

FIGURATIVE MONUMENTS AND ROCK ART TRADITIONS OF THE KAZAKH STEPPES

The unique heritage of the Kazakh people includes ancient rock art—petroglyphs founded in the vast expanses of Saryarka, the steppes of Kazakhstan. They are still not very well known and virtually excluded from modern tourist routes. Within the administrative boundaries of the Karaganda region (Fig. 1), covering most of Kazakh steppes, twenty-seven sites were found.¹⁾ The petroglyph sites are situated in the most notable places of the steppes—on the rocky outcrops on the tops and slopes of the hills, on the steep banks of small rivers drying up in the summer time. These points are visible from afar. As a rule, they are associated with numerous myths and legends of the locals and they are honoured as sacred places—'aulie'. Such landmarks are essential to cattlemen as important indicators for orientation in the vast 'ocean' of the steppes (Fig. 2). Perhaps the ancient petroglyphs sites acted as 'lighthouses' in the vast steppes, pointed out the most convenient pastures and directions of movement. In the absence of written tradition, there is a limited number of communication channels between members of societies. Communication was limited to verbal and pictorial traditions that reflected the knowledge, accumulated by society, in the only one available form—mythological.²⁾

Petroglyphs are considered to be an archaeological source, the study of which requires the solution of specific problems and challenges, among which the most salient are: an integrated analysis, classifications and documenting

¹⁾ Bedelbayeva et al. (2015:4–1).

²⁾ Novozhenov (2012a; 2012b: 114–145; 2012c: 183–187; 2012d: 117–122)

(descriptive) materials in the light of the definition of their history, identification, decryption, as well as cultural and historical interpretation. Experience in studying primitive art study clearly shows that the solution of research problems in rock art depends on the overall level of development of scientific knowledge, in this case on the level of theoretical and methodological foundations of the petroglyph research.

The earliest evidence of rock art in the Kazakh steppes may be found in the works of Arab scholars and travellers. Later, more references appeared in the works of German's scientists and Russian's geologists, since the 19th century, but the real breakthrough in the research of the Saryarka petroglyphs occurred only in the second half of the last century.³⁾

Steppe figurative sites—the petroglyphs are located in a cluster of two to five hundred items on each site and consist of several multi-figure compositions, arranged in the most notable places in the steppe—on rocky outcrops of various types of sandstone, shale and granite, on the tops and the slopes of the hills, on the steep shores of small rivers drying up in summer, or on boulders, or dikes of 'moraine origin' (Fig. 3). Generally, the total number of images is barely more than a thousand as opposed to the more southern and eastern figurative sites located in the foothills of the great mountain ranges and greater in quantitative terms.

The most ancient artistic traditions of the Saryarka population—graphic, ornamental, figurative (statutory) and megalithic traditions, as well as the development of these and other traditions in space and in time—are referred to as pictorial communication, which was an important means of internal and external relations between local societies, and which are recorded here by archaeological methods in the form of isolated archaeological cultures or cultural-historical communities.⁴⁾ They have become a reliable indicator of the identity of these societies and its study and analysis enable the classification of many controversial issues surrounding local ethno-cultural history.

The complex analysis of Saryarka petroglyphs shows that they belong, as a rule, to different historical periods, the majority of rock art sanctuaries or temples in the open air having functioned over various periods, as evidenced by the neighbourhood in the engravings on one site, belonging to different

³⁾ Bedelbayeva et al. (2015: 10–31); Novozhenov (2002: 8–11); Samashev et al. (2013: 17–23).

⁴⁾ Novozhenov (2012a); (2012b: 114–145); (2012c: 183–187); (2012d: 117–122); (2013a: 321–329); (2013b: 132–142); (2014a: 18–267); (2015a: 57–88); (2015b: 20–36).

chronological periods. This leads to the conclusion that the function of rock art sites as one type of communication system has remained unchanged for thousands of years.

In the history of rock art of Saryarka of the Bronze Age there are three fine traditions, which are directly linked with the key stages (periods) in the history of the local population: the Yamnaya–Afanasiovo pictorial tradition during the III mill. BC, the Andronovo in the II mill. BC (within which independent artistic styles and traditions developed and the Early period (Sejma–Turbino style, Fig. 4), or the Andronovo (late stage) and Karasuk or Begazy–Dandybay tradition (Fig. 5) in the 14th–9th cent. BC.⁵⁾

In the frames of the Indo–Iranian pictorial traditions of the Bronze Age, to its final stage of development, a new, so to say, conditionally ‘prototurkic’ (or Begazy–Dandybay / Karasuk) pictorial tradition, which apparently developed in parallel and coexisted in different forms with Scythian–Saka, mutually enriching each other. Due to the nomadic way of farming practised by the carriers of the two traditions, the initial formation of their territorial origin could not be accurately located by modern methods or with the help of existing source data.⁶⁾

