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Chronology of Rock Art of the Russian and Mongolian Altai: From the Paleolithic to the Late Middle Ages

This study attempts to elaborate a chronology of rock art in the Russian and Mongolian part of the Altai Mountains, from the Paleolithic to the Late Middle Ages. We focus on the style and themes of rock art and on petroglyphic palimpsests. The earliest representations date to the Upper Paleolithic. On certain palimpsests, images of horses in the Kalguty style are overlaid by Bronze Age petroglyphs. The key challenge is to identify Neolithic petroglyphs. Among the huge number of Bronze Age representations, some follow the traditions peculiar to the Afanasyevo and Chemurchek cultures. The key feature of the latter is so-called "Chemurchek anthropomorphs". Bronze Age petroglyphs, representing animals, humans, weapons, wheeled vehicles, etc., are chronologically and culturally diverse and must be subdivided respectively. Early Iron Age ones require attribution to either the initial stage or to the mid-1st millennium BC. We discuss the difficulties of analyzing rock art of the Xiongnu-Sarmatian age, the expressive Turkic style, that of the early medieval rock art, and recent petroglyphs of the southern Russian Altai.

Keywords: Mongolian Altai, petroglyphs, palimpsests, Kalguty style, Chemurchek culture, Early Iron Age, Middle Ages.

Introduction

The Mongolian Altai is a real petroglyphic treasure, with many outstanding rock art sites (Fig. 1). As the most numerous archaeological objects in the region, petroglyphs have been systematically studied for decades, along with burials from various periods, commemorative complexes, and sculptures. In the late 20th to early 21st century, international expeditions extensively explored the valleys of the Baga-Oygur, Tsagaan Salaa, and Tsagaan Gol rivers in Northwestern Mongolia. During this time, they recorded and replicated thousands of rock compositions spanning various historical periods. The results of these works were published in monographs (see (Jacobson, Kubarev, Tseveendorj, 2001, 2006; Kubarev, Tseveendorj, Jacobson, 2005; Kubarev, 2009), which contain sections on the problems of periodization and chronology of petroglyphic sites in the Mongolian Altai studied by the co-authors. In his short article, N. Batbold outlined his point of view on the chronology of the petroglyphs in the Mongolian Altai (2018). A.N. Mukhareva and

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Fig. 1. Rock art sites in the Altai Mountains (Russian and Mongolian Altai).

1 – Chaganka; *2* – Elangash; *3* – Kalgutinskiy Rudnik; *4* – Muzdy-Bulak; *5* – Baga-Oygur; *6* – Tsagaan Salaa; *7* – petroglyphs from Baga-Oygur (right bank); *8* – Khar-Dzhamat-Gol; *9* – Khar-Salaa; *10* – Khar-Chuluu; *11* – Shiveet-Khairkhan.

N.N. Seregin chronicled the research history of the early medieval petroglyphs in the Mongolian Altai, and evaluated the findings of the studies (2021).

V.D. Kubarev, E. Jacobson, and D. Tseveendorj delved into the chronology of the petroglyphs, focusing on their cultural process dynamics and style, and drew conclusions regarding the parallels between representations and the material evidence uncovered in excavations. The examined complexes belonged to a wide chronological range, from the Stone Age to the ethnographically modern period. Scholars attributed the earliest rock art to the "Neolithic-Chalcolithic" (Kubarev, Tseveendorj, Jacobson, 2005: 54, 121) and distinguished two periods, early and late, in the set of petroglyphs from the Bronze Age (4th–1st millennia BC) (Ibid.: 55). The co-authors attributed the petroglyphs from the period of the "ancient nomads" of the Early Iron Age (Ibid.: 92–107), the Xiongnu-Sarmatian period, the "Middle Ages", and later time (Ibid.: 107–111). In the English-language studies published in France, the date of each rock composition or individual figure is provided (Jacobson, Kubarev, Tseveendorj, 2001, 2006).

