

The Snake and the Duck of the Belarusian Lakeland

ABSTRACT

From the 5th to the middle of the 2nd millennium BC, interconnected archaeological cultures existed in the territory of northern Belarus. In the mid-4th millennium BC, ideas related to the image of the duck (waterfowl) and the (grass) snake arrived in the region. They are represented first by motifs on ceramics (late 4th to first half of 3rd millennium BC), and later by small sculptures/figurines of bone and clay (second half of the 3rd to first half of the 2nd millennium BC). The duck and snake motifs next appear in the 5th-11th centuries AD, associated with artefacts of the late Baltic population and the Smaliensk-Polack long mound culture. With the spread of Christianity, these motifs passed into oral tradition and can be traced through regional folklore. One of the most plausible explanations for the origin of duck depictions is a myth about the creation of the world. The snake represents certain chthonic forces and might have been a reference to regional totemic beliefs.

KEYWORDS

Northern Belarus / Neolithic / Bronze Age / Middle Ages / ornithomorphic and zoomorphic images / duck / snake

Description and Discussion of Finds

The terms »Belarusian Lakeland« and »northern Belarus« are more or less synonymous. The area (**fig. 1**) is situated mainly in the Dzvina river basin (Daugava/western Dvina), and it includes small parts of the Dniapro river basins (Dnipro, Dnieper; the upper reaches of the Biarezina) and the Nioman river (Nemunas, Nemen; the upper reaches of the Vilija river (Neris). This terrain was mostly formed during the last Ice Age, specifically at the beginning of the retreat of the ice, when the modern outlines of rivers emerged and the eponymous system of lakes was shaped.

The Neolithic to the Early Bronze Age in the East European Plain Forest Zone (Second Half of the 6th to First Half of the 2nd Millennium BC)

During the period from the second half of the 6th to the middle of the 4th millennium BC, the territory of the Belarusian Lakeland formed the southern periphery of the Narva culture. Its lithic, bone and antler industries continued Mesolithic traditions here, and local northern-Belarusian ceramic finds are mostly characterised by half egg-shaped and large,

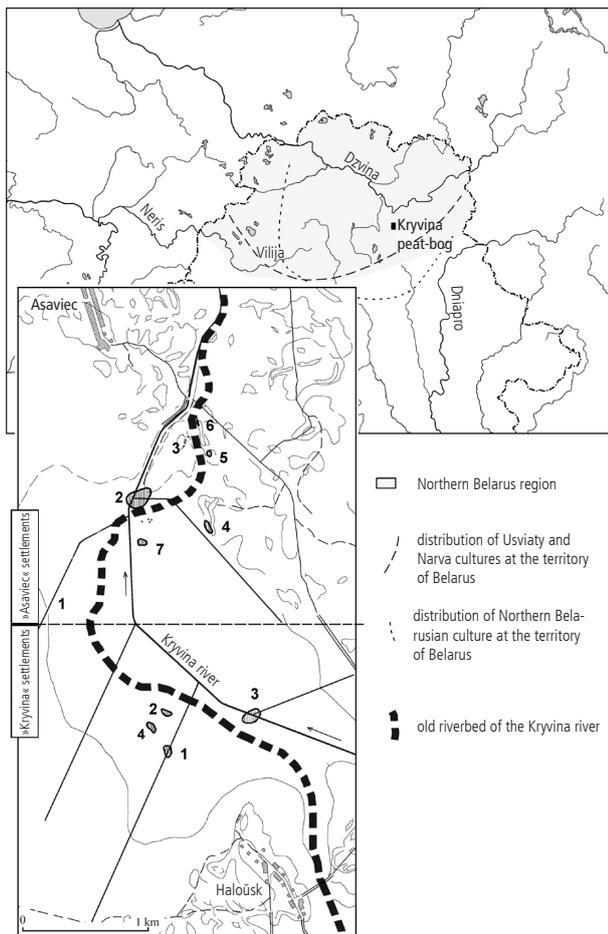


Fig. 1 Location of the Kryvina micro-region in Belarus and its settlements. – (Graphics M. Čarnâuski).

wide, open, pointed-based pots (Čarnâuski 1996, 134–135, 140; 1997a, 191–200; Černâwskij 2014, 31–33). The coils were joined in a diagonal (N-type) and concave-convex fashion (U-type), and the temper used for the clay paste was made up predominantly of organic matter and crushed shells. The surface of the vessels was covered by comb impressions made by a toothed spatula, resulting in a »scratched«, striated surface. Major ornamental elements were impressions made by a fine-toothed stamp, notches, pits, punctures, and incised lines. Rows of oblique impressions, horizontal fishbone patterns, and obliquely falling rows are the most common motifs. The decoration was placed in spaced-out horizontal rows, predominantly on the upper part of the vessels. The rims were rarely decorated (Černâwskij 2014, 31–32).

Around the mid-4th millennium BC, the region was »infiltrated« from the north by a small but active population of the Comb-Pit Ware culture. They used rather uniform ceramics: big, egg-shaped wares with a rounded, less frequently conical base, with a diameter at the rim of c. 30 cm. Grus and coarse sand were added to the clay paste as a temper. The surface

of the pots was smoothed out, with visible bulges of mineral admixtures on it. The rims were thickened and obliquely cut inwards. The most common decorative elements were predominantly rounded pits, imprints of a wide-toothed comb, caterpillar-like imprints, and pricks. The vessels were mostly decorated over the whole surface with alternating belts of pit and comb elements. Scrapers on flakes, blades, rhomboid and leaf-shaped arrowheads are quite common flint artefacts (Čarnâuski 1997a, 206–208; Černâwskij 2012a, 92–94).

