture reflects upon diligence and idleness, strength and weakness, dignity and poverty, experience and folly. Significantly, even in contexts where the mythological background has been entirely forgotten, the horse retains a distinctive symbolic weight and remains a kind of measure of human qualities²².

Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that the persistence of the horse image in mythological, religious, and folkloric traditions is determined not by the repetition of individual narratives nor by the preservation of a fixed set of symbolic meanings, but by the reproduction of a specific functional model. Despite substantial differences in cultural contexts, the horse is consistently associated with situations of transition, boundary crossing, and transformations of the human condition.

The examination of materials drawn from diverse mythological and religious traditions has made it possible to trace the continuity of this model across a broad cultural spectrum. Despite variations in narratives, characters, and religious conceptions, the horse repeatedly appears in contexts of mediation, contact with the sacred, and the facilitation of passage between different levels of existence. It is precisely the recurrence of this function, rather than the similarity of individual motifs, that points to the existence of a deep mythopoetic structure preserved in multiple forms of cultural experience.

Particularly significant is the connection established in the course of this study between the horse image and the psychopompic function. The material demonstrates that the horse regularly appears in situations involving contact with the realm of the dead, the domain of the ancestors, or other forms of sacred reality. Its origins in the otherworld, its role in funerary rituals, its association with deceased ancestors, and its accompaniment of the hero through spaces of trial all allow it to be regarded as one of the most enduring psychopompic figures in the mythological traditions of Eurasia.

народов. Т. 1. – М.: Издание К. Солдатенкова, с. 303. – 800 с. [Electronic resource]. Available at: <https://www.booksite.ru/fulltext/afanas1/text.pdf> (Accessed: 21.06.2026).

²¹ Сказка-былина про Илью Муромца // Былины в записях и пересказах XVII–XVIII веков, сс. 316, 319 [Electronic resource]. Available at: <https://feb-web.ru/feb/byliny/texts/imu/imu-313-.htm> (Accessed: 21.06.2026).

²² **Даль В.** Толковый словарь великорусского языка. Т. II. М.: Государственное издательство иностранных и национальных словарей, 1955, сс. 154-155. – 24,375 усл. печ. л.

Equally important is the observation that this function undergoes a gradual transformation over time. In archaic cosmological systems, the horse primarily facilitates connections between different levels of the cosmos. In epic and fairy-tale traditions, however, the focus shifts toward the subject undergoing transition. As a result, the mediating function becomes inseparable from processes of personal transformation, the realization of hidden potential, and the formation of heroic identity.

The Russian folkloric material is of particular importance for the present study because it most clearly illustrates the long-term evolution of this model. Whereas in cosmological systems the horse functions primarily as a mediator between different levels of the cosmos, in Russian fairy tales and the bylina epic tradition its role becomes closely bound to the hero's destiny. The horse not only enables movement toward a goal but also becomes an indispensable participant in the processes that shape the hero: the acquisition of knowledge, the passage through trials, and the realization of latent potential. In this respect, Russian folklore preserves some of the oldest cosmological conceptions associated with the horse while simultaneously reinterpreting them within an anthropological and artistic framework.

The hypothesis advanced in this study is therefore confirmed. The horse should be understood not merely as a significant image within world mythology and folklore but as a distinctive mythopoetic figure of mediation and psychopompy that facilitates interaction between different levels of existence and accompanies processes of symbolic transformation. It is precisely this function that explains the image's remarkable persistence across millennia and clarifies its exceptional role in Russian folklore, where ancient structures of mediation rooted in myth and ritual achieve their most coherent and artistically accomplished expression.

Future research may profitably expand the comparative corpus and examine additional forms of cultural representation of the horse image. Of particular interest would be the study of its functioning in modern and contemporary literature, as well as the analysis of transformations undergone by archaic models of mediation and transition within contemporary culture. Equally promising is the investigation of the horse image alongside other mediating figures of mythological consciousness, which may contribute to a more precise understanding of the mechanisms through which ancient symbolic structures are preserved, adapted, and reinterpreted across different historical and cultural contexts.

