

SUBJECT COMPOSITIONS IN TUVAN ROCK ART

Currently, we know of more than seventy locations of rock art in Tuva, with more than one thousand petroglyphs. Those sites are dispersed throughout the different districts of Tuva, but are mostly confined to the river valleys.

We have managed to create a typology of petroglyphs in Tuva and arrange them in chronological sequence.¹⁾ The most ancient samples of rock art refer to Eneolithic (engraved or painted animal figures with massive, large bodies, disproportionate to their heads and limbs). The next layer is the Early bronze age, when the Okunevo culture was distributed across the territories of the Sayan-Altay upland.

This is a period characterized by more realistic figures of animals, most of which are oxen, along with some symbolic characters such as ‘masks’ or ‘mushroom-shaped people’—anthropomorphic figures with specific hats or hairstyles. Also at that time chariots make their first appearance in the rock art of the region. The third layer is the late Bronze Age correlated with the Karasukskaya culture of Southern Siberia and the Mongun-Taiga culture of Tuva. The petroglyphs from this era are engraved or drawn in scratches. We can divide them into three styles: the Varchinsk and Chyrgaky styles characterized by schematic images performed with lines and the Chailag style with more voluminous animal figures with boat-shaped bodies and branched antlers in the case of stags. Engraved images of chariots started to become more and more common during that period. The next layer of images belong to the Scythian epoqe. Its first stage encompasses the early Scythian engravings performed in Mongol-Transbaikalian (characterized by figures

¹⁾ Kilunovskaya (2010: 23–36).

of stags with elongated proportions and beak-shaped snouts) and the more realistic Ardzan style, while the 2nd stage of the Scythian period features realistic animal figures along with widespread hunting scenes. The rock art of Tuva reflected the mythological representations of various nomadic cultures. The majority of petroglyphs are figures of animals following each other (predators chasing hoofed animals). There is a variety of compositions which we are currently trying to decrypt using myths handed down to us in Iranian and Greek narrative sources. Most of compositions belong to the time of the early and middle Bronze, when the cult of the ox along with the worshiping of Heaven was commonplace.

During the ages of Eneolithic and early Bronze the oldest cattle-breeders settled across all the space of the Eurasian steppes. That was the first wave of Indo-European diffusion to the East, which is marked by the monuments of Afanasevo culture. Mythological and ritual representations of cattlemen, where the image of an ox played one of the main roles as an embodiment and attribute of polyhypostatical deity, were being formed at that time. On the one hand, the image of an Ox appears as the lunar deity, on the other—as the land of God, patron of the house and the hearth. In Rigveda the image of ox is used to refer to male sexual potency, the expression of male productive force, so for Indo-Iranians the ox was an embodiment of fertility.

The eneolithic layer of Tuvan rock art is not strictly divided from the early Bronze age and presents a large variety of pictures and stories. Foreign cattle breeders mingled with the local population and created the Okunevo culture, unique in terms of the number of monuments of fine art. Monumental art arrived in the region, with amazingly complicated mythological content such as engravings and paintings on slabs, inside graves and petroglyphs in the open rock sanctuaries.

The largest number of petroglyphs, which could be referred to this period, was situated on the banks of Ulug-Khem.²⁾ This large river is connected with a whole range of Mytho-ritual representations, which found their embodiments on the rocks. The ritual centre of the Bronze age was situated in the narrowest section of the Yenisei (Ulug-Khem), convenient for ferry crossings—the beginning of the Sayan canyon, with extensive rock outcrops covered with a dark shiny tan crust. Petroglyphs were focused on the both banks, to the left in Mugur-Sargol tract and to the right on the rocks of Aldy-mozaga and Usty'-mozaga and other places down the canyon. One of

²⁾ Kilunovskaya (2007: 77–110).

the major specialists in the archeology of Central Asia, Professor Karl Yetmar, compared that sanctuary with the upper reaches of the Indus valley, where the concentration and similarity of petroglyphs were equal to the ones at the upper Yenisei.

The main image presented on the Yenisei are unique horned masks, depicting the spirit-masters of the land and river (Fig. 1: 1). Masks used to watch each other from the opposite banks of the mighty Ulug-Khem. Nowadays those monuments are flooded with the waters of Sayano-Shushenskoe reservoir. Such an image could have appeared during the Eneolithic age and been formed under the influence of foreign cattle-breeders, as in the Grave pit culture anthropomorphic steles that are presented. Masks existed until the Scythian ear as one of the components of Okunevo tradition, which formed the basis for the creation of the Scythian Siberian animal style. Masks, for example, were engraved on the early stag-stones, which themselves embodied the human figure, representing ideas of a Divine ancestor and anthropomorphic universe.