Under the influence of the incoming Comb-Pit Ware culture, the Narva culture transformed into the Usviaty culture in the research area (Černâwskij 2012a, 94), a process that had finished by the end of the 4th millennium BC. The biggest changes are evident in the pottery: while maintaining the Narva composition of the clay paste (with organic matter and crushed shells), the outer and inner surfaces of the wares became smooth – a result of the »paddle and anvil« method. The rims of the vessels became slanted inwards, and often broader; the bottoms became more rounded. The coil joints became exclusively U-shaped. Sometimes, there are signs of an additional working of the surface with bone or ceramic burnishers. The dominant decorative elements are various notches, pricks, small shallow pits, caterpillar imprints and, less frequently, incised lines and comb impressions. Decorative motifs, such as horizontal rows of oblique impressions of stamps and notches, mostly continue to follow and develop the traditions of the Narva culture. Occasionally, they form horizontal fishbone patterns, diamonds, and diagonal and vertical lines. Incised lines are sometimes organised into an oblique net pattern. For the Usviaty culture, frequent ornamentation of the bevels and inner surface of the rims is characteristic. The ornamentation is somewhat spaced out, dominated by a horizontal orientation of bands (Čarnâuski 2016, 91).

The most distinctive feature of the Usviaty ceramics is the presence of different geometric designs formed of lines of different stamp prints, as well as stylised images of waterfowl, snakes and men. Some geometric designs, such as rhombic patterns or short zigzags, are interpreted by a number of researchers as the images of eggs and waves. Other designs are explained as images of water chestnut leaves (*Trapa natans* L.; Čarnâuski 2013).

Bird images on northern-Belarusian vessels are mostly known from the settlements of Asaviec 2 (Biešankovičy district, Viciebsk region) and Kryvina 1 (Sianno district, Viciebsk region), which are situated in the archaeological micro-region of the Kryvina peatbog.

A pottery fragment from the Asaviec 2 settlement comes from a large vessel that was uncovered in the north-eastern part of the settlement, at the base of the site's cultural layer (at a depth of 1 m below ground surface). The surface of the fragment is smooth, worked with the »paddle and anvil« method; the clay paste is characterised by the inclusion of crushed freshwater mussel shells. The fragmentary images of two waterfowl (probably ducks) are visible on the sherd (fig. 2, 1). On the top left part, the lower half of a bird is visible, specifically its feet, belly, and the lower part of its breast. The lower part of the fragment depicts the upper part of a bird with specifically the head, back, tail and breast merging into the belly. To the right of each of the birds, and in the lower image to the left as well, there are short stretches of a one and a half horizontal fishbone pattern, possibly representing waves. Perhaps the whole pot was covered in such motifs – depicting ducks among the waves. All the elements were incised with a wide-toothed stamp. The body of each of the birds is created using three rows of oblique impressions inclined to the right; in the case of the lower bird, between the first and the second row, an additional row of impressions inclined to the left was added, forming a one and a half horizontal fishbone pattern. The feet and the tail are executed using the same slanted impressions, tilted to the left. The base of the neck and part of the head are formed by double parallel impressions which, on the dorsal side of the neck and the top part of the head, are surrounded by the superimposed left-tilted impressions of a wide-

toothed stamp. Breast and belly are underlined with the same row of such impressions. Judging by the visual similarity, ornithologists classify the images as either mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) or goose (*Anser*).

The crust from the inner surface of this sherd was dated to 4370 ± 50 BP (Ua-34618), which corresponds to a calendar date of 3030–2910 cal BC (68 % probability) or 3110–2880 cal BC (95 % probability; Zajceva et al. 2008, 79).

Mihal M. Čarnăuski, the main researcher of the Usviaty culture in Belarus, noted that the »classic« images of ducks on the ceramics in the forest zone of eastern Europe were created predominantly using wide-toothed combs or in form of rounded pits. Such comb impressions are, however, absent among the wares of the Kryvina peatbog Usviaty culture. Even fine-toothed comb impressions, characteristic for earlier and later periods, and for the Neolithic ceramics from the territories neighbouring Belarus, are absent here. However, the ware with the ducks from Asaviec 2 was decorated specifically using the impressions of a wide-toothed tool that was »foreign« to the local population. This emphasised the canonical nature of the visualization of a mythological image and is a practice that was possibly borrowed from the traditions of the Comb-Pit Ware culture (Čarnăuski 2008, 67–68).

Another pottery fragment, a small sherd of Usviaty ware, comes from the Kryvina I settlement. The silhouette of a bird depicted on it is much more simple and laconic, and it is formed by a rounded double line of small pits, 18 in each row (fig. 2, 2).

