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## Turkic Symbols and Images of Totemic Animals: From a Semiotic Perspective

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**Keywords:** tamgas, Turkic tamga signs, semiotics, amulemas, totems

**Түйін сөздер:** таңбалар, түркі таңба-белгілері, семиотика, амүлемалар, тотемдер

**Ключевые слова:** тамги, тюркские тамговые знаки, семиотика, амүлемы, тотемы

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The tamga, as a symbol, has a long history in the traditions and cultures of various peoples worldwide. It served to denote membership in a specific tribe or clan, convey information through symbols, and confirm ownership. From a semiotic perspective, tamgas function as sign systems that communicate messages through visual forms. Each tamga represents a particular cultural or social group and helps to identify ownership of land or livestock. The simplicity of the tamga is due to its purpose – to be a recognizable symbol. This article examines tamga symbols and totemic animals of Turkic peoples as symbolic systems that express cultural meanings. Each tamga has its own unique code, indicating belonging to a particular lineage or community. In this sense, the tamga serves as a symbol that reflects the social identity, status, and significance of a particular group.

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**Түркі таңбалары мен тотемдік жануарлар  
бейнелері семиотика тұрғысынан**

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**Тюркские тамговые знаки и изображения тотемных  
животных в контексте семиотики**



Таңба әлем халықтарының тарихы мен мәдениетінде ұзақ тарихы бар символ ретінде. Бұл белгілер ру немесе тайпаға тиесілікті көрсету және ақпаратты таңбалар арқылы жеткізу үшін қолданылған. Семиотикалық тұрғыда таңбалар визуалды бейнелер арқылы хабарламалар беретін белгілер жүйесінің қызметін атқарды. Әрбір таңба белгілі бір әлеуметтік немесе мәдени топты білдіреді және мал мен жерге, елге меншік иелігін анықтау үшін қолданылған. Таңбаның қарапайымдылығы оның функциясымен – оңай танылатын символ болуымен түсіндіріледі. Мақалада түркі халықтарының таңба белгілері мен тотемдік хайуандар бейнесі семиотика тұрғысынан қарастырылып, олар нақты мәдени мағыналарды беретін белгілер жүйесі ретінде зерттеледі. Әр таңбаның өзіндік ерекше коды бар, ол белгілі бір руға немесе қауымдастыққа тиесілікті білдіруі мүмкін. Осы мағынада таңба әлеуметтік бірегейлік, билік және белгілі бір халықтың мәртебесі туралы ақпарат беретін символ болып табылады.

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Тамга, как символ, имеет долгую историю в истории и культуре народов мира. Эти знаки служили для обозначения принадлежности к определённому племени или клану, передачи информации через символы и подтверждения собственности. В семиотическом аспекте тамги выступают как знаковые системы, передающие сообщения через визуальные образы. Каждая тамга символизирует определённую культурную или социальную группу и помогает идентифицировать принадлежность к земле или скоту. Простота тамги обусловлена её функцией – быть легко распознаваемым символом. В статье рассматриваются тамговые знаки и тотемные животные тюркских народов как системы символов, которые выражают культурные смыслы. Каждый знак тамги имеет свой уникальный код, который указывает на принадлежность к роду или общине. В этом смысле тамга выступает как символ, отражающий социальную идентичность, статус и значение определённого народа.

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## 1 Introduction (*Sapashev O., Samashev S.*)

A tradition of using signs of identity, known as sign, nishan or tamga, was formed and developed in the vast territory of the Central Asian interfluvium and the Kazakh steppe from the Bronze Age to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Initially, these symbols were used to denote belonging to a clan or community. In ancient and early medieval times, with the spread of writing, the meaning of such signs not only survived, but also found wide application in various spheres of life: political, economic, religious and everyday life. Tamga monuments found throughout the region demonstrate the flourishing of this unique communication system, adopted by different cultures and peoples as a symbol of unification [Yatsenko, Rogozhinsky 2019: 10–11].