The Kalgutinsky Rudnik site was explored on the Ukok plateau in the southern Russian Altai, which seems to constitute a single natural and cultural region with the Mongolian Altai. Some of the petroglyphs from that site have been identified as the earliest representations in the Altai, and were dated to the Upper Paleolithic (Molodin, Cheremisin, 1999). The concept of the historical and cultural development of local populations was formulated (Molodin, 1995).

The concept of the Central Asian center of prehistoric art, developed by A.P. Okladnikov (1972), has been further elaborated in later studies. In the recent decade, research in the Mongolian Altai by Russian, Mongolian and French scholars, aimed at identifying and studying the earliest petroglyphs, resulted in the discovery of a series of unique complexes (Tseveendorj et al., 2017; Cheremisin et al., 2018; Molodin, 2022; Molodin, Geneste, Zotkina et al., 2019; Molodin, Zotkina, Cretin et al., 2020; Molodin, Cheremisin, Nenakhova et al., 2022a; and others).

Study results

The study of the previously known and newly discovered representations involved the identification of their iconographies and stylistic features, reconstruction of techniques for making petroglyphs using traceological analysis, and interpretation of palimpsests. This provided new evidence supporting the Upper Paleolithic age of some petroglyphs in the Russian and Mongolian Altai. Figures of mammoths, rhinoceros (?), bulls, horses (Fig. 2, *1–5*; 3), deer (see Fig. 2, *6*), rams, and partial images pecked on slate rock surfaces were found in this region.

A serious argument for the early age of this group of petroglyphs was the results of the study of palimpsests containing pecked horse figures in the Kalguty style, overlapped by images of bulls and deer made in the Bronze Age style (compositions at the sites of Tsagaan Salaa IV and on the right bank of Baga-Oygur) (Molodin, 2022; Molodin, Geneste, Zotkina et al., 2019; Molodin, Zotkina, Cretin et al., 2020; Molodin, Cheremisin, Nenakhova et al., 2022a; Cheremisin et al., 2018; Tseveendorj et al., 2017; Batbold et al., 2019). It has been suggested to concentrate on the special "Kalguty style" of the earliest images (Molodin, Geneste, Zotkina et al., 2019).

Attribution of the Neolithic petroglyphs of the region under discussion is the most controversial area of chronological reconstructions. Identification of this group of rock art has been proposed in the works of Kubarev, Tseveendorj, and Jacobson (Jacobson, Kubarev, Tseveendorj, 2001: 64–66; Kubarev, Tseveendorj, Jacobson, 2005: 48–54). These scholars attributed a small number of rock representations to the Late Stone Age, relying upon stylistic features of pecked animal images, which to some extent were

similar to features typical of the Upper Paleolithic Kalguty style. A significant methodological issue arises from the fact that accepting this argument hinges on positing a connection between the Neolithic population of the region and the Paleolithic period. If, conversely, it is assumed that during the Neolithic the population changed, the rock art style may not necessarily show parallels with the previous tradition. Either way, identification of Neolithic petroglyphs in the region is currently the most difficult problem, for which no evidence is available.

According to the general principles of the chronology of Siberian petroglyphs, several single animal figures can still be safely attributed to the Neolithic. One of the reasons is a "scaly" technique of representation, probably with stone tools, which was noted by Kubarev, Tseveendorj, and Jacobson (2005: 49). Such figures included an image of an elk's head (see Fig. 2, *7*) and possibly several more large pecked animal figures (see Fig. 2, *8–10*), which, however, may well belong to an earlier period. Anthropomorphic figures did not yet appear during this period.

The Bronze Age was marked by flourishing of rock art traditions in the region. No other period is represented in the petroglyphs of the Mongolian Altai with so many images, such richness of plots, such variety of characters, and number of realities embodied in the art. This is also true for other regions of the mountain and steppe belt of Eurasia. However, the petroglyphs of the Mongolian Altai show completely unique motifs, compositions, and characters, which represent mythological subjects and ideological beliefs of the authors of this tremendous array of rock art imagery.