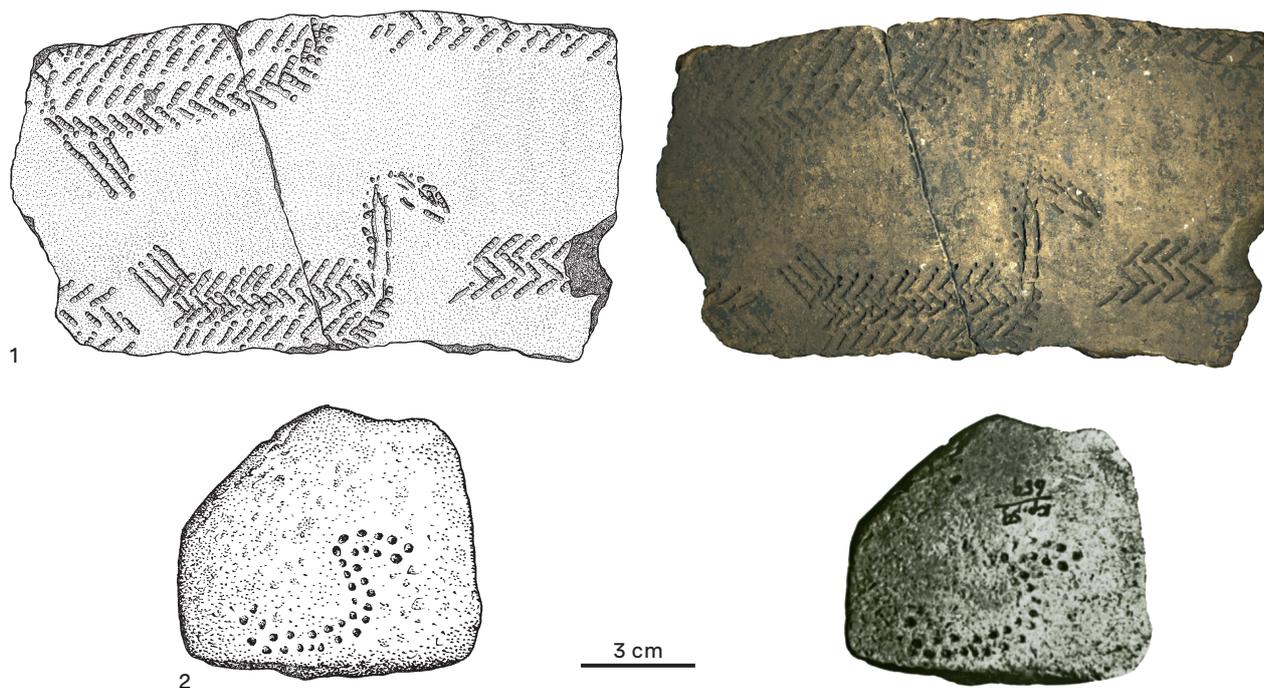


Fig. 2 Images of birds on Usviaty culture ceramic vessel remains. Late 4th to first half of 3rd millennium BC. 1 Asaviec 2. – 2 Kryvina I. – (1 drawing A. Tkachou, photo Mihal Čarnăuski; 2 drawing after Čarnăuski 2008, fig. 3, 2, photo Mihal Čarnăuski).

There is another group of Usviaty ware fragments from Asaviec 2, the decorative motifs of which can with a certain degree of probability be interpreted as bird imagery (fig. 3). It consists of two fragments of small bowls and one fragment of a large pot. On both bowl fragments, schematic images of possible heads of waterfowl with long necks are evident, which are in turn incorporated into a composition of oblique elements. On the pot fragment (fig. 3, 3), we can see probably the same image – a schematically portrayed head on a long neck. It is important to note that on one of the bowls, and also on the pot, the possible bird images are represented by two rows of impressions, just like those on the fragment from Kryvina I described above (fig. 2, 2). The style of representation of neck and head here is analogous.

Complex geometric compositions are also characteristic for the Usviaty culture ceramics. Amongst these there are double vertical zigzags which, according to some scholars, represent images of snakes (fig. 4; see Černâwskij 2012a, 95).

From the beginning of the 3rd millennium BC, bearers of new traditions began to gradually penetrate the region dominated by the Usviaty population. The first were representatives of the Globular Amphora culture, who most probably arrived from the Nioman region, travelling via the rivers through Wilija and Dzisna (Čarnâŭski/Vajtovič 2019). Shortly after that, members of the Corded Ware culture entered the region via the Wilija from the west, Dzvina from the north, and lastly and chronologically later, via the Biarezina and other small right-bank tributaries of the Dniapro river from the south. The last process was very prolonged, possibly happening in several waves, with long periods of coexistence with the larger local Usviaty population. After all, as a result of their symbiosis, at the end of the second quarter of the 3rd millennium BC, the northern-Belarusian archaeological culture spread in the region. Just as in the previous instances, the basis of this culture was formed by the local population which, however, accepted the outer characteristics of the incomers.

