

ON THE TRAIL OF THE DEER

For thousands of years, and all over the world, the deer has been deeply connected with the sacred traditions of humanity

Right: Wooden-antlered mask found at Spiro Mound, Oklahoma.

Below: Tibetan Stag dancer from Kham in Eastern Tibet, in a photo taken in the mid-1940's

Inset: a gilded Wheel of Dharma and two deer on the roof of a building in Tibet



People have always lived close to deer, and so there have always been those who have learned lessons from them by watching them and working with their spirit.

Because of this relationship there are many tales told about deer from all over the world. Many show deer as a gentle and kind creature who sometimes becomes the magical lover of a human, while others tell of lost children who are changed into deer themselves. There are also darker, more mysterious tales which recall human journeys into other worlds,

or tell of the abduction of humans by spirit people, or even tell of people who are turned into deer and who generally come to a bad end.

PREHISTORIC RECORDS

Perhaps the earliest image showing the relationship between human and deer can be seen in the palaeolithic cave paintings in the Trois Frères cave, in Southern France. Here the figure of a shaman is shown as a deer-spirit wearing antlers.

As prehistory gradually became history, the deer remained deep within the human psyche. The stag was worshiped as a protective spirit by the Hittites, and it is one of the commonest motifs in Scythian art, especially at funeral sites, as the animal was believed to speed the spirits of the dead on their way.



In many cultures the male deer, the stag, is regarded as a symbol of regeneration because of the way its antlers are renewed each year, and even today we still have *stag nights* for the groom before his wedding. In some traditions the antlered deer is also connected with the Tree of Life because of the similarity between its antlers and the

branches of a tree.

Consequently, antler was believed to contain great magic, whether worn intact, broken in pieces, or ground into powder.

CLASSICAL CONNECTIONS

In Greek mythology, the deer is particularly associated with the goddess Artemis in her role as virgin huntress. One of the Labours of Heracles was to capture the Cerynian Hind, sacred to Artemis.

Another tale of a deer is told by Ovid. It is the story of the youth Actaeon who spends a day with his friends, hunting with his dogs in the hills. As the sun rises high into the sky and the day becomes increasingly hotter, he calls off the chase, telling his friends to rest as they will hunt again when it is cooler.

His friends rest, and he wanders into a wood and comes by chance to a sacred pool where the goddess Diana bathes with her nymphs. Actaeon sees her naked and she throws water in his face before he can run away.

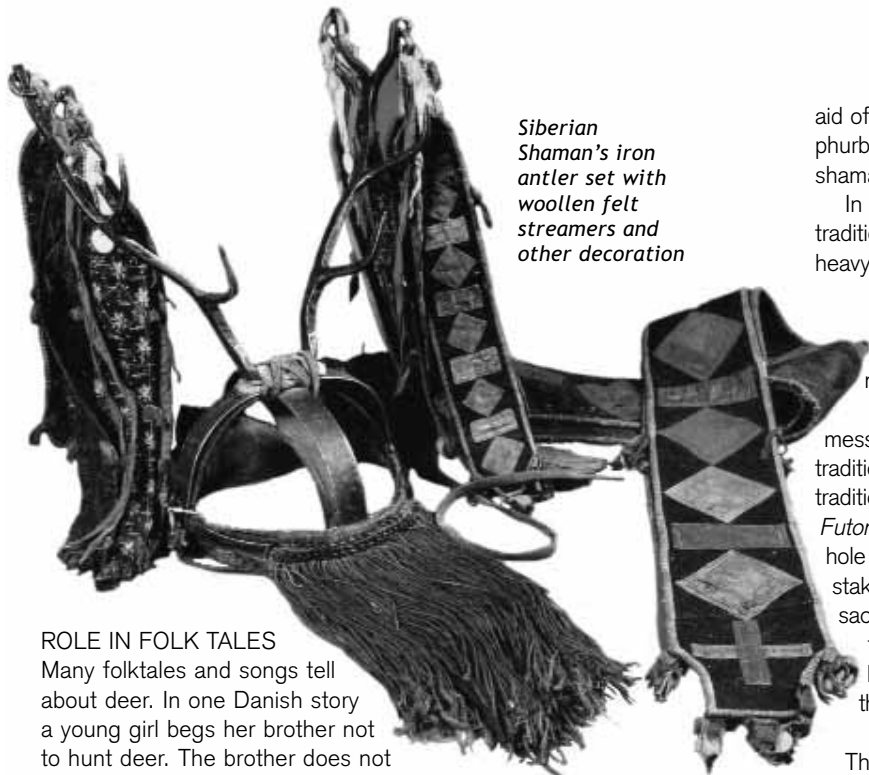
As he goes back to find his friends he hears his dogs barking and sees that they are chasing him. Confused, he calls out to them, but instead of his voice, he hears the bellowing of a great stag and realises he has been transformed by the goddess's hand. He runs fast on his four legs, but soon the dogs chase him down and tear him apart.

