



This is how the harpies and sirens were seen in Europe in the Middle Ages



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SIREN MOTIFS ON GLAZED DISHES

(BASED ON MATERIALS OF THE NATIONAL AZERBAIJAN HISTORY MUSEUM)



This is how the harpies and sirens were seen in ancient Greece. Image on a ceramic vase

The National Azerbaijan History Museum (NAHM) is rich in archaeological materials belonging to various periods of our history, including the 12th-13th centuries. Based on this material evidence, we can study the artistic and aesthetic image and world outlook of the period, as well as its principle of cultural succession. From this point of view, we will be talking about archaeological materials, which belong to the aforesaid period, found in the urban areas of Beylagan and Bandovan and handed over to the NAHM from the Nizami museum. The particularity of these material cultural artifacts is that they depict a mythical creature with a human head and a bird's body. Since we do not encounter such an image in the archaeological materials of this period en masse and since it is also original and interesting, we think it expedient to address this subject. We will try to touch on the mythological roots of the aforesaid siren motif and at the same time, talk about its place in ancient Turkic mythology. Apart from that, we intend to provide infor-

mation about the semantics of the image with a human head and a bird's body.

First of all, let's get acquainted with the description of the material cultural artifacts we mentioned above:

A fragment of a dish was found in the urban area of Beylagan in 1963 (1, No 25058). The clay of the glazed fragment was bright orange and well fired. The internal surface is covered with engobing and is glazed with images of birds and plants engraved on it. The outlines of the image are bright brown. The profile of a bird is depicted from the right side. Its head is incomplete and has dark brown hair around it. It is very likely that the bird had a human head. It has a stripe on the neck. Its trunk is painted dark yellow and brown. Its wing is shaped as a petal and is painted bright green and brown. Its hips are green and legs are brown. With its features, the bird resembles a siren. There are remains of green flowery images in front of the siren.

This fragment of a dish was shaped in a potter's



This is how the harpies and sirens were seen in ancient Greece. Image on a ceramic vase

wheel, fired, engobed, embossed, painted, decorated and glazed.

The second sample of a dish was found in the urban area of Bandovan I in 1974 (1, No AF 24192). The glazed dish is well fired and its clay is bright orange. Its internal surface is engobed and embossed with an image of a bird (siren) with a human head. The outlines of the image are brown. The head of the siren is given against the background of a brown circle. Its hair is straight and long and falls on the sides of its face. Its throat is surrounded with a green stripe. The extremities are shown on the chest with horizontal curved lines. Its wing is shaped as a petal

and is divided into three parts with arch-shaped stripes. Its circular part is green and its middle is decorated with dotted semi-circular scales. The middle part is painted dark yellow and decorated with curved lines. The edge of the wing is green and is given with parallel straight lines. The siren's trunk is dark yellow. Its tail goes upwards and is decorated with green semicircles with a brown ring in the middle. It slightly resembles a peacock's tail. Its legs are slightly narrow and dark yellow. The lower extremities of the siren have a green flowery image. It was made in a potter's wheel and through firing, engobing, embossing, painting, patterns and glazing.



Fragment of ceramics depicting a harpy. National Museum of the History of Azerbaijan, Archeology Foundation, № 24192

The third fragment (1, No AF 15596) is a fragment of a faience bowl. Both of its surfaces are covered with bright green glaze. The edges of its external surface are decorated with dark brown patterns. Two birds (sirens) with a human head are engraved in the black circle in the middle of the internal surface. Although the sirens are

standing back to back, their heads are facing backwards. The heads of both of them are depicted inside the circle. Their wings are shown with a black thick and arch-shaped line. There are dots in the wider part of their wings. The sirens' tails are slightly long and are decorated with dots and lines from inside. Their legs are curved. This dish was

*Fragment of ceramics depicting
a harpy. National Museum
of the History of Azerbaijan,
Archeology Foundation,
№ 25058*





A ceramic bowl depicting a harpy. National Museum of the History of Azerbaijan, Archeology Foundation, № 15157

also made in a potter's wheel and through firing, engobing, painting, patterns and glazing.

Apart from the three dishes we mentioned above, we also find an image of a siren inside a faience bowl belonging to the 13th-14th centuries (1, No AF 15157). This shows that this legendary creature was depicted on dishes in subsequent periods as well. Both surfaces of the thin bowl are bright yellow and embossed. A bird (siren) with a human head is depicted in the black circle in the middle of the internal surface. The siren's head is depicted inside the circle. There is a stripe covering its head on the forehead. The wing of the siren, which has a corpulent body, is slightly small. There is an elongated pattern in the wider part of the wings. Its legs are bent. It was made in a potter's wheel and through firing, engobing, painting, patterns and glazing.

Apart from the aforesaid urban areas, a polychromic glazed dish with a siren motif on it was also found in the Shamakhi urban area. Huseyn Jiddi writes that a fragment of this dish was found in a layer belonging to the 9th-12th centuries (2, p. 485-459).