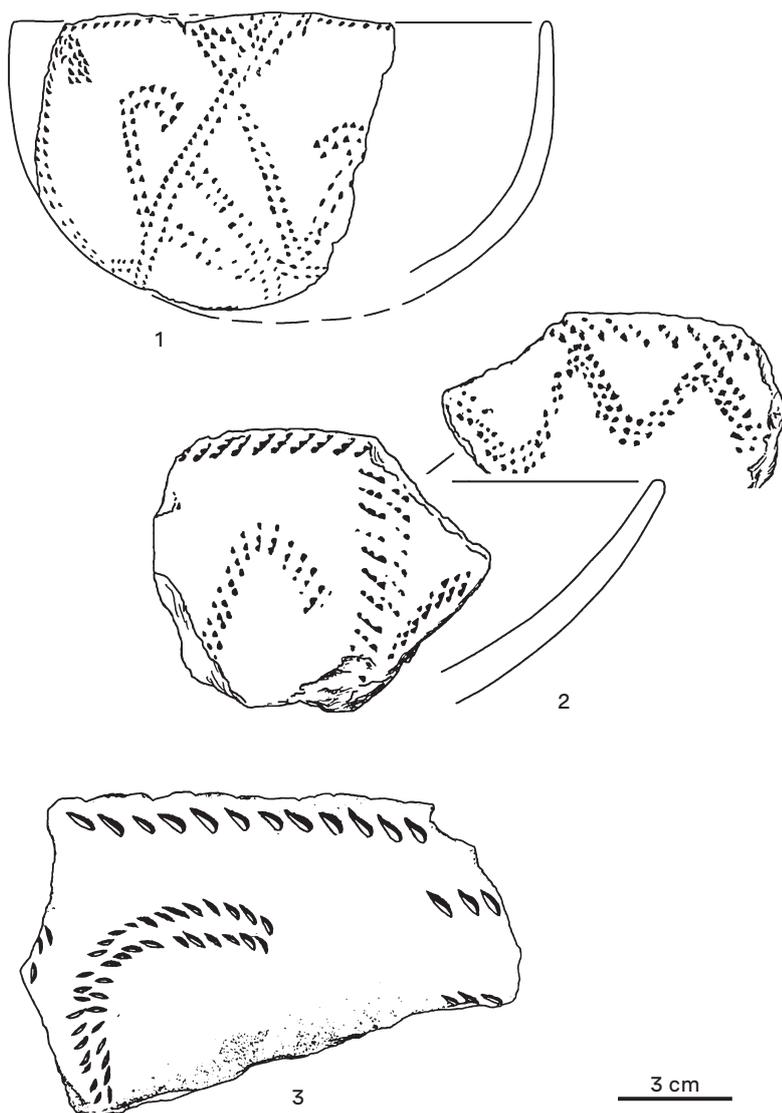


Fig. 3 Asaviec 2. Possible images of birds on Usviaty culture ceramic vessels. Late 4th to first half of 3rd millennium BC. – (Drawings M. Čarnâŭski).

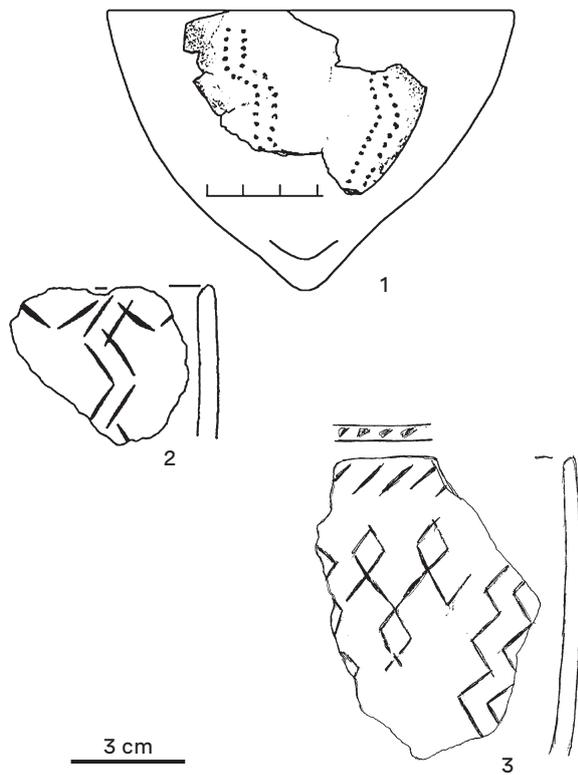


Fig. 4 Asaviec 2. Possible images of snakes on Usviaty culture ceramic vessels. Late 4th to first half of 3rd millennium BC. – (Drawings M. Čarnâŭski).

As a result, the material culture adopted new types of amber and bone jewellery, which might have been connected with sun and fire cults and cannot be discussed here any further (Čarnâŭski 2015, 249), and new types of weapons, hunting tools, work and household tools made of flint, stone, bone and antler (Čarnâŭski 2007, 75).

The outward appearance of the ceramics also changed. Firstly, we see an increasing diversity in the forms of northern-Belarusian wares. There is evidence for the use of pots of various sizes, from large sack-shaped ones to miniature ones, bowls, and cups. Quite quickly, the rounded-tapered bases became flat. The profiles of vessels became more varied, figured, and often S-shaped; the design of the rims was now also characterised by diversity – outwardly bent, straight, inwardly bent, rounded, flat, or oblique. The joints, which during the time of the Usviaty culture had become U-shaped, once again became N-shaped. The surface of the wares was brushed with a bunch of grass. However, the recipe of the vessels' clay paste at first remained the same; it was still tempered with shell and organic material (chopped grass), with an insignificant amount of grog. Shortly after, the organic component increases, possibly due to the addition of bird droppings (the fabric shows inclusions of small feathers and down). It is only when we get

closer to the turn of the 3rd millennium BC that sand began to be used as temper in addition to the materials mentioned above. During the first half of the 2nd millennium BC, the organic components gradually began to disappear, leaving only sand and grog; gradually, grus began to be used, too (Čarnâŭski 1997b, 321–322; Černâŭskij 2012b, 161–162; Charniauski 2016, 91).

The ornamentation of the northern-Belarusian culture pottery differs from that of the preceding Usviaty culture in its increased saturation, often with the same individual décor elements but of a smaller size. Usually, the decoration covers the whole vessel's surface, including the base, the top, and often the inner part of the rim. The main decorative elements are various impressions of smooth and comb stamps, pit impressions, and notches. »Caterpillar« impressions are very seldom. The use of cord and incisions is rare. Ornamental compositions are oriented mostly horizontally. Rows of stamp impressions tilted to the right or left, herringbone patterns and zigzags made by the same stamps, and zones of pit impressions made up of four to five rows are the most characteristic decorative elements on the northern-Belarusian culture ceramics. Less frequently, one encounters more complex elements, such as a »tree«, arcs made by cord impressions, and a parquet pattern. Figurative motifs are unknown, with the exception of a single fragment from the Asaviec 2 settlement that depicts a man (Čarnâŭski 1997b, 322–323; Charniauski 2016, 91).