CHRISTIAN VISIONARIES

With the spread of Christianity, the stag began to be seen as a symbol of Jesus; Christians saw that the deer, like Jesus on the cross, gave its blood (or in the case of the deer its flesh) for humankind.

Saint Withburga has the doe as her animal symbol, and Saint Hubertus (or Hubert) was said to have been converted to Christianity when a stag with a crucifix between its antlers appeared, and turned the worldly and aristocratic Hubertus into a pious person.





Siberian Shaman's iron antler set with woollen felt streamers and other decoration



Top: Siberian Shaman's iron deer fetish.

Centre: Cave art from Southern France

Bottom: A stag is pursued by hounds and riders in an illustration from the Hunting Book by Gaston Phœbus (1331 - 1391)

ROLE IN FOLK TALES

Many folktales and songs tell about deer. In one Danish story a young girl begs her brother not to hunt deer. The brother does not listen to her and shoots a deer while his sister is at home with her step-mother. When he skins the deer, he finds his sister under the animal's skin, and realises the girl has been put under a spell and turned into a deer by their step-mother. In the story she can only be freed by drinking her brother's blood, so he cuts his finger and allows her to drink from it, which turns her back into a girl again.

In the Pueblos of New Mexico there is the story of Deer Boy. A baby is abandoned by its mother, and a Deer Woman finds the human child and brings him home to raise with her own fauns. After some time, a human hunter sees strange tracks among those left by the Deer People, and Deer Woman knows that the time has come for the boy to return to the humans. She tells him to be caught by the hunter and that he must know about his real human mother, so he can find her again. She also tells him that in order to remain among his own people he must be left alone and unseen in a room for four days once he is back in the village.

The hunter finds him and takes him home, and the boy finds his mother and tells her that he must be left alone as Deer Woman had told him. But his mother is impatient to see him again and glances in his room before the four days are up. As soon as she does the boy turns into a deer and runs back to the Deer People never to be seen again.

SACRED PRACTICES

Many tribes have Deer dances. In California, the Yurok Deer dances are held to bring plentiful crops, and the Hopi have a Deer Dance to bring rain.

The Huichol have a Deer Dance associated with the ceremonial use of peyote, the hallucinogenic cactus. Deer is seen as their brother, and their pilgrimages follow the spirit Deer's tracks (the growing peyote plants) across the land in a mythic hunt.

In Buddhism the first teachings the Buddha gave were in the Deer Park, and so a common Buddhist symbol is that of the Wheel of Dharma (a symbol of the Buddhist path) with a deer each side of it.

Deerskin is used by some Buddhist yogis and yogini as a meditation mat, and Chenrézic the Bodhisattva of Compassion, is sometimes depicted wearing the skin of a magical deer draped over his left shoulder as a symbol of his love for all beings.

In Bhutan the Stag Dance tells the story of Padmasambhava's victory over the Wind King. The Wind King had been causing the world great misery through his powers. Padmasambhava vanquished him and then rode the Wind King's mount, the stag, when he went on to subdue all the demons of the earth, establishing peace and happiness in Bhutan.

The deer is a sacred animal in Nepalese shamanism and some shamans call to their spirits with the

aid of a deer horn trumpet; some phurbas (ritual knives) of Nepalese shamans are also made from antler.

In certain Siberian shamanic traditions the shaman wears a heavy iron headdress in the shape of a set of stag's antlers, and some shamans beat their drums with a drum stick made from an antler. Deer are considered messengers to the gods in traditional Shinto. There is a traditional divination method called *Futomani* which involves striking a hole into a deer bone with an iron stake which has been heated in a sacred fire, and telling fortunes based on the shape of the resulting hole.

The relationship between the deer and human peoples has always been magical, from cave art to Bambi we have danced together: may the dance go on.