An important feature of the Bronze Age art in Central Kazakhstan is the lack of parallels between the vascular ornamentation, weapons, bone items and repertoire and characters of rock art period of the Andronovo cultural-historical community, or rather their separate development independent from each other. At that time, as the synchronous patterns on ceramics and bones remained strictly geometric, the petroglyphs, engravings on stelae and minor Bronze Age art demonstrate the multifaceted artistic diversity of the repertoire of imagery and iconography; they are diverse in their scenic and compositional approach.⁷⁾

Perhaps along with the megalithic tradition, different channels of communication existed at the same time in the same society, but different medias carried the same ideas and images, influencing society differently. This feature of the art of the Bronze Age—the separation of artistic motifs in the ornamentation and in the monumental rock art, including small artistic images—remains a subject of debate and may, apparently, be explained by

⁵⁾ Novozhenov (2013a: 321–329); (2013b: 132–142); (2014a: 18–267); (2014b: 90–100); (2015a: 57–88); (2015b: 20–36).

⁶⁾ Bedelbayeva et al. (2015).

⁷⁾ Shvets (2010: 77–81; 2012).

the specifics of mythological thinking of the ancient inhabitants of Saryarka. Probably the pictorial ‘language’ of the Bronze Age, imprinted on the rocks and clear to all the clans speaking here in different dialects and languages, was a common communicative tool for these societies that helped to resolve the problem facing inter-clan relations, communication, the search for spouses, matchmaking, trade, technology exchange etc.

The rock art of the Andronovo community and the early Iron Age archaeological evidence proclaim the continuity of cultures and artistic traditions—the existence of broad historical, economic, geopolitical and cultural ties in the region of Central Asia, and throughout the steppe zone of the continent, which influenced the development of this era was underpinned by a common, almost unified, ‘visual graphic language’, understandable everywhere in Central Asia.⁸⁾

The repertoire of the Scythian-Saka pictorial tradition of Saryarka was well represented in typical images of wild animals, wild boar, fantastic predators and deer with branched antlers, mountain sheep, argali and scenes of torment. A horse mask with horns depicted on a rock in the vicinity of the village of Besoba⁹⁾—similar to the horse found buried in the mounds of the Pazyryk time in Altai (Berel, Pazyryk, Tuekta et al.)—is a striking fact proves the transformation of ancient images of the Bronze Age and the formation of a new mythology and traditions (Fig. 6). The image canon, whether it be a totem animal or scene, chosen story, or in this case a horse image in the ritual mask, begins to adopt a new and extraordinary regulating and apparent magical power at this time.

Indeed, the nomadic lifestyle itself predetermined the main areas of communicative activity of early nomads across the entire belt of the Eurasian steppe. The culture and economics of their lifestyle involved the migrations of all clans (groups of blood relatives and not), often over several thousand kilometres, cyclicism—i.e. inevitable return to the original territories—as well as ‘vertical nomadism’ in the plentiful mountain valleys, and many other features. The Saka-Scythian animal style, its decoding and territorial distribution in contemporary artefacts in the vast territory of the continent is clear evidence of transcontinental ties and, in fact, of the symbolic and imaginative communication means of early nomads in this period. The phenomenon of this style and its geographical distribution, decoding the images and com-

⁸⁾ Sher (2016).

⁹⁾ Bedelbayeva et al. (2015: 50–16).

munication messages, obviously finds its origins on the rocks of Saryarka, clearly demonstrating its continuity and the beginnings of the local rock art of the Bronze Age (Fig. 7, 8).

The territory of Saryarka in the early Middle Ages (5–8th cent. AD), till to the time of the Arab Caliphate, was always under the control of the early Turkic clans and even mostly formed part of the territories ‘state inheritance’ of Western Turkic Qaganate—the core of its lands, contrast to the ‘wings’—it’s vassal and peripheral regions.

Among the Turks’ internal communications there are visual, figurative, epigraphic sources, tamgas as ethnic markers and Qaganate coins of their own. A new impetus in the Saryarka at this time was the megalithic (statutory) manufacturing tradition of Turkic anthropomorphic sculptures—stone ‘balbals’ that marked the most noticeable and plentiful areas in the steppe.¹⁰⁾ The formation of their own ancient Turkic identity is reflected in the traditional art that was influenced by the new historical realities—domination over the neighbouring sedentary states, imperial scope and level of political contact. A bright and original Turkic pictorial tradition was formed. It was reflected all these new realities and achievements. Geographically, this tradition also developed within the territory of Saryarka.