However, the images of ducks and snakes are represented in this archaeological culture, too, only here as small figurines made of bone and clay. Two three-dimensional sculptural duck (waterfowl) heads carved out of bone have been excavated so far at Asaviec 2. One of the heads, which was broken off from the rest of the figurine at the neck, is particularly realistic and expertly made. It has an accurately depicted beak, nares and eyes (fig. 5, 1). The fragment, which has a total length of 68 mm, was discovered in the lower section of the layer dominated by northern-Belarusian culture material (between 60–80 cm beneath the present-day surface). The second example, also with a broken neck, is represented by a similar fragment. The head is more schematic, without distinctly marked eyes (on one side there is an indistinct mark where the eye would be) or a defined beak (fig. 5, 2). Under the neck of the bird, a ledge of uncertain purpose was cut. The fragment was discovered in the upper half of a layer dominated by northern-Belarusian culture materials (20–40 cm beneath the present-day surface).

Possible depictions of birds can also be observed in the range of pendants made from split boar tusks,

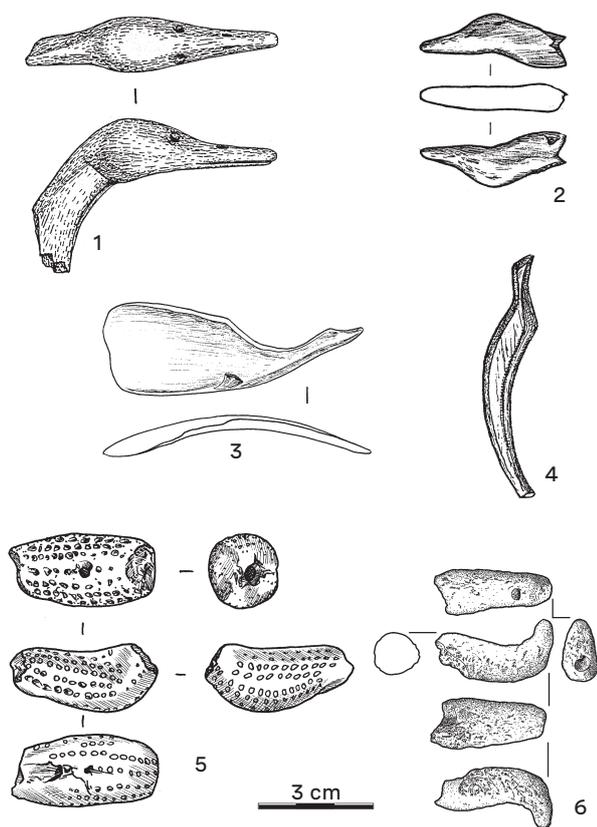


Fig. 5 Figurines of birds made of bone (1-4) and clay (5-6). Northern-Belarusian culture, second half of 3rd to first half of 2nd millennium BC. 1-4 Asaviec 2. - 5 Kryvina 3. - 6 Biarešča I. - (1-2, 4 after Čarnāŭski 2015, fig. 7, 3-4; 11, 1; 3, 5 drawings T. Zinchanka; 6 drawing M. Čarnāŭski).

discovered in the northern-Belarusian culture layers of the settlements Asaviec 2 and Asaviec 7 in the Kryvina peatbog (fig. 5, 3-4; Malyutina/Charniauski 2021, 34-39 fig. 4).

Ornithomorphic images from that period are also known among the clay artefacts: A damaged clay »duck« statuette was discovered at the bottom of the modern (artificially changed) bed of the Kryvina river, which was dug through the Kryvina 3 settlement (the site contains almost exclusively northern-Belarusian culture materials). This artefact is a fairly realistic figurine which, however, had its head and the tip of its tail broken off in antiquity. The preserved fragment, which measures 37.5 mm × 15 mm × 19 mm, consists of the body of the bird with a distinct breast, neck, and tail (fig. 5, 5). Its entire surface is decorated by long rows of small pit impressions. On the back and on the belly, four such rows cross the figurine from one end to the other. On the sides, the rows (three on one side and four on the other) begin at the tail and reach the breast, where they terminate at the same level. As a result, this creates the impression of folded bird's wings. The statuette has an oblique hole through it, which goes from the belly to the back. Another possible clay artefact, of a more

simple design, originates from the Biarešča 1 settlement in the Liepiel district, Viciebsk region (fig. 5, 6). This can be broadly dated from the beginning of the 3rd to the mid-2nd millennium BC (Usviaty and northern-Belarusian cultures).

The images of snakes in the northern-Belarusian culture material record are represented by small bone figurines (realistic or schematic). All of them were found at the Asaviec 2 settlement. The first, with a length of 142 mm and made out of antler, has been preserved almost in its entirety (fig. 6, 2). The figurine has a spindle-shaped body; just the very tip of the tail was broken off. The sub-rhombic head is defined by light and smooth thinning and is lifted slightly above the body. The mouth is well-defined (by drilling), as are the eyes. The whole surface of the artefact, from the back and sides to the belly, is covered by long rows of slanted notches; on the back and the sides each successive row is oriented in the opposing direction, thus creating a fishbone pattern, which is a classic element of northern-Belarusian culture ceramic decoration. On the upper half of the figurine, on the belly side, there is a ledge with a hole for fastening. According to the morphology of the head, it can be inferred that the figurine represents a grass snake (*Natrix natrix*).