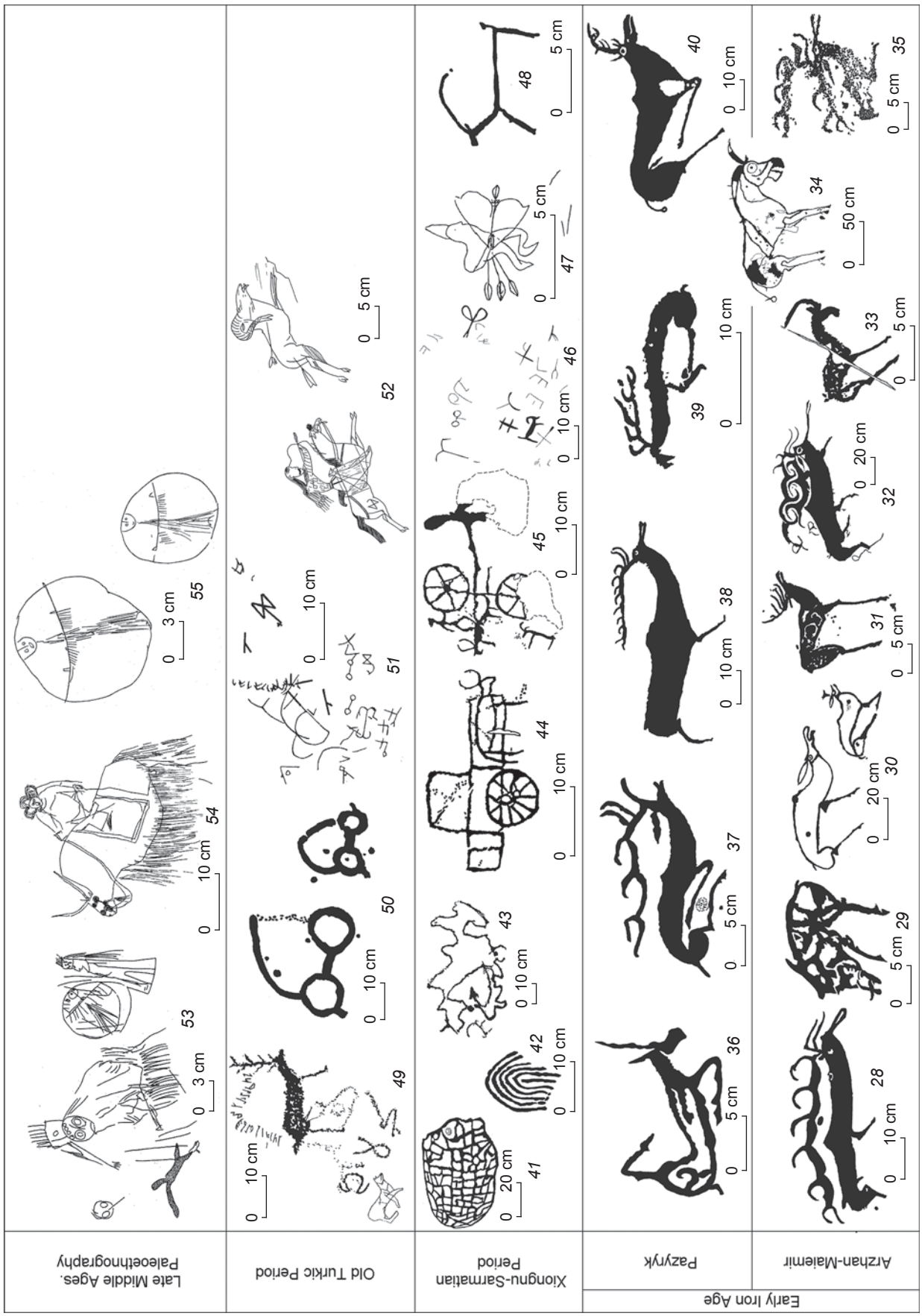
The characters include both domestic and wild animals repeatedly represented in hunting scenes (bulls, deer, mountain goats, camels, elks, wild boars; predators, such as felines, wolves, and rare bears, and various bird species). Domestic animals are horses and bulls. In the compositions, horses are harnessed to wheeled carts and chariots, bulls are loaded with luggage, are led by rein, and carry people on their backs. Stylized representations of dwellings, masks, and human footprints clearly go back to the Bronze Age. Anthropomorphic characters (in hunting scenes and military operations against each other), in different iconographies, with a variety of what seems to be ritual attributes and real weaponry, well-known from excavations, were most often depicted in the Bronze Age than in earlier periods. Various sexual practices were also represented. This subject was obviously related to the ritual aspect of culture of the local population.