Engraved images of masks are known widely beyond the borders of Sayan-Altai—on the lower Amur and the Inshan mountains, on the North-west coast of Canada and USA. Masks in Tuva differ a lot in terms of the shape of heads (round, oval, egg-shaped, heart-shaped), with or without horns and antlers, the shape of horns and the ‘antenna’ on the top, the handle-shaped ledge under the chin, the interior filling (transverse lines, hooks, etc.).³⁾ Their different time of creation or different semantic meaning may serve to explain such variety. On the rocks of the upper Yenisei anthropomorphic masks are usually engraved along with certain symbols—geometric figures of ‘fences’ or ‘dwellings’, cup-shaped indentations, solar symbols, which allow us to see the signs of some deities or divine elements behind the masks.

Peculiar egg-shaped masks are known to exist on the Biziktig-khaya rock art site on the Khemchik river, engraved under the tail of a huge bird (Fig. 1: 3). This is a mythological bird seen from the front, whose egg once become the universe and then divided into three worlds inhabited by different spirits. One of those masks has bull’s horns with sprouts hanging down. Such big horns with sprouts appear in the images of fantastic figures in wide costumes, engraved on the flat rock to the left from the bird. They carry some rods in both hands. Those are some priests or priestesses or, maybe, some divine heroes.

³⁾ Devlet (1976: 10–20); Devlet (1980: 225–229).

Climbing up the rocks of Biziktig-Khaya, we can see different scenes created by people from the Bronze age; there is a procession of pack oxen, lead by some figures in wide ornamented dresses, hunting scenes with bowmen in mushroom-shaped hats, bulls with point-engraved geometric ornament on their bodies and others. Such art compositions could constitute evidence of the existence of complicated mythological representations of ancient nomads.

Between the anthropomorphic figures, which could be referred to as Bronze age, people with mushroom-shaped or round heads appear, sometimes with tails, and usually armed with bows or spears (Fig. 1: 2). The tails have different shapes—long and broad like the tail of a horse or yak, long sprouts ending in a round object, which is interpreted by many scientists as mirrors, bags, tambourines or other items connected with shamanistic rituals.⁴⁾ Sometimes we can see the fighting scenes between the ‘mushroom-headed’ and ‘round-headed’ people, and sometimes they are engraved in chariots. But at the same time such figures are often engraved along with the masks. This fact tells us that this image existed during the entire Bronze age. The most characteristic detail of these figures are the legs bent at the knee with the feet highlighted, so we might call them ‘dancing people’. Such figures, striking in their similarity, were found in the different parts of Central Asia—Altai, Kazakstan and Mongolia. A common interpretation of those figures—the image of the mushroom-people—is that they are the characters of many world mythologies, as described in detail in a book by E.G and M.A. Devlet.⁵⁾ Indo-European myths consider mushrooms to be a phallus or a masculine symbol. Their connection with archery proves the connection of those characters with the idea of fertility. V.N. Toporov writes about the connection of mushrooms with storm, thunder and lightning as presented in myths.⁶⁾ Many peoples from Greece to Oceania and America believe that mushrooms grow because of thunder. Such an idea could find its embodiment on the rocks, so mushroom-headed people could be a kind of symbol of the god of lightning and thunder.

However the main character of the Bronze age art was an ox. Figures of bulls with horns of different shapes and variously ornamented bodies are presented on many of Sayan-Altai upland rock-art monuments. This cult is

⁴⁾ Devlet (1980: fig.7).

⁵⁾ Devlet (2005).

⁶⁾ Toporov 1991: 335–336.

echoed in the myths of the Tuvinians: 'there is a master of the lake in shape of huge ox, living in the lakes of Tuva, he is invisible to the human eyes, but people can hear his roar from far away, it brings fertility to the land and people' (Kenin-Lopsan). This cult has common Indo-European roots. We can remember the chariot harnessed with bulls from the Znamenskaya monument, Zeus, in shape of an ox kidnapping Europe, the Creetan bull that was the father of the minotaur, the son of Queen Pasiphae. The ancient Iranian cult of Mitra, who created the universe by sacrificing a bull and building all of nature from its blood, bones and hide, is the most important. The connection with the divine world is managed through the sacrifice. This myth reflects with the beliefs about resurrection through death and sacrifice.

