

ON THE INTERPRETATION  
OF 'SUN-RAY HEAD' FIGURES  
as shamanic  
in the Rock Art of Central Asia

This paper is about the 'sun-ray head' figures in the rock art of Central Asia that can be evidence for a specific form of prehistoric religion—shamanism. The latest discoveries of rock art sites in Central Asia have a considerable impact on the interpretation of some of the 'sun-ray head' figures as shamanic and the associated rock art scenes as illustrating shamanic rituals.

The discoveries of new locations of rock art in Central Asia present some interesting engravings of anthropomorphic images. We do think that these anthropomorphic figures provide strong hints that help with their dating. These clues are the characteristics and the pictorial techniques that belong to the Early and Developed Bronze Age. They also give us reasons to renew the discussion about a shamanic interpretation of some masked anthropomorphic images. These anthropomorphic engravings could support the meaning given to the existence of the shamanism or its basic elements by the people in Central Asia in the Bronze Age.

The latest discoveries of rock art sites in Central Asia have a considerable impact on the interpretation of some of the 'sun-ray head' figures as shamanic and the associated rock art scenes as illustrating shamanic rituals. During the last ten years in Kazakhstan as well as all over Central Asia new sites of rock art have been discovered. New concentrations of petroglyphs were

found in western, north-western, north, south and south-eastern Kazakhstan. These new findings not only revealed new regions with petroglyphs but also new motifs hitherto unknown in Kazakh rock art. These new sites to which we will make reference to our subject are Bojan-Zhurek, Kuldzhabasy, Sauskandyk.<sup>1)</sup>

The shamanic interpretation of the same masked anthropomorphic images has already been discussed several times in specialist literature, not only regarding the petroglyphs of Central Asia, but also about the cave drawings.<sup>2)</sup>

Most of the theorists favouring the existence of shamanism in Central Asia already in the Bronze Age make their arguments on the basis of some ethnographic parallels, the presence of a certain conservatism and ritual continuity in nomad society. They mention that in rock art or in caves, shamans were often represented by anthropomorphic figures because of the characteristic headdress, masks or costumes known to us as shamanic from Siberia, Africa and Australia. For the same arguments they were also criticized by their opponents who underline not only the huge time gap, but also often the territorial distance between occurrence and concept.

One new point in this debate around the depiction of the head of the so-called 'sun-ray head' figures in the Bronze Age rock art of Central Asia. These figures are known from the literature as sun-headed, sun-ray head figures, mixed-beings, masked beings, shamans, costumed beings, priests, sun-gods, dancers etc. The designing of the head of the anthropomorphic figure was often significant in rock art. The head's representation in the rock art became more detailed over time. For example, the petroglyphs of the Turkic time present to us not only various headdresses, but also variations of hair dresses.

Many images of 'sun-ray head' figures have been found in Kazakhstan. Such figures vary in terms of details, but they also feature similar iconographic elements like coronal rays around the head. Similar depictions are found amongst the petroglyphs of Sajmoly-Tash in Kirgisia, which are usually dated to the Early Bronze Age. Such motifs are also known from gravestones of the Altai region (the funeral paintings of Karakol). The paintings of Karakol's grave chambers, where stone plates were decorated with

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<sup>1)</sup> Shvets (2012 : map1)

<sup>2)</sup> Renfrew (1994); Francfort (1998, 2001); Jacobson (2001); Rozwadowski/Koško (2002); Lewis-Williams (2001, 2003); Швец (2012); Есин (2008).

'sun-ray head' figures are dated to the Early Bronze Age. Stone steles of the Okunev culture in southern Siberia also present 'sun-ray head' images. Some anthropomorphic 'sun-ray head' figures on ceramics of the Samus culture in Western Siberia are dated to the Early Bronze Age. As in Karakol such drawings were found in Western China, among drawings in caves of India and on ceramics of the Harrap culture.<sup>3)</sup> It can be therefore assumed that this iconographic motif extended over Kazakhstan and the wider areas of Central Asia, from the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC until the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium AD.

Some of these 'sun-ray head' figures are armed with a simple bow. One of the largest 'sun-ray head' figure of the Tamgaly from Southeast Kazakhstan, is represented with a fighting axe and a quiver of arrows. Many of the 'sun-ray head' figures are engraved with a phallus.

Most of these figures are represented in movement—a torso/body from the front, feet in profile and bent in the knees which creates an effect of a dynamic, mobile figure. In comparison with other parts of their body, the head of these figures is displayed in great detail. The number of sun rays around the head varies from three to twenty.

For example, the Tamgaly's 'sun-ray head' figures do not have a strong iconographical canon—the figures are characterized by different sizes, their heads represented in the form of a fully engraved disk or a circle, the head-disks featuring only the sun-rays or sun-rays and the points above them. In addition to this, there is a little empty space between the ray and the special point engraved on their top.

One new point in this debate revolves around the depiction of the head of the so-called 'sun-ray head' figures in the Bronze Age rock art of Central Asia. The existence of these special points engraved above one of the rays of the 'sun-ray head' figures motivated some scientists to interpret these figures directly as the solar gods known to us from the Indo-Iranian mythology. In their opinion, the feathers of the shaman headdresses could not be shown in this interrupted form.<sup>4)</sup>

One photo of a masked Indian from the Melanesian islands allows us to look at this problem in a different way. The specific styling of the bird feathers, which have bare quills and a roundish top, decorate the headdress.<sup>5)</sup>

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<sup>3)</sup> Новоженев (1994:212).