It is indisputable that Bronze Age petroglyphs are not culturally and chronologically monolithic or homogeneous. The complexes related to the Early Bronze Age cultures may be distinguished from those left by the Late Bronze Age people.

Scholars have so far identified only a few examples of petroglyphs that can be associated with the Early Bronze Age. Some of these appear in a multi-figured palimpsest from Tsagaan Salaa IV. The Afanasyevo pictorial tradition identified by V.I. Molodin from the evidence discovered in the Russian Altai (Kucherla, Muzdy-Bulak, Uzungur) (1996) was also embodied in the rock art of the Minusinsk Basin (Esin, 2010). At the Muzdy-Bulak site on the Ukok plateau, a figure of deer was overlapped by other Bronze Age petroglyphs, while in Tsagaan Salaa (Mongolia), a similar image was superimposed on a figure of a horse in the Kalguty style (Molodin, Cheremisin, 2002; Molodin, Zotkina, Cretin et al., 2020). It is possible that the rich array of Bronze Age petroglyphs in the Mongolian Altai also includes other images associated with this developmental trend of the Early Bronze Age cultures of Southern Siberia and Central Asia (see Fig. 2, *11–13*).

Representations of anthropomorphic figures wearing distinctive clothing ("parabolic", "bell-shaped", "transparent capes", with weapons, "horns") appear widely on the rocks in the valleys of the Tsagaan Salaa and Baga-Oygur rivers. On the basis of complete iconographic parallels with scenes represented on ritual fences of the Chemurchek culture (Khar-Chuluut-1, Khulagash), these images can be considered the markers of the Chemurchek visual tradition identified by A.A. Kovalev (Kovalev, Munkhbayar, 2015, 2022; Molodin, Cheremisin, Nenakhova et al., 2022b; and others). The scholars have determined the circle of subjects associated with these characters and the pictorial context, which included animals in the scenes with the "Chemurchek anthropomorphs", such as bulls and horses, rendered using special iconography (Kovalev, Munkhbayar, 2022: 87). In addition, the depiction of a weapon, i.e. a bronze shaft-hole axe, makes it possible to date the figure represented on the right bank of the Baga-Oygur to the late 3rd millennium BC (Molodin, Cheremisin, Nenakhova et al., 2022b: 248) (see Fig. 2, *14–16*).

The variability of images, subjects, and iconographic solutions for representing zoo- and anthropomorphic characters, which go back to the Bronze Age, is clearly associated with their different chronology and cultural affiliation. For example, images of bulls are very diverse (a group of animals with massive rectangular bodies is clearly distinguishable (see Fig. 2, *18–20*), just as a group of more realistically depicted animals).


Late Middle Ages. Paleoethnography
Old Turkic Period
Xiongnu-Sarmatian Period
Early Iron Age
Pazyryk
Arzhan-Maiemir
0 3 cm
0 10 cm
0 20 cm
0 5 cm
0 50 cm
53
54
55
49
50
51
52
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
36
37
38
39
40
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35

Bronze Age
Late
Middle
Early
Neolithic
Paleolithic
0 10 cm
(21, 22)
(19, 20)
(15, 16)
(12, 13)
(7–10)
(2, 3)
(4, 5)
0 5 cm
(24–26)
0 15 cm

Human figures are often associated with the images of bulls: most often people lead these animals.