The second snake figurine was excavated in two fragments a small distance apart. It was manufactured from the wall of a tubular bone, and it is 147 mm long. It is an elongated spindle-shaped object, with the most significant enlargement in the middle of the artefact and at its head (fig. 6, 3). The width and height at its head are 9.5 mm × 9 mm, whereas at the widest portion of the body it measures 10.5 mm × 9.5 mm. The figurine is slightly curved in profile, with the lowest point in the middle of the artefact, and the head and tail raised relatively to it by 15 mm. The shape of the head is anatomically correct, elongated-pointed-rounded, with the mouth marked by incisions. The eyes are marked by two small, rounded pits. At the transition from the head to the body, in the lower part, towards the belly, a mounting hole was made using bilateral drilling. The transverse fracture of the artefact into two parts runs through this hole. On the fragment with the head, on the small undamaged section on the left, a semi-circular transverse notching begins, the remains of which are also evident along the entirety of the damaged fragment. On the other half, on the belly side next to the break, at the lowest point, one can see two overlapping, semi-circular notched patterns, one of which is at an angle towards the direction of the fracture. The notched patterns were created on each half separately for the repair after the artefact had been broken. Starting from the right eye, and

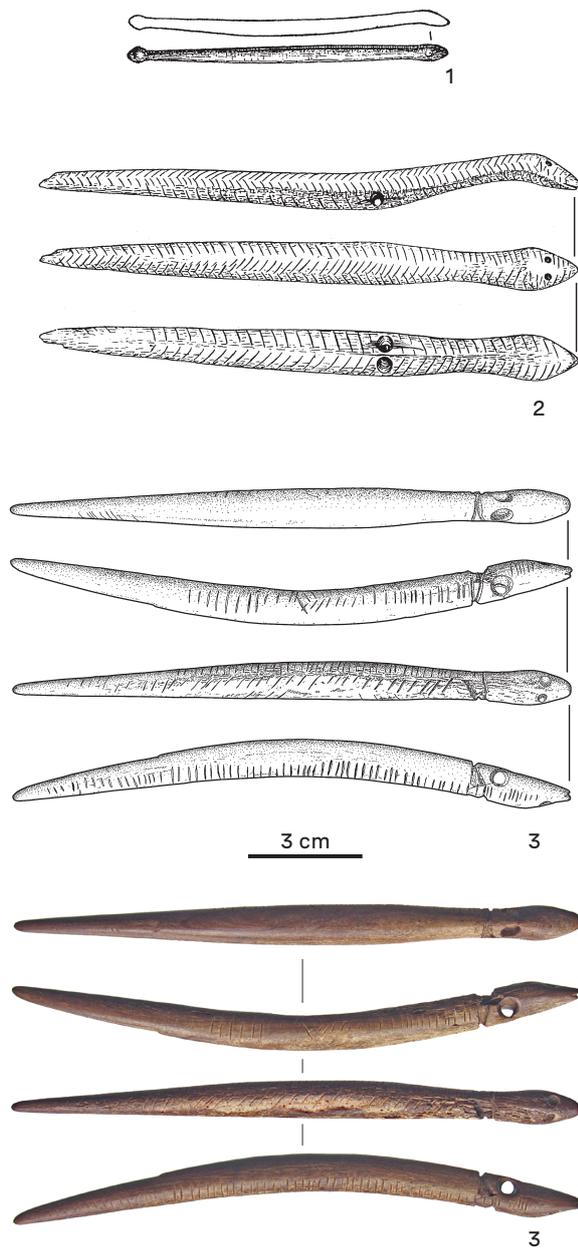


Fig. 6 Asaviec 2. Figurines of snakes made of bone. Northern-Belarusian culture, late 4th to first half of 3rd millennium BC. – (1–2 after Čarnâŭski 2015, figs 5–6; 3 drawing and photo M. Čarnâŭski).

slightly stepped back from the left eye, there are two rows of ornamentation on both sides. The right one does not reach the tip of the object by about 1/3 of the length, the left one reaches almost the very tip of the tail. The right band of ornamentation is at first (near the head) represented only by a row of vertical, slightly right-tilting notches, after which a row of left-tilted notches has been added, creating a classic horizontal fishbone pattern. On the left side of the figurine, the ornamentation also begins at the head as a single row of vertical, slightly left-tilted notches, after fourteen of which a row of right-tilted notches begins above it, once again creating a horizontal fishbone pattern. The ornamentation from the left

and right sides for the most part practically joins on the back. The pendant was discovered in two pieces at the top of the layer, 80–90 cm below the present-day surface of the settlement, close to the »Usviaty–northern Belarusian culture transition horizon«.

The third artefact is a relatively schematic depiction of a snake made from a small bone (fig. 6, 1). The elegant, diamond-shaped head is also slightly raised, but the mounting in this case was designed not as a hole but rather as a spherical ending on the tail, which would have allowed the artefact to be hung with its head facing downwards. Discovered at the top of the cultural layer (up to 20 cm beneath the present-day surface), which was dominated by remains from the northern-Belarusian culture, its dimensions are 84 mm × 5 mm × 4.5 mm.

