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## Mythic codes of the Mezinian



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### ABSTRACT

Inhabited by mammoths, the Eurasian steppe witnessed the rise of religious performances based on the exchange of their life with the human populations that lived alongside them. Some plastic art codes reflect this balanced equilibrium with nature still wild today and which is still in evidence among some Siberian peoples and the Saami (Lapps) in Europe. Such persistence can be seen as a direct legacy and reflect an environment that allows a range of relationships with animals incompatible with the notion of animal “domestication” commonly associated with the European Neolithic.

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### 1. Context

During recent glacial phases, the eastern European plains saw the development of a broad range of cultural traditions (Kozłowski, 1992), based on relational networks between humans and animals specific to the immense areas that formed their territory (Fig. 1). Rarely practiced in Western models where, paradoxically, analogies are often extracted from the most distant exotic contexts, these cultural systems nonetheless operate in near permanence, practically to our doorsteps (Lot-Falk, 1953; Maj, 2008; Ferret, 2009; Wilk, 2009). Their great interest lies in their latitudinal identity, of a world plunged into wilderness and mythic systems appropriate to the role of humans in a complicit natural environment. In this history without beginning or end, the anxious thoughts that torture closed societies in the West have no meaning: no competitive struggles during the Paleolithic, no nervousness during the transformation into the Neolithic.

The Mezinian period, generally situated around 15,000 BP between Desna and the Urals, seems to belong to one of the edges of this universe, simultaneously nebulous, permanent and powerful, from which pulses attempted to expand episodically toward Europe. Ultimately, despite the absence of prehistoric human remains, it is quite likely that these populations belonged to the family of modern Mongoloids in northern Siberia, including, for that concerning Mezine, its western branch oriented on the Urals from which Lapp, Finnish and Estonian communities come (Dolukhanov, 1996, Ojala, 2009).

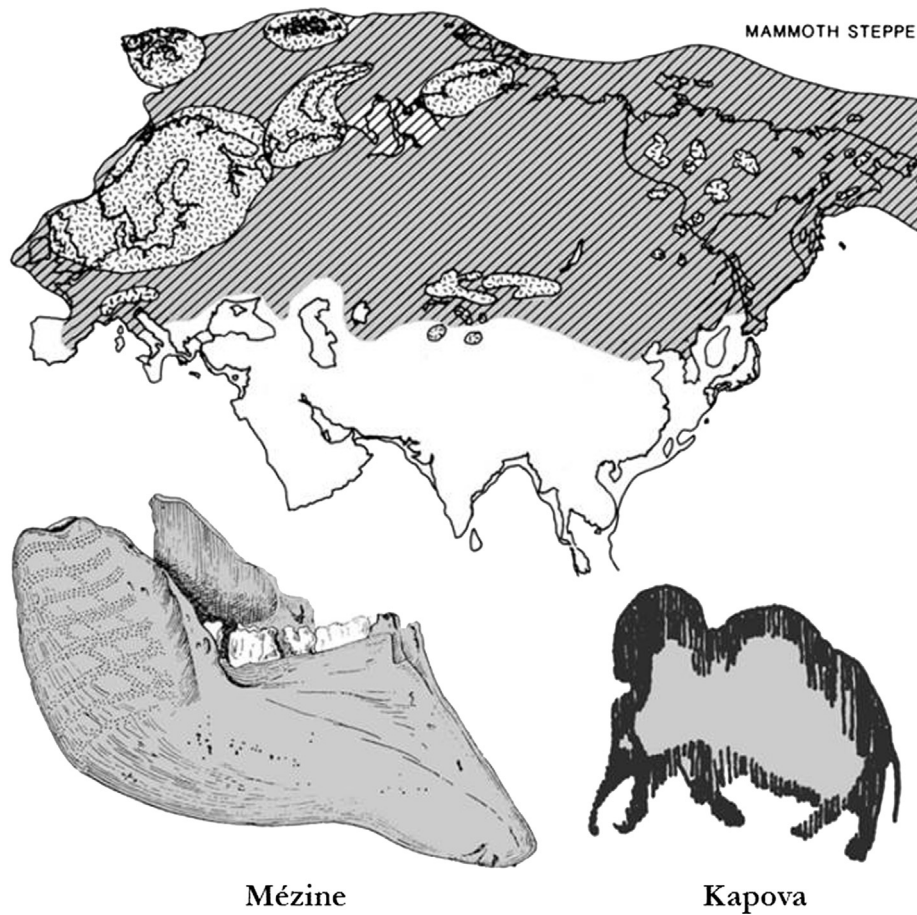
#### 1.1. Myths

In the meanders where the animal world and human spirit are intertwined and placed in apparently perpetual situations of intimacy and complementarity, the forms taken by the representatives of life slip slowly from one species to the other, depending on their paleontological success. Today for example, the Buryat-Mongols play with a ternary mythology founded on species that are also very real (horse, reindeer, aurochs, Maj, 2008). Their counterparts on the Pleistocene steppes included species that were regularly present and somehow “familiar”, first and foremost the mammoth as an incarnation of absolute natural force, one for which all evidence functioned as symbols of such power, but also worthy of deadly challenge like modern bull-fights or our mediocre short hunts today. The mammoth, specific to these huge plains, extended from Kiev to Alaska (Guthries, 1990; Plumet, 2004), embodied in all of its forms both unending harmony and the fundamental constraints to overcome, such as life itself. This could explain its multiform presence in “Mezinian” societies: from weapons to architecture, figurines to wall paintings (Fig. 2).

#### 1.2. Signs

Formal classes used in the language of plastic arts, are organized according to three semiotic formulas: the material in which the images are made is itself imbued with symbolic value (ivory), the contours with analogical references with observed reality (recognizable women and animal species, termed “iconic”) and patterns in which the plastic substance is so distant that it eludes us, but for which meaning has been maintained, somewhat like the way our current alphabetical signs do (curves, Greek chevrons— Fig. 3).

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**Fig. 1.** During the Pleniglacial period, the mammoth steppe extended from the Ukraine to Alaska, centered on present-day Siberia. The far West, between the Ural and Carpatian mountains, corresponds to a sort of appendix, marginal to this vastness: the Ukraine and southern part of European Russia. In fact, this strip of land, surrounding the Desna, must be understood within the larger Asiatic context, where the link between steppes, herds and human societies still remains harmonious. The relationships of intensive hunting carried out against a background of anxious competition, often encountered in the Western countries, must give way to a much more subtle natural spirit, unique to these regions for which exotic analogies are pointless. The “spirit of the steppe” is pictured in hyperrealistic images, such as the decorated mandible, or in analogous evocations, exemplified in cave art. Allusions are always clear through the different forms of incarnation of the symbolically most powerful species, both in the past and today: the mammoth, lord of the county and myths. Map after Guthries, 1990, wall paintings at Igriakievka after Petrin 1992, painted mandible from Mezine after Pidoplitchko in Boriskovskii et al. 1984 and Abramova, 1995. Relevant sites are: Dobranitchevka, Gontsy, Mezerith and Mezine in Ukraine; Elisseevtchi, Ioudinovo, Kapova, Timonovla and Igniatevka in Russia, cf. Djindjian et al., 1999, Abramova and Grigorieva 1997, Iakovleva 2009, Kozlowski 1992, Plumet 2004.

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