Turkic tamgas represent a complex symbolic system that goes beyond simple identification functions. In addition to indicating clan affiliation, they include mythological, religious and social meanings, and also fulfil a magical and protective role. The totem animals of the ancient Turks play a significant role in this. Thus, the images of wolf, eagle, deer and camel in Turkic culture have both denotative meaning (designation of a particular object) and connotative meaning (symbol of power, strength or patronage). For example, the wolf in Turkic mythology symbolizes strength, courage and is associated with the legend of descent from the she-wolf. The eagle is associated with spiritual ascension, wisdom and connection with



the spirit world. These images are reflected both in tamga signs and in art, including the symbolism of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Seljuk state.

In modern semiotics, Turkic tamgas are considered as cultural codes that combine visual symbols, mythological meanings and social functions. They fulfil not only identification but also performative function, influencing the surrounding world through their symbolic power. Thus, tamgas are a complex system connecting religious, social and magical aspects of Turkic culture.

## **2 Materials and Methods** (*Sapashev O.*)

The research works of predecessors who analyzed tamga signs starting from the Saka period, preceding the ancient and early medieval period of the Turks formed the methodological basis. The methods and methodology of studying tamga signs within the framework of semiotics presuppose the use of various approaches, since tamgas are signs symbolizing clan affiliation, power or cultural meanings. The study of such signs encompasses several levels of analysis. One of them is historical and cultural analysis, which describes, catalogues and systematizes various types of tamga signs recorded in archaeological finds, historical sources and ethnographic data. On the basis of these materials, the origin of tamga signs is reconstructed, including the analysis of historical evidence to identify the context of their use, materials and surfaces on which they were left.

An important aspect of the systematization of tamga signs is the study of mutual cultural influences, including borrowing and evolution of tamgas under the influence of other cultures. A semiotic analysis plays an important role in this process. For example, syntactic analysis allows us to study the structure of the sign, investigate the mutual arrangement of tamga elements and their possible meaning in various combinations. Semantic analysis focuses on identifying the meanings of each element of the sign within a particular cultural tradition. The pragmatic approach examines the situations and contexts of tamga use and their influence on behavior, customs and social structures, as well as the ways in which tamgas are used in everyday life. The ethnolinguistic approach allows to study clan names and appellations associated with tamgas, which is particularly important as they are closely linked to tribal or clan identity. This method includes analyses of legends and tales, as well as comparison of Turkic symbols with symbols from other cultures, such as coats of arms in the Western tradition or the signs of other peoples.

The hermeneutic approach requires in-depth cultural interpretive analysis, as tamgas, like other symbols, may need additional interpretation to more fully understand their meaning in specific historical and social contexts. Anthropological and sociological approaches involve field research that includes collecting data on contemporary and historical communities that continue to use tamgas. The rituals, rites and social practices associated with these signs are investigated, as well as their social function, as tamgas can serve as identifiers of social groups, reflecting social hierarchy, power and relationships between clans or tribes. Within the framework of cognitive semiotics, the study of the perception and interpretation of tamga signs, including analyses of how the information encoded in the signs was transmitted through generations is an important aspect. Thus, the study of tamga signs requires an interdisciplinary approach including semiotics, anthropology, history and linguistics.

## **3 Discussion** (*Sapashev O., Abilbekuly A., Samashev S.*)

There is no unified definition of the concepts of 'sign', 'symbol' and 'tamga' in domestic tamga studies. In modern scientific discourse, these terms have multiple meanings and interdisciplinary application, designating various objects and entities that carry a conditional meaning, not always directly derived from their external form. However, in the context of tamga studies, regardless of the distinction between a sign, symbol or tamga, specific images containing special information are implied. Their main



function is to create, highlight and transmit this information, which emphasises their conventional nature. In order to give precise definitions of sign, symbol and tamga within the framework of semiotics, it is necessary to briefly consider this issue.

According to Y. Lotman, signs are coiled mnemonic programs of texts and stories stored in the oral memory of the people. Symbols, in their turn, have the ability to preserve exceptionally extensive and significant texts in a coiled form [Lotman 2000: 213]. In this respect, the ‘scope’ of tamgas is limited, as they are ancient symbols functioning mainly as stamps or signs of identification of a clan, tribe or family.