The mid-2nd millennium BC marks the end of the northern-Belarusian culture's presence in the Belarusian Lakeland, which was most likely caused by dramatic changes in the climate that resulted in an average rise in the water level of 2 m across all the lakes in northern Belarus, bringing it up to modern water levels. This would have had a tremendous impact on the lifestyle of the inhabitants, who depended strongly on the local environment. They might have fallen increasingly under the influence of southern populations, whose economy would have been oriented more towards production activities.

The Middle/Late Bronze Age (Middle and Second Half of the 2nd Millennium BC) and the Iron Age (7th Century BC to 4th Century AD)

Knowledge about the Belarusian Lakeland in the middle and latter half of the 2nd millennium BC is very poor. There is only a limited number of known settlements with rather few artefacts from that time, and artefacts made of organic materials are unknown. There is much more research concerning the Iron Age of this region (7th century BC to 5th century AD), mostly in relation to hillfort excavations. But for the Middle and Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age in general we do not have any artefacts with duck (waterfowl) or snake depictions from the territory of northern Belarus.

The Middle Ages (5th–11th Centuries AD)

In materials from the third quarter of the 1st millennium AD, at the Prudniki settlement in the Miory district of the Viciebsk region, a duck figurine made of bone was found. Its head is missing the front part

with the beak; the tail is prolonged. The figurine is decorated with chaotic dot ornamentation on both sides of the breast and neck. The tail is incised with complex patterns, among which there are diamonds, horizontal zigzags, an image in the form of the letter »M«, broken lines and crosses. Several dots can be traced on the bottom of the tail as well. On the upper plane of the tail part, in addition to carved lines, a row of dots has been applied (fig. 7, 1), and there is a hole in the back. One bone hairpin has also been found at the site, with a head that can be interpreted as a stylised depiction of a snake (fig. 7, 2; Šadyra 2006). At that time, the Prudniki settlement was inhabited by a population of Balts who used a coarse pottery (Šadyra 2006, 47. 64. 72).

In the period from the 8th to the 11th centuries AD, the territory of northern Belarus, except for its extreme western part, was dominated by the Sma-liensk-Polack long mound culture. The people of this culture are known from early chronicles as the Kryvichy tribe. In the early stages of their existence, according to some scholars, they were representatives of the Baltic world. Shortly after, during the time of the active penetration of the Slavs into the region and the beginning of the processes of state formation, there was a period of rapid Slavisation of the population. At the same time, the Baltic cultural component continued to play an important role and remained visible in their material culture (Šadyra 2006, 114. 133; Šmidt 2012, 117–118).

Bone duck pendants are found in the assemblages of female burials, where they appear as one of the cultural markers of the Kryvichy. In the Belarusian Dzvinia region, they have been found in two cemeteries: Biaskatava in the Haradok district of the Viciebsk region (two examples), and Barki in the Polack district of the Viciebsk region (11 examples; see Štyhaŭ 1992, 115. 118). These pendants have a similar morphology and some of them are decorated (fig. 7, 4–8). They could have been used as elements of necklaces or belt sets.

However, for the 8th to 11th centuries, images of snakes are most commonly found on the terminal ends of bronze bracelets (fig. 7, 3). They are known

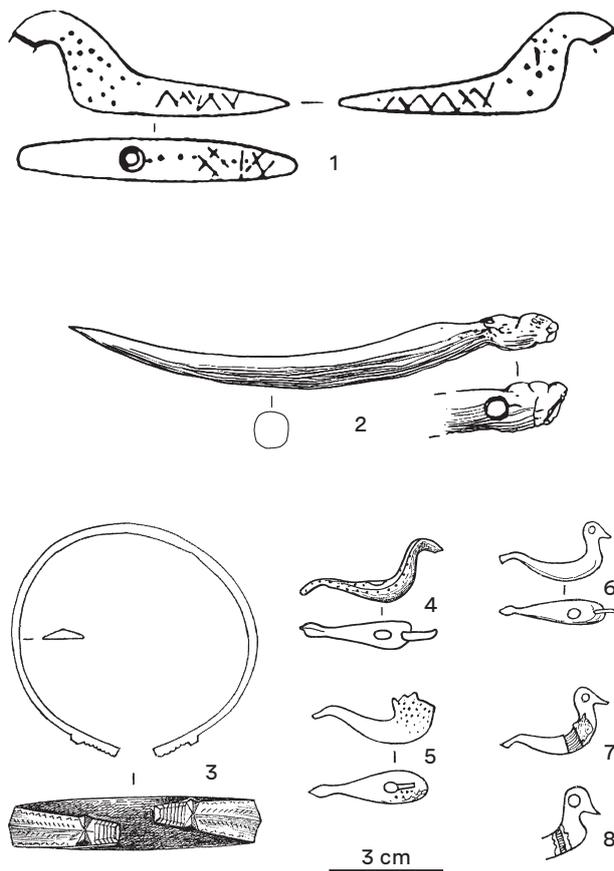


Fig. 7 Bone figurines of birds (1, 4–8), hairpin with snakelike head (2) and snake bracelet (3) from the 5th–11th centuries AD. – (1–2 after Šadyra 2006, tab. 9, 40–42; 3 after Vojtehovič 2019, fig. 38, 1; 4–8 after Štyhaŭ 1992, figs 31, 9–11. 13; 32, 4).

from Kryvichy burial mound cemeteries. These bracelets are associated with Baltic traditions. They are more common in the territory of the Baltic tribes (Vojtehovič 2019, 243).

After the 10th century AD, images of ducks disappear from the northern Belarusian archaeological record. In the ethnographic record, various species of birds are encountered – ducks, geese, storks, swans, and chickens. This is also evident when it comes to snake imagery – after the 11th century they, too, disappear as figurines or other representations, remaining only in folklore.