We can find the image of the legendary creature with a human head and a bird's body under various names – phoenix, harpy or siren – not just in ceramics, but also among miniatures of Islamic art in China among Buddhists, Uigurs and Karakhans. This image can also be found among the miniatures of a work known as *Maqamati Hariri* by Arab author Hariri. It is believed that the word "siren" is derived from the word "sirang", which means thirty colors in Persian. (3, p. 7)

It must be noted that apart from Azerbaijan, images of sirens can be found on both ceramic and metal items in Central Asia, Iran, Turkey and the South Caucasus. (4, p. 129; 5, plt. 85B) For example, a sample of toreutics in Central Asia can be found on ceramic items made in the cities of Kashan and Rey, which were part of the Great Seljuk state, as well as in the medieval city of Ani and on tiles in a palace built in Turkey by Seljuk Sultan Keykubad I (1221-1237) (3, p. 5-17; 6, p. 1-121). The image of a siren found on a faience dish in the city of Ani stands out because of three crowns on its head (7, p. 32, cup No 776). This can also be said about images of sirens on tiles in the Kubadabad Palace built by Keykubad. Images with or without crowns can be found among images of sirens on faience dishes made in the cities of Rey and Kashan, which were part of the Great Seljuk state in the 12th-13th centuries, as well as in Mesopotamia and Syria. (8) An image of a harpy has also been found on the walls of the Akdamar Church in Turkey. Apart from that, there are



A fragment of a ceramic bowl depicting a harpy. National Museum of the History of Azerbaijan, Archeology Foundation, № 15157

siren motifs made from stone on the Hudabend Hatun sepulcher in the Turkish city of Nigde. (9, p. 146-147)

We can find images of sirens in Iranian mythology as well. For example, it is mentioned as Saena in the Avesta, while the word "siena" means born in Sanskrit. In Avesta, Saena is known as a healing tree and it is believed that the bird made its nest on this tree. (3, p. 7) In Greek mythology, a siren is depicted with a woman's head and a bird's body, and it is believed that it is an angel that takes dead souls to gods. We even find a description of sirens in the work "Odysseus" by the ancient Greek author Homer. In the 12th song of the work, sirens lure ships sailing past their island and then destroy them (10, p. 507). In Iranian literature, we find a description of a phoenix in Ferdowsi's work "Shahnameh". There are two phoenixes there: one represents good and the other - evil. We see traces of this legendary creature in Turkish mythology as well. For example, there is an image of the winged goddess Argimpas holding two cheetahs with her hand on a mirror found in the Kelermess barrow attributed to Scythians, who many researchers believe were Turkic speakers (11, p. 81-83). A goddess called Umay is mentioned in inscriptions on the Orkhon-Yenisey monument, which is a medieval Turkic written monument (12, p. 134).

It notes that Umay and holy Earth-Water spirits helped Turks. Umay also patronizes children. Mahmud Qashqari uses the proverb "if you worship Umay, you will have a son" (12, p. 38). It is interesting that this goddess is often depicted with wings. Fadlun Afandi linked Umay to the goddess of the moon worshipped in Mesopotamia and Nana (14, p. 60-61). According to Turkish researcher Lale Afsar, the root of this legendary creature Mother goddess existed in the mythology of different peoples at different times. Yasar Coruhlu notes that sirens are the same as Anka birds that were considered "state birds" and are known in Turkish art (15, p. 132). In medieval Russian art, siren figures are known to be connected with wealth and water. In Slavic mythology, the siren is also known as a sea girl. Fragments of glazed dishes have also been found in the 12th-13th century cultural layer of the Kherstones urban area. A. Jacobson described sirens as birds of paradise and stresses that this motif is widespread in the Caucasus and in the Muslim East, especially in Persia (now Iran) (16, p. 138-140).

Apart from the aforesaid, we find the phoenix in Azerbaijani fairy tales as well. For example, in the Azerbaijani fairy tale about Malikmammad, Malikmammad gets into the world of darkness as a result of his brothers' betrayal but the phoenix takes him to the world of light. Apart from that, in the ballad "Kitabi Dede Gorgud", which is an example of verbal folklore, we see a creature with a woman's head and a bird's body called "peri", who is presented as the mother of the Cyclops in the ballad.

Summarizing the aforesaid, we can draw the conclusion that harpies and sirens have a special place in the mythology of various peoples. As can be seen, they are mostly known as good creatures, help people and bring them good luck. There is no doubt that this image did not appear out of nowhere. Its roots go a long time back and can be linked with people seeing natural forces as something extraordinary. In this sense, we believe that images of sirens depicted women with wings and as defenders. Of course, this image totally changed over the course of time and was depicted according to the artistic notions of the time. It can be seen that religion had little influence and failed to seriously infiltrate into the realistic world outlook of artists of the time. Apart from that, potters could not place such an image on glazed dishes so suddenly. This means that this motif existed in their mind and they reflected it in this way. The samples of material culture we mentioned above make it possible to create a certain idea about Azerbaijani pottery in the 12th-13th centuries, its artistic and aesthetic

image and artistic thinking. We explain the presence of such an image in Azerbaijani pottery as a result of the influence on cultural and trade relations with cities that were part of the then Great Seljuk state and the principle of cultural succession. ●

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Two harpies on a ceramic dish. National Museum of the History of Azerbaijan, Archeology Foundation, № 15596