ՆԱՏԱԼԻՅԱ ԳՈՆԶԱՐ-ԽԱՆՋՅԱՆ – Ձին որպես միջնորդ և հոգեուղեկից. առասպելաբանական ավանդույթից մինչև ռուսական բանահյուսություն – Չնայած տարբեր ժողովուրդների առասպելաբանական, կրոնական և ֆոլկլորային ավանդույթներում ձիու կայուն ներկայությանը, դրա նշանակությունն առավել հաճախ մեկնաբանվում է առանձին խորհրդանշական համալիրների՝ արեգակնային (սոլյար), ռազմական, խթոնիկ կամ տնտեսական համատեքստերի միջոցով: Նման մոտեցումը դժվարացնում է այս կերպարի բացառիկ կայունության և մշակութային առումով իրարից հեռու ավանդույթներում դրա վերարտադրելիության բատատրությունը: Իրականացված հետազոտությունը թույլ է տալիս տվյալ հիմնախնդիրը դիտարկել այլ տեսանկյունից՝ կերպարի կենսունակությունը կապելով ոչ թե խորհրդանշանների մշտականության, այլ որոշակի կառուցվածքային գործառույթի պահպանման հետ: Առասպելաբանական նյութի համադրումը ռուսական հեքիաթային և բիլինային ավանդույթի հետ ցույց է տալիս, որ ձին հանդես է գալիս որպես անցման առանցքային կերպարներից մեկը, որն ապահովում է կեցության տարբեր մակարդակների միջև փոխազդեցությունը և ուղեկցում հերոսի կարգավիճակի փոփոխությանը: Ընդ որում, ռուսական ֆոլկլորում տեղի է ունենում արքայիկ մոդելի

զգալի վերաիմաստավորում: Եթե առասպելաբանական համակարգերում ձին գերազանցապես կապված է տիեզերաբանական միջնորդության և աշխարհների միջև սահմանների հատման հետ, ապա հեքիաթում և էպոսում դրա գործառույթը կենտրոնանում է բուն անցման սուրբեկտի շուրջ: Հրաշագործ ձին ներգրավված է լինում ոչ այնքան հերոսին տեղափոխելու, որքան նրա կայացման, փորձությունների հաղթահարման և նոր ինքնության ձեռքբերման գործընթացներում:

Նման շեղումը թույլ է տալիս ռուսական ֆոլկլորը դիտարկել ոչ թե որպես հնագույն առասպելաբանական պատկերացումների ուշացած արտացոլում, այլ որպես դրանց ակտիվ գեղարվեստական վերամշակման տարածություն, որտեղ ձիու մեդիատիվ գործառույթը ստանում է առավել հետևողական և մարդաբանորեն նշանակալի մարմնավորում: Այս դիտանկյունից ձիու կերպարը ներկայանում է որպես միջնորդության և հոգեուղեկցության յուրահատուկ առասպելապոետիկ մոդել, որը միավորում է տարասեռ մշակութային ավանդույթները՝ անցման և տրանսֆորմացիայի ընդհանուր տրամաբանության միջոցով:

Բանալի բառեր – *ռուսական ֆոլկլոր, ձիու կերպար, հրաշապատում հեքիաթ, բիլինա, առասպելապոետիկա, միջնորդություն, հոգեուղեկից, լիմինալություն*

НАТАЛИЯ ГОНЧАР-ХАНДЖЯН – Конь как медиатор и психопомп: от мифологической традиции к русскому фольклору. – Несмотря на устойчивое присутствие коня в мифологических, религиозных и фольклорных традициях различных народов, его значение чаще всего интерпретируется через отдельные символические комплексы — солярный, воинский, хтонический или хозяйственный. Подобный подход затрудняет объяснение исключительной устойчивости образа и его воспроизводимости в культурно удалённых традициях. Проведённое исследование позволяет рассмотреть данную проблему в иной перспективе, связывая долговечность образа не с постоянством символики, а с сохранением определённой структурной функции.

Сопоставление мифологического материала с русской сказочной и былинной традицией показывает, что конь выступает одной из ключевых фигур перехода, обеспечивающей взаимодействие между различными уровнями бытия и сопровождающей изменение статуса героя. При этом в русском фольклоре происходит существенное переосмысление архаической модели. Если в мифологических системах конь преимущественно связан с космологическим посредничеством и пересечением границ между мирами, то в сказке и былине его функция концентрируется вокруг самого субъекта перехода. Чудесный конь оказывается вовлечён не столько в перемещение героя, сколько в процессы его становления, прохождения испытания и обретения новой идентичности.

Такое смещение позволяет рассматривать русский фольклор не как позднее отражение древних мифологических представлений, а как пространство их активной художественной переработки, в котором медиативная функция коня получает наиболее последовательное и антропологически значимое воплощение. В этой перспективе образ коня предстаёт как особая мифопоэтическая модель медиации и психопомпы, объединяющая разнородные культурные традиции посредством общей логики перехода и трансформации.

Ключевые слова: *русский фольклор, образ коня, волшебная сказка, былина, мифопоэтика, медиация, психопомп, лиминальность*

Ethics Statement

The author confirms that all ethical requirements regarding the research have been met.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author confirms that there is no conflict of interest.

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