The basis of the Turkish graphic tradition was a key figure—the armed horseman (bearer, steppe knight, catafractus) in the broadest sense, the heroic image of the leader of the clan: *qagan*, *aruah-ancestor*. Depicted on statured artefacts (balbals, stone sculptures) as the era’s symbol, with standard, canonical positions and similar artistic techniques, the image in combination with other characters of ancient Turkic fine series is widely represented in religious, ceremonial and everyday scenes, hunting stories, in fights, in both the petroglyphs and wall paintings of palaces in the southern regions (Penjikent, Afrasiab) or on the walls of the underground tombs of the Turkic qagan—the mausoleum Mayhan-uul in Mongolia.¹¹⁾

The evidence of their own identity are the following: a few finds of Turkic tribal tamgas in petroglyphs on cult and utilitarian objects, inscriptions and coins that have become not only an indicator of a developed system of property ownership, but also an important marker of tribal identity and ethnicity. It is no coincidence that many tamgas defined by researchers as *West Turkic* or *Turkish* has a direct correspondence with the modern tamgas

¹⁰⁾ Kurmankulov, Ermolenko (2014).

¹¹⁾ Altynbekov (2014:136–152).

of some Kazakh tribes, or with their graphical basis. An important role in this complex process of self-identification was adopted by the iconic ancient Turkic tradition—with all the global changes, it remained a mostly traditional communication channel on the steppes.

In general, in the region's stories on the rocks and all the artistic traditions from ancient times to the ethnographic present, the petroglyphs of Saryarka directly reflect the economic and geographic, economic and ideological features of the progressive development of the indigenous population of the region. The images of moose, dwellings, or plow, as well as the symbols of known world religions are not found or rarely met here. The history of Saryarka rock art contains several series of successive fine traditions, which are directly linked with the key stages (eras) in the history of the local population: the Yamnaya-Afanasievo pictorial tradition in the the 3rd mill. BC, the Andronovo in the 2nd mill. BC and its bright ornamental tradition, the Karasuk or Begazy-Dandybay in the 14th–9th centuries BC, the Saka in the 6th–2nd cent. BC (in the depths of which, the classical Scythian-Saka animal style formed and developed), as well as the unique Turkic (5th–8th cent. AD) and Kazakh (14th–19th cent.) pictorial traditions.¹²⁾

In the frameworks of the Indo-European, Indo-Iranian pictorial traditions of the Bronze Age, to its final stage of development, there is a new—'prototurkic' (or Begazy-Dandybay / Karasuk) pictorial tradition, which apparently developed in parallel and coexisted in different forms with the Scythian-Saka, mutually enriching each other. Due to the nomadic way of farming practised by the carriers of the two traditions, the initial formation of their territorial origin could not yet be accurately located by modern methods or with the help of existing source data.¹³⁾

It is obvious that the vast expanses of the Saryarka become a place where these traditions evolved and developed, becoming an important means of communication for local societies. At subsequent stages of development, these traditions were gradually drawn into independent pictorial canons, which form a new ruling pictorial tradition known in the local history of the ethnic groups: Saks (Tasmola people), Sarmatians (Savromats), the Western Turks, Kipchaks (Polovtsy), and later—the Kazakhs. However, the problem of absolute chronology and dating of the petroglyphs of Saryarka, as well as

¹²⁾ Novozhenov (2014a: 206–235).

¹³⁾ Rogozhinsky (2015:109–125).

their decryption and ethno-cultural attribution is still very far from being resolved and requires further research efforts.

Now comes the main issue regarding the practical use of the artefacts of Saryarka rock art for education and the promotion of cultural heritage as well as the development of domestic and international tourism. The task of documenting figurative artefacts is relevant, but no less important is the need to preserve them for future generations. The survey of rock art sites in the region conducted in 2015 showed that the petroglyphs are constantly and persistently disrupted by ignorant visitors with their 'autographs', and attempts to repeat the images of the past.

Taking into account the increasing popularity of eco-tourism and the emergence of interest in the sites of rock art, another important issue became the problem of how to present the petroglyphs themselves while also keeping them safe from mass visitations. The ancient images are often barely visible on the surface of the rocks, so inadvertent damage and destruction to these images do happen; people are not even aware of their existence or simply cannot see them.

In general, the monitoring and mapping locations of petroglyphs of Saryarka shows that most rock art is concentrated in sparsely populated regions that are convenient for human habitation in natural landscapes, which are temporarily abandoned or still active during Kazakh winters. Nevertheless, the presence of petroglyph locations in close proximity to numerous archaeological sites dating back over a broad chronological range indicates that in ancient times and the Middle Ages they were mostly located along the major trade and caravan routes.