Interpretation and Discussion

There have been numerous attempts by scholars to interpret the Neolithic-Bronze Age waterfowl images in the northern parts of eastern Europe (Gurina 1961, 144–150; Krival'cevič 1988, 20–21; Kašina/Emel'ânov 2003, 54. 67–69; Čarnâuski 2008, 70). We can only speculate about the meaning the waterfowl images held for the prehistoric inhabitants of

the Belarusian Lakeland. The return of waterfowl in the spring, the arrival of flocks of ducks, geese, and swans was undoubtedly a significant event in the yearly cycle of the then inhabitants of the Belarusian Lakeland, whose life was tied year-round to the lakes. The birds' return signified the end of the cold and hungry winter, the rebirth of nature and the ar-

rival of kinder, warmer times, just as their departure signified the approach of winter and the beginning of the severe part of the year.

One of the most plausible explanations for the waterfowl images (the »duck«) is a cosmogenesis myth that tells a story of the creation of the universe from a duck's egg, a variation of which can be found in the first rune of the Kalevala (Gurina 1972, 144–150; Čarnáuški 2013, 5). Such an image of creation can also explain the existence of waterfowl imagery on bone retouching tools: a person who uses such a tool creates a new object, just as the bird creates the universe. The image of the bird can be seen as a medium between heaven and earth, just as the retouching tool was a medium between the human hand and the flint (Kašina 2009, 74). Over time, these ideas were transformed, reaching ethnographic modernity in the form of fairy tales, songs, embroidery, and ritual art (Krival'cevič 1988, 22).

The image of the snake, which was common in the region in the period from the end of the 4th to the first half of the 2nd millennium BC, lends itself to interpretation more reluctantly. It is possible that it is also tied to the specifics of the natural environment – the main location of the settlements was near the shoreline of the shallow overgrown lakes and close to peatland and floodplain meadows, where snakes have always been abundant. Their disappearance for the winter would also have been rather noticeable, especially when one considers the conspicuous bunch of entangled snakes in the autumn, when they are getting ready to hibernate. It is possible that the snake represented certain chthonic forces. It also might have been a reference to certain totemic regional particularities.

Conclusion

In summary, the archaeological record in northern Belarus contains two episodes of the simultaneous presence of artefacts with duck (waterfowl) and snake imagery. The first one dates back to the period between the end of the 4th to the first half of the 2nd millennium BC (the Middle Neolithic to the Early Bronze Age, according to the local periodisation) and ties in with antiquities from the Usviaty and northern-Belarusian archaeological cultures. The second episode, from the 5th–11th centuries AD, relates to people of late Baltic traditions and the Smaliensk-Polack long mound culture – the Kryvichy of the historical sources.

The period of the middle to the latter half of the 2nd millennium BC has seen little research in northern Belarus. At its beginning, a strong influence of

The veneration and respect towards snakes, specifically grass snakes, was noted in the territory of modern-day Lithuania and northern Belarus in the first half of the 16th century AD by the diplomat of the Holy Roman Empire, Siegmund Freiherr von Herberstein (Gerberštejn 1988, 195). It is also noted in Belarusian folklore. The legends of the Snake King, as well as the tradition of feeding grass snakes near and in houses, were noted in the ethnographic records as recently as the 19th century and throughout the 20th century (San'ko et al. 2004, 93–94; Lobač 2011, 72).

Representations of ducks and snakes on vessels of the Usviaty culture are the first visual images that can be recognised among the rich ornamental motifs of its pottery. And, as the remaining graphic elements of the ornamentation on the pots and bowls of that time, they likely had a ritual meaning. Later northern-Belarusian culture clay figurines possibly follow the same concept. They can be interpreted as an element of a paired protective amulet, which would have been fixed to the rim of a clay pot. Analogous examples are known from the vast territory of north-eastern Europe (Kašina 2007).

Due to the fragmentary nature of the bone artefacts representing bird heads, their precise identification is impossible. Most plausible, however, is their identification as ritual pommels of retouching tools, analogous examples of which are known from the Volosovo culture on the upper reaches of the Volga river (Russian Federation). They could have also been fragments of amulets or ritual pendants (Kashina/Emelyanov 2020).

the Trzciniec culture is seen, and then there are traces of textile pottery before the appearance of hatched pottery at the turn of the 2nd to the 1st millennium BC and the arrival of the Dnieper-Dvinian cultures a little later. The representatives of the last two cultures are interpreted as the first Balts in this territory. However, we do not have enough information to prove genetic continuity from the Neolithic-Early Bronze Age cultures to the Iron Age ones in northern Belarus, even though a prominent continuity of certain parts of the material culture is known. The manner and details of the cultural transition from the Iron Age to the Middle Ages are also quite disputable. This leads us to two possible conclusions: If a (genetic) continuity of archaeological cultures exists (at any level), then we are dealing with a long-term

existence of the cults of the duck (waterfowl) and the snake, a modern-day interpretation of which can be seen in the local folklore. If the genetic line was broken, then we have two different time periods when similar duck (waterfowl) and snake imagery was created. This could have happened due to the same kind of thinking determined by the same environment, or

through the complicated transmission of this idea from other contemporary eastern European cultures. In any case, it indicates that northern Belarus is a region with a long, ancient, and complex cultural heritage, the roots of which possibly stretch back to periods when the Baltic tradition dominated, or even to Proto-Indo-European times.

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