A scene depicting the sacrifice of a bull may be found among the petroglyphs of Tuva and Altai. This rite has remained partially until nowadays as a corrida. The engraved figures of men attacking a bull with arrows and spears constitute the real ancient corrida.

There is a monument of rock art that we studied in the west of Tuva, the Saamchyr mountains, where there is a special complex known as Bull's Rock by the local population.⁷⁾ This is a flat stone covered with images of oxen, executed in a particular style. There are pairs of figures, engraved in contours and silhouettes. The most interesting are two oxen engraved in the lower part of the rock in a fighting pose.

To the right from the central stone there is a hunting scene, where the 'mushroom-headed' bowman with round tails chases a bull with two sickle-shaped horns and a long tail. The same anthropomorphic character is engraved in the lower part of the central composition. But here he is looking to his left and shooting some phallus-shaped figure of a human with large open hands who is leading some strange animal with goats horns and a cat's tail. Undoubtedly, this scene depicts some mythological story.

The upper part of Bull's Rock is decorated with two large silhouette figures of oxen with some rectangular constructions on their backs (Fig. 2). There are schematically engraved anthropomorphic figures inside those constructions or 'packs'. The oxen are lead by mushroom-headed figures. Figures of pack bulls are known in Tuva, Altai and Mongolia. Two large figures of pack bulls are engraved on the foot of the Usty'-Mozaga mountain on the right bank of Ulug-Khem.

⁷⁾ Kilunovskaya (2008: 124–133).

The image of the pack bull did not appear on the rocks of Central Asia without a reason. As we can see there are some representations considering the ox as a transcendent animal, the bringer of the special functions connected with the other world. M.A. Devlet speaks about two rather interesting facts, in connection with that.⁸⁾ The first is the myth about the bull from Sut-hol' lake who was born from a simple cow and a huge ox—the master of the lake. This bull was so big that people could place 9 yourtas on his back during nomadic migrations. The second one is the Tibetan rite of attaching the remains of burned corpses and their clothes to the back of a 'dedicated' animal, because bulls and yaks were considered both as the souls of the dead and a means of transport to another world.

Scenes where the pack bulls are engraved with anthropomorphic figures on their backs are familiar among the petroglyphs of Bhimbetka in India and Baga-Oigur in Mongolia, where such oxen are lead by mushroom-shaped figures in wide costumes (Fig. 2: 3–5).

We can find a key to this image in Zoroastrian texts representing the ancient layer of Iranian religions, which speak about a bull called Sarsaok, or Hadaiosh.⁹⁾ 'About the Hadaiosh bull also known as Sarsaok, Ormazd says that while the bases were being created, people moved on his back from one kishwar to another, and after its last resurrection the elixir of immortality will be created from it'. People travelled across the Frahvarkand sea to the other six kishwars on his back. When the people were traversing the Frahvansard, a strong wind destroyed the lights standing on the bull's back, but altars of fire were established on three places on his back, and they kept burning, so there was light and the people managed to cross the sea. Another legend says that 'three sacred lights show themselves during the rein of Tahmurup, when people from Hvaniras travelled to other kishwars. They crossed the Varkash sea on the back of Sarsaok, where the three fires were installed. Once at night, a strong wind threw the lights out into the sea, but the fires remained burning on the bull's back lighting the way so people could cross the sea'. Representations about a huge bull carrying people to other worlds have clear reflections in rock art.

The late Bronze age was the time of a new wave of migration, when the Indo-Aryans resettled across Central Asia. They were familiar with wheeled vehicles and used horses domestically. The arrival of a new population, the

⁸⁾ Devlet, Devlet (2005: 203–215).

⁹⁾ Chunakova (2004: 198).

change in ideology and the ritual system, undoubtedly found its reflection in art. The chariot may be considered as a symbol of that time.¹⁰⁾ There are several hundred images of carts, wagons and wains harnessed with bulls or horses from Southern Siberia and Central Asia. About twenty of them are known in Tuva. They are usually portrayed as if views from above, while the harnessed animals are shown in profile. The animals and chariots in such images are portrayed extremely schematically. Firstly, the chariots are engraved in compositions with Okunevo style petroglyphs. This schematic style developed gradually. Images of wheels or chariots are undoubtedly connected with the cult of the Sun, which replaced the cults of the Earth and Moon, along with the ox as their symbol.