The locations of petroglyphs in the Saryarka were holy places for a thousand years. They also reflect the rich spiritual and religious ideas of bygone eras. The significance of the petroglyph landscape lives on. People visit them in the hope of healing or spiritual support. The genetic memory of the people preserves its heroic history and the chronicles of great events. Therefore, these places are authentic artefacts of our cultural heritage and a global phenomenon inherited from the ancestors.

The petroglyphs of Saryarka demonstrate a high level of development of the spiritual culture of the ancient population of Central Kazakhstan and can rightfully be called a kind of rock chronicle spanning thousands of years, covering a range of historical periods from the Bronze Age to the ethnographic time. Integrated in modern values, the structure of cultural tourism, symbols and images of ancient cultures are a powerful resource of historical memory,

the most attractive from an aesthetic point of view and a convenient tool for the modern perception of the world of ancient civilizations.

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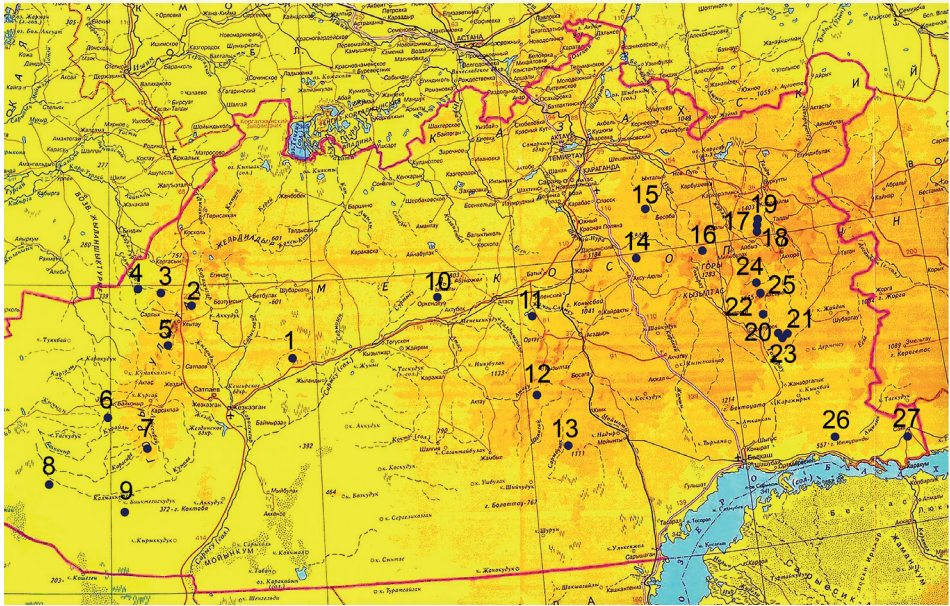


Fig. 1. Central Kazakhstan (Sryarka)—the steppe and hill part of the country. Map of figurative artefacts.



Fig. 2. Zhyngertas. General up-view. Boulders with rock art and barrows. Photo by the authors.



Fig. 3. Baikonour river. General view of group "N" and river valley. Photo by the authors.



Fig. 4. Baikonour river. Group "N". Horses in Sejma-Turbino style. Photo by the authors.



Fig. 5. Baikounour river. Group "A". Antilope—Lama (?) in the Karasuk style.
Photo by the authors.



Fig. 6. Konyrzhon. Horse mask with horns, animals and praying people on the tri-partite panno. Photo by the authors



Fig. 7. Baikonour river. Group “N”. Feline in Scythian-Sakas animal style. Photo by the authors.

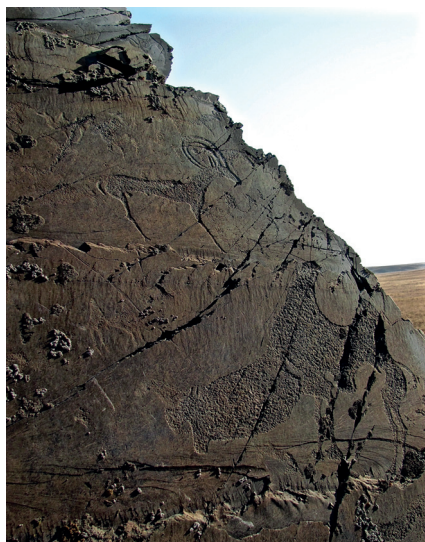


Fig.8. Baikonour river. Group “N”. Camel and goat in Scythian-Sakas animal style. Photo by the authors.