<sup>4)</sup> Есин (2008: 82).

<sup>5)</sup> Sting (1985: Fig.1).

The large volume of the feather tip or the intensity of colour on the feather's tip often exists in nature. A famous example known to everybody are the feathers of a peacock, as well as the partridge, eagle, owl, hawk, jay and many other birds. Perhaps the ancient artist tried to represent this effect in a petroglyph with such points above the sun rays!?

All this recalls the modeling of a headdress by use of feathers, leather, fur, wood etc. We know, the creators of ladies' hats experiment with feathers too, playing with their natural volume to fashion various examples of elegant headwear. Ancient shamans exhibited similar creativity when producing ritual costumes.

In addition here are some interesting details: the 'sun-ray head' figures on the Okunev's steles have engraved points not only above the head's ray, but also along the body. Some of Okunev's 'sun-ray' personages represent a division in two parts that looks like 'Y' at the end of their 'sun-rays'.<sup>6)</sup> Other 'sun-ray' figures on the Okunev steles have a 'nimbus' above the head.<sup>7)</sup>

It should be noted that the rays on the head were engraved in the same manner, as well as the strips along the body of 'sun-ray head' figures of the Okunev culture. This is also typical for hybrid figures of the Tas-Hazaa, the Sulek and Pora-Tigey sites in Southern Siberia.<sup>8)</sup>

Perhaps only the masked figures from Karakol, Ozernoie and Besh-Ozek in the Altai region represent various styles of textile or fur strips or possibly feathers along the arms and bodies and on the head.

M. A. Devlet interprets the points above the rays on the Mugur-Sargol's masks from Tuva as a nimbus symbolizing the shine or flash of the 'sun goddess' personages.<sup>9)</sup> In our opinion this is not very believable, because similar points are located along the bodies with strips of some engraved figures. Also a single engraved point could be met above the 'antennas' on the Mugur-Sargol's masks. These engraved masks sometimes have a stick-handle under the face contour that reflects their functional use. Therefore, all these facts say something about the masks represented in the rock art; perhaps they were the masks of those who participated in some ceremonies or masks of scenes illustrating shamanic rituals. Each engraved element of this costume had a specific meaning which we will never know exactly, but some carved

<sup>6)</sup> Есин (2008: таб. I-13, 15).

<sup>7)</sup> Есин (2008: таб. I-15).

<sup>8)</sup> Есин (2008: таб. III-1-3).

<sup>9)</sup> Дэвлет (1992: 210).

details, for example the 'above sun-rays located points' could have a very trivial meaning, marking the styling of a garment using bird feathers.

One of three 'sun-ray head' figures from Boyan-Zhurek site in Southeast Kazakhstan has an interesting and complex headdress.<sup>10)</sup> Its head has seven radial sun-rays and the semicircle goes from one bent elbow to the other over the head. Above this semicircle a  $\Phi$ -shaped sign is adjoined. Two 'sun-ray head' figures from Boyan-Zhurek have roundish items in their hands, and many strips are depicted along the bodies. The sun-rays and other mentioned details of these figures support their interpretation as illustrating shamanic rituals. Some of the dress elements could be the styling of bird feathers, fur, leather, wood etc.

The latest discoveries of the masked figure from the site Sauskandyk in Southern Kazakhstan may lead us to interpret an anthropomorphic creature with horned headdress as a shaman.<sup>11)</sup> This figure demonstrates not only the unusual headdress in the form of lyre-horns, a hat or ears (?), but also unusual subjects in both hands which could be interpreted as a tree-horn-mask or birds (?).

The chronological fixing of the 'sun-ray head' figures of Central Asia points to the end of 3,000 BC to the middle of the second century BC. They belong to various cultures such as Karakol, Okunev and others synchronous to them, as well as some of those which replaced them in the steppe zone of Northern and Central Asia.

'Sun-ray head' figures belong to the so-called mark/predicate examples of rock art in Central Asia of the beginning Bronze Age and reflect a closeness with the ideology of the population in this territory.

The numerous repetition these and some other mark/predicate engravings demonstrate to us one of the elements of the uniting 'WE' structure in the past. That concept included according to the German Egyptologist Prof. Assmann not only a closeness of ideology and knowledge, common rules and values, but also memories of connected past.<sup>12)</sup>

Some of the 'sun-ray head' anthropomorphic figures in the rock art could certainly represent sun-gods. Incidentally, we know of 'sun-ray head or torso' animal figures from rock art too. They could be a symbol for the animal

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<sup>10)</sup> Байпаков/Марьяшев (2008: 194, fig. 1).

<sup>11)</sup> Швец (2011: 134–138), Самашев/Мургабаев/Елеуов (2014).

<sup>12)</sup> Assmann (2000: 16–17).

sun-gods known to us also from the Indo-Iranian mythology. But many of the 'sun-ray head' figures of Central Asia present a shaman—a keeper and cultivator of ritual.

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