Semiotics as a science is relatively young, it is just over a hundred years old, but its roots go back to ancient times, as the reflection on the nature and meaning of signs and symbols has been spreading for thousands of years. It is believed that the first scientific comprehension of the sign was carried out by the Stoics. According to Stoic philosophy, the sign has a two-sided nature: material (signifier) and ideal (signified) [Ancient Theories 1936: 26]. The material side of a sign is perceived physically, while its content is a conceptual representation of the substituted object, not the object itself. As an example, E. Akhokhova cites the road sign ‘Children’, where this sign denotes not real children, but the idea of their possible appearance [Akhokhova 2007: 10]. The Stoics emphasized the immateriality of the content of the sign, defining it as ‘understood’ as opposed to materially ‘perceived’.

The ancient formula of the sign ‘something replaces something’ (*aliquid stat pro aliquo*) was refined by one of the founders of semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce [Peirce 2000: 176–181]. He defined a sign as a means of transmitting information to consciousness about something external. What a sign represents is called its object; what it conveys is called its meaning; and the thought it evokes is called its interpretant. Charles Morris added a fourth element, the interpretant, arguing that a sign exists only if it is interpreted as such [Morris 1983: 39]. Thus, a sign includes two components, the external (signifier) and the internal (signified). This unity, expressed in the formula of the Stoics, which was later developed by Aurelius Augustine (*Signum = signans + signatum*) [Ivanov, Stepanov 2009: 125–166], formed the basis of Ferdinand de Saussure’s definition of a sign, which remains classical and generally accepted [Saussure 1998: 63]. Nowadays, L. Fedorova presented a simplified model of a sign situation in which subject X applies sign Y to denote object Z [Fedorova 2020: 19].

Y. Lotman defines symbol by as a text that has an internal, self-sufficient meaning and a clearly defined boundary, which allows to distinguish it from the surrounding semiotic context. He pays special attention to this feature, considering it key to the ability of an element to be a symbol. According to Lotman, symbols transfer texts, story structures and other semiotic formations from one cultural domain to another. Symbol actively interacts with the cultural context, being influenced by it and simultaneously influencing it [Lotman 2000: 213].

Symbol is not limited to any particular layer of culture, it permeates it vertically, linking the past with the future. The memory of a symbol is always older than the memory of its non-symbolic textual environment. Tamga, in turn, is a unique type of sign that fulfils the functions of identification and social differentiation. In the context of historical semiotics, tamgas are used as visual markers of belonging to a clan, tribe or community. They often carry information about social and political structure, important historical events, and cultural traditions.

The following conclusions can be drawn on the basis of the above. Sign, tamga and symbol, with the help of a particular image, ‘encode’ historical information, representing visual elements that convey and preserve data about significant historical events, processes or identities. These images play a key role in the interpretation and perception of history, as they transform complex historical facts into easily perceived symbols.



Signs encode historical information through visual images that capture important events or facts, such as images on coins or medals reflecting significant historical figures or events.

Tamgas are symbols that often encode membership of a particular group or community and may be associated with a specific historical moment, such as the founding of a state or an important political event. They convey information about clan or tribal affiliation as well as the social and political structure of the time.


Symbols encode abstract ideas or important historical moments, such as flags, coats of arms or emblems, which become iconic images for entire nations or eras. They depict, for example, national identities, revolutionary events or other significant phenomena.





Thus, through these visual signs, historical information is ‘encoded’, conveying meaning through images that can be interpreted and understood in the context of history. Further research is needed to unify the terminology in tamgology and to analyse in depth their role in the historical and cultural context.

#### **4 Results** (*Sapashev O., Abilbekuly A.*)

Tamga signs recorded in Kazakhstan and neighboring territories are found on two types of monuments: portable objects and immovable archaeological and architectural objects. Most of the signs are found on immovable monuments, such as memorial and cultic structures (steles, balbals, tombstones, temples), as well as on rocks. Rock signs are often represented in petroglyphic sanctuaries, near stationary sites or in special collections of tamga signs (‘tamgalytas’) [Rogozhinsky 2019: 101]. A natural question arises: how can a researcher determine which of these is a sign, symbol or tamga from the point of view of semiotics?