A remarkable monument of rock art was discovered by our expedition in the mountains of Tannu-Ola, in the valley of Elegest river. It is called Chailag-khem (Fig. 4). There are more than one hundred rock planes with images from different periods. All the images were made using the technique of deep engraving. There are various stories told by those petroglyphs. Multi-figured panels (like the rock panel from cluster 1 which is about five metres in length) are especially impressive. There are processions of beasts and hunting scenes. These images could refer to the Scythian era and the Bronze age. There are unique images of boats, animals shown from above, birds, fish and otters, which are presented in Tuvan art as single examples.

There is the phallic figure of a man engraved in the third cluster, with enormous open hands, fingers spread, quite similar to the image from Bull's Rock. Those hands resemble a bird's wings. He is walking towards the right, legs in a wide stance. Under this character, a figure of a goat is engraved. Professor V. A. Semenov thinks that such anthropomorphic figures with small heads, big hands, spread legs and phalluses in combination with goats, should be considered as a universal symbol of the Thunder deity.¹¹⁾ Such characters are presented in the rock art of Italian Alps, Armenia and upper Irtysh.

Images of pack oxen and stags with branched antlers from Chailag are quite interesting. The oxen have slab-sided bodies, sharpened legs, plications on the necks, big phalluses, massive snouts, long tails with brushes and rectangular constructions on their backs. Their sickle-shaped horns form an open ring with horizontal bars in shape of the letter T (like a shaman's

¹⁰⁾ Kilunovskaya (2011: 129–133).

¹¹⁾ Semenov (2008: 410–412).

drum) (Fig. 3: 5). There are four such oxen on the one of panels, along with tailed bowman, goats and horses, executed in a similar style. Stag figures are also present. These stags have boat-shaped bodies, plications on their necks, sharpened snouts, bowed down, with antlers that are prominent and branched. We can confidently speak that those stags were made in the special 'Chailag' style, because there is nothing similar on the other monuments. On one panel the size of the antlers is much greater than the figure of the stag itself. There is one analogy—on the rock art site of Yi-me, where the antlers of a stag resemble a labyrinth, filling a shallow niche (Fig. 3: 6). There are several figures of animals with many horns or antlers that are known in Sayan-Altai. This type of image could also be encountered in folklore, where a many-horned animal could be a character of the underworld or heaven. There is eighteen-horned deer in an Osetian epic, a nine-horned black bull which belong to the master of underworld Erlik-khan, a four-eared horse and a four-horned cow from the 'Maaday-kara' epic.¹²⁾ A character from the Maaday-kara epic, Kudygey the hero, could transform himself into a 'shaggy black maral with seventeen antlers'. Those ancient representations found their reflection in the rock art and remained in the heroic epics of different peoples.

The panel with the boat is quite unusual among the stories and compositions of Chailag (Fig. 4: 2). The images were made by using a technique the combined slick engraving with grinding. The image of the boat is in centre of the composition and takes the shape of segment, engraved with contours and crossed with vertical lines. There are two 'headless riders' to its right. From the left side there is a complicated scene with a bowmen, rider, an axis with wheels and some strange figures (V.A. Semenov says that they resemble bulls portrayed in scenes like the ones from Armenia). Once again here it is a question of some mythological story etched in stone, where the boat is considered as a means of transport to the other world. Such an impression is reinforced by the headless riders.

Another vehicle on the rocks of Chailag is the bullock-cart harnessed with a bactrian camel (Fig. 4: 1). There are human figures shown in the cart and one is riding the camel. The style of those images could belong to the late Bronze or early Scythian era. Such a composition, along with the image of camel is unique for Tuva.

¹²⁾ Maaday-kara (1987: 356).

Another topical composition from Chailag is the representation of a chariot harnessed with a pair of horses and several anthropomorphic figures (fFig. 4: 3). A charioteer and four phallomorphic male figures are depicted with bows pulled back, ready to shoot. Another figure resembles a woman in a wide dress, standing with her arms akimbo. The archery motif is familiar for both funeral and wedding rituals (like the competition for Penelope's hand from the *Odyssey*). In the Indo-Iranian epic the *Mahabharata* there is a story about a wedding competition (called *svayanvar*) between five Pandawa-brothers, for the bride Draupadi, who became the wife of Ardzuna and then of five brothers.¹³⁾ Polyandria was common in Tibet as well as, as M.P. Gryaznov wrote, for the bringers of the Afanasevo culture, where one woman is usually buried with several men.

