

YURI E. BEREZKIN. THE BIRTH OF THE STARRY SKY. IDEAS ABOUT THE NIGHT LUMINARIES IN HISTORICAL DYNAMICS

This book analyses the areal distribution of tales and images related to the night sky, i.e. stars, constellations and shadows on the moon. Assessments of the approximate time of the spread of particular images and narratives are based on the existence of similar cosmonymic ideas in cultures of the Indo-Pacific belt of Asia Siberia, and the New World, which were in contact with each other only during particular epochs. Besides some not very clear African-Australian links, which could be as old as the initial movement of modern man out of Africa, three major systems of transcontinental cosmonymic parallels are noticeable. The earliest system that can be reconstructed is shared by cultures of the Indo-Pacific Asia and the New World (primarily Central and South America). In particular, we can talk about interpretations of the Milky Way (“river”, “serpent”, and possibly “the path of the dead”) and of the dark spots on the lunar disc (“frog”, “rabbit”, and possibly others). Much more abundant parallels, including several versions of the “cosmic hunt” myth, unite Northern Eurasia with North America, more precisely with its northern and western parts. The Siberian motifs could hardly have reached the New World before the opening of the MacKenzie Corridor (ca. 13 000 cal. B.P.); some of them were probably only brought there in the Holocene. At the time of the Pleistocene/Holocene boundary, Siberia may have been the most important center in the world for the emergence of cosmonymic ideas. When it comes to the Indo-Pacific set of motifs, evidence suggests that it was formed not later than 17 000–20 000 cal. B.P. It is hardly possible to reconstruct the Northern Eurasian cosmonymy from the time of the Last Glacial Maximum or from even earlier times. After the spread of productive economy and new technologies, the European cosmonymy was fundamentally transformed and mostly reflects the realities of the Iron Age. The spread of world religions also left a deep trace here. The cosmonymic links between Europe and South and Southeast Asia are of special interest, the direction of borrowings being not always clear. The European cosmonymy is much richer than other regional sets of the corresponding motifs, which reflects the unique cultural diversity of the continent during millennia.