Modern semiotics emphasizes the key properties of a sign: it has a meaning, conveys information about an external object, serves to store and transmit data, and functions in the system of signs in the presence of an addressee. The meaning of a sign is stable in a particular context, and its boundaries are clearly defined, which allows to distinguish it from others. The form of a sign may change, but it remains recognizable, even if the relationship of the form is arbitrary to the denotative. The physical nature of a sign’s expression determines the channel of its perception [Akhokhova 2007: 10]. At initial fixation, all marks that meet this definition will be documented as signs.

After the historical context is identified, they can be categorized as ‘symbol’ or ‘tamga’. It should be noted that symbolic signs can be divided into two groups: perpetual and temporary. For example, zigzag lines, which can be traced in the tamga culture of the peoples of Eurasia from the Bronze Age to ethnographic time, can be ‘permanent’ symbols reflecting the worldview of these peoples [Samashev et al. 2024: 16–20], while the Turgesh tamga  carved on their coins is temporary, as it loses its ‘symbolic’ significance after the collapse of the Turgesh Kaganate.

The bit-angular sign, known from the tracts of Oralbai  and Eshkyolmes , as well as from the Russian Altai  [Rogozhinsky, Cheremisin 2019: 363] and Bulgaria  [Western Turkic Kaganate 2013: 407], has an older analogue among the seals of Gordion [Dusinberre 2005: 82]. This sign is a geometric figure made of two connected triangles, the symbolic meaning of which remains not fully identified.

It remains a ‘sign’ in Kazakhstan, as it is not found among the tamgas of medieval ethnic groups, including ancestral tamgas of the Kazakh people and symbols of medieval states of the region. The absence of analogues among these tamgas indicates that the bit-angular sign probably had no local significance in the cultural and historical context of Kazakhstan.





At the same time, this sign acts as a tamga of the Ako, Aysandyr and Batyrbiy tribes of the Karachai-Balkars [Gömeç 2024: 691]. Its discovery at the burial site of the monument to Bilge-Kagan, as well as among the seals of the Roman layer of Gordion testifies to its wide symbolic meaning in different regions of Eurasia. This may be related to tribal migrations or cultural contacts, which requires further research.

The symbolic meaning of the sign in the Karachai-Balkar tribes is confirmed by its use as a clan tamga, which indicates a stable cultural tradition. In Kazakhstan, the absence of such use, despite the presence of the sign on some archaeological monuments, excludes it from the system of local symbols. The same can be said about the ‘Kagan tamga’.

All signs that are provably comparable with ethnic names are without exception recognized as tamgas. From the point of view of semiotics, this is the main criterion for recognizing a sign as a tamga.

In semiotics, symbols can be seen as coded text, and this text always has a context. There is always a context between a symbol and its interpreter. Symbols acquire meaning only in a certain context, which includes cultural, historical, social and linguistic factors. Without this context, there is a risk of misinterpreting symbols, as the same symbol may have different meanings in different cultures or situations. Thus, context serves as a link between a symbol and its interpretation. This idea is confirmed by the Japanese scientist T. Osawa, who studied stone sculptures of Mongolia of the Turkic time. According to him, tamgas on monuments are not signs of deceased or honoured people. On the contrary, they indicate the identity or affiliation of the authors of inscriptions, rock epitaphs and other historical materials [Osawa 2010: 341; 2015].

The next group of signs beyond the category of ‘tamga’, possessing no less symbolic meaning, includes images of totem animals of ancient Turks, which reflected important mythological and religious ideas. Totemism as a belief system was widespread among Turkic tribes, and each tribe or clan had its own totemic symbols, often expressed through animal images. These signs did not simply represent animals, but also embodied cultural and religious concepts important to the Turks, such as patronage, power, connection with ancestral spirits, and sacred aspects of the world around them.