Processions of various beasts, representing the world in all its abundance are the most common compositions for the rock art of Central Asia, from the Bronze age until medieval times (Fig. 5). Mainly goats are featured but sometimes there are also horses, hunters with dogs shooting stags, chariots and packs of oxen. Usually those beasts are portrayed walking the road, which could be depicted as a curved line. Usually there is no real line, but mere scratches or edges of rock, along which the symbols and figures are engraved replace the line of the 'road'. There are various mythological scenes with the common fundamental principle of the road, but different content depending on the region and period.

During the Scythian era, the image of a maral deer became central to most compositions. Those are single figures or pairs of stags, sometimes chased by hunters or predators. However, scenes of rapture are very rare in rock art. The brightest of such scenes are engraved on the Mortuk mountain in Southern Tuva. Figures of stags with beak-shaped snouts, which seem to fly upwards started to become popular in early Scythian times. Those images appear on the rocks as a replicas of stag-stones. There is a fantastic, divine creature—a bird-horse-deer, legends of which have remained among the native peoples of Siberia. Another early-Scythian style of depicting a stag features = more realistic figures that are, nonetheless, still far from nature. The stag seems to be standing on the tips of its hooves, with its head raised high and long antler, which consist of semi-circles and sickle-shaped sprouts. The stag in such a pose seems to be trumpeting, and is referred to as 'flying'. Such a pose could be interpreted as a sacrificial. Again we are dealing with the idea of the

¹³⁾ *Mahabharata* I 189; XVIII 4, 9.

universe reborn through sacrifice and death, common for Indo-Europeans. The Scythian cult of the stag is close to those of the horse and the Sun. The Scythian name Saki means stag in Persian.

A popular story in the rock art from the Scythian period was a hunting scene in which a rider with a bow chases a stag or another hoofed animal. This is a ritual hunt, during which the divine hero chases a heavenly beast. In fruit of the hunter's luck—the blood of that beast—should flood all of the land. That is how the ancient people imagined the apocalypse.

Rock art marks the presence of certain mythological representations, and reflects the oldest cults leading to the forming of shamanism.

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Fig. 1. Petroglyphs of the Bronze Age. 1 – Alydy–Mozag masks; 2 – anthropomorphic figures with the mushroom–shaped heads of Ortaa–Sargol; 3 – the image of a bird, masks and “shamans” Bizhiktig–Khaya.



Fig. 2. The image of a pack of bulls. Bronze Age 1 – Sholde–Tey, 2 – Saamchir; 3 – Bhimbetka (India); 4, 5 – Baga–Oygur (Mongolian Altai).



Fig. 3. The image of animals with unusual horns. Bronze Age–Scythian time. 1–3, 6 – Chaylag–Khem, 4 – Shanchig, 5 – Yime.



Fig. 4. Chaylag–Khem. Tuva. 1 – the plane with the image of a camel and an arb; 2 – plane with the image of the boat; 3 – the plane with the image of “matchmaking”. Bronze Age.

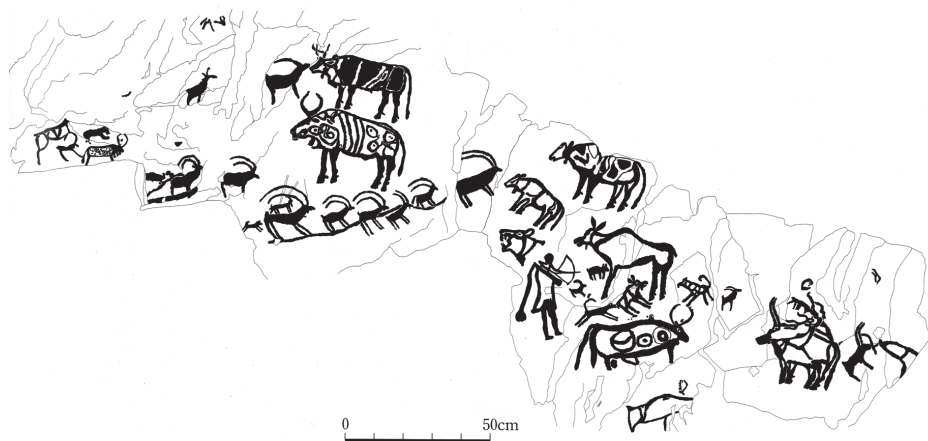


Fig. 5. The image of the procession of animals and people on the «road». Bizhiktig–Khaya on Khemchik. The Bronze Age.