*Deer as a symbol.* Deer was one of the main symbolic signs among the ancient Turks, which was reflected in ethnonymy and mythology. The Tang chronicles (7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries) mention the Tele tribe and its generation Pugu, preserved in the Khakass tradition as ‘ulus Pug’alar aaly’. There are assumptions that the ethnonym Sakha (Yakuts) is also associated with the word ‘deer’ (saga) [Bakirov 2017].

Archaeological finds – petroglyphs, scribes, reindeer stones – confirm the antiquity of the deer cult associated with solar and fertility concepts. The branching horns of the deer symbolized the sun’s rays and the movement of the sun across the sky. In the mythology of the Turks, the deer served as a conductor between the worlds, providing communication with the spirits of nature. Images of deer antlers decorated agricultural tools and cult objects. The symbolism of the deer is deeply rooted in the art of various Eurasian cultures.

In Sarmatian and Hittite traditions, the horns of the deer were associated with the sun. For example, in one of the images the Sarmatian deer has branching horns symbolizing sun rays [Golden deer of Eurasia 2003: 8–24], and in Hittite solar discs the deer is placed between the horns of a bull, representing the interaction of the sun and the moon [Çınaroğlu 2018: 1–14].

*Wolf as a symbol.* Wolf is one of the most important symbolic signs of Turkic mythology, personifying strength, courage and defense. In the legends of the Hunnu and ancient Turks there is a myth about a she-wolf who saved a baby, which makes wolf a symbol of motherhood and the protector of the family. The cult of the wolf strengthened the ideals of cohesion and mutual assistance.

A special place in Turkic mythology is occupied by Bozkurt, the legendary celestial wolf, the messenger of the Great Tengri. His image symbolized the connection with the higher forces, fortitude and



immortality of the people. In military traditions, the wolf was associated with male strength, leadership and strategic wisdom, which was expressed in coats of arms and military insignia.

*Eagle as a symbol.* The eagle in Turkic culture represented spiritual ascension, divine power and protection. During the period of the Seljuk state, the eagle became the official symbol of power, decorating coins, city gates, mosques and tombs. The double-headed eagle with wings lowered vertically downwards symbolized the power over the two worlds – the earthly and the heavenly [Khalitova, Khalitov 2013: 110].

*Leopard as a symbol.* Leopard or snow leopard symbolized strength, swiftness and military valor. This symbolic sign was used by warrior tribes, denoting the right to power and defense of territories. Leopard was often depicted on shields, armor and weapons, emphasizing the status of the elite responsible for the welfare of the tribe.

The symbolic signs of the Turks had a multilayered semiotic structure. The denotative meaning of the signs reflected specific objects or animals, while the connotative meaning consisted of representations of power, strength, patronage of gods and clan affiliation. In Turkic mythology, images of the deer, wolf, eagle and leopard expressed spiritual and social ideals, ensuring the continuity of traditions. These signs had sacral significance, served as guides between people and ancestral spirits, strengthening the mythological foundations of society and symbolizing harmony with nature. Thus, the symbolic signs of totem animals played a key role in Turkic culture, uniting the world of spiritual ideas with the social and political structure of the tribe. They retained their significance for centuries, influencing the artistic and ritual traditions of the ancient peoples of Eurasia.

## **5 Conclusions (Sapashev O.)**

In conclusion, it can be noted that the problem of understanding and interpretation of cultural artifacts is a complex and multifaceted process. Any cultural phenomenon can be considered as a text created with the use of signs, which requires reading and comprehension. This process involves identifying the meaning of the text and relating it to the cultural context of the cognizing subject.

Cultural texts do not exist and are not perceived in isolation, but are always included in a number of other phenomena that form a common cultural context. The isolation of ‘pure’ meaning proves difficult, since it is determined by contextual conditions. The task of phenomenology is to study the meanings of phenomena in their perception by consciousness.

Once in a new context, tamgas acquire additional meanings. The understanding of culture changes over time, and the interpretation of its artefacts cannot be reduced to a single correct version. Cultural values continue to live in history, being filled with new meanings and actualized in accordance with changes in the cultural context.

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