Kubarev identified several groups of images of bulls: made in different techniques, with different types of horns, "spotted" bulls, and bulls "in decorative style", riding and pack, in scenes with male and female characters (Kubarev, Tseveendorj, Jacobson, 2005: 523–535, 579–583). Domestic bulls were essential to the economy of the early cattle breeders, and this was reflected in their beliefs and art. It is still impossible to establish unambiguously the chronology of subjects associated with the depiction of domestic and wild (?) bulls, but note that in a number of compositions, the figures of bulls can be assigned to different groups. At the same time, they are associated with anthropomorphic characters in mushroom-shaped hats.

Anthropomorphic figures also differ in their iconography: the most numerous are male characters with weapons—bows and arrows, spears, daggers, and clubs. Figures depicted in a unique manner, i.e. on half-bent legs, wearing mushroom-shaped headdress, with tails or clubs, belong to the Advanced/ Late Bronze Age (Kubarev, 1987). Armed with bows and spears, they are often shown in hunting scenes, military confrontations, battle compositions, in the scenes of migrations with pack bulls, and in scenes with chariots (see Fig. 2, *20–25*).

The "Age of Chariots" (mid-second half of the 2nd millennium BC), related to the Late Bronze Age, is represented by lots of images of light wheeled carts drawn by horses. The Mongolian Altai is one of the regions where these images embodying the "Central Asian tradition" of depicting a chariot "in plan view", with horses located "back to back" and the charioteer on the platform, are most numerous (see Fig. 2, *26*, *27*). Anthropomorphic figures wearing mushroom-shaped hats, on half-bent legs, with daggers (Kubarev, Tseveendorj, Jacobson, 2005: 577, fig. 87, *20*) can be considered the dating evidence. These weapons correspond to solid cast daggers with handles, which have been found in the complexes of the Krotovo culture (Molodin, 2015) and occur as accidental finds from China to the Kazakhstan Irtysh region (Ibid.). They have been reliably dated to the Advanced Bronze Age. Judging by the parallels (Chlenova, 1976), images of anthropomorphic characters with daggers provided with ring pommels on their handles (Kubarev, Tseveendorj, Jacobson, 2005: 577, fig. 87, *19*) can be attributed to the Late Bronze Age.

The Early Iron Age petroglyph array, against other archaeological sites of this period in the region under discussion, would have been expected to feature no fewer images than that from the previous period. However, the situation is not as straightforward as it could have been. Indeed, very vivid, stylistically reliably identifiable, and very fully represented rock art at almost all significant sites in the Russian and Mongolian Altai consists of numerous petroglyphs in the "deer stone style" (Savinov, 1990) (see Fig. 2, *28*, *32*, *35*; 4). This is primarily an image of a "stylized" deer, which is widely reproduced not only on rock surfaces in vast areas of the region, but also

Fig. 2. Periodization of petroglyphs in the Mongolian Altai.

1 – Baga-Oygur III (Cheremisin et al., 2018: 67, fig. 15); *2* – Baga-Oygur II (Kubarev, Tseveendorj, Jacobson, 2005: 376, fig. 961); *3* – Kalgutinskiy Rudnik, section 1, representation 9 (Molodin, Cheremisin, 1999: 48, fig. 26); *4*, *5* – Tsagaan Salaa IV (Molodin, Zotkina, Cretin et al., 2020: 139, fig. 3); *6* – Kalgutinskiy Rudnik (Molodin, Cheremisin, 1999: 34, fig. 15); *7* – Tsagaan Salaa IV (Kubarev, Tseveendorj, Jacobson, 2005: 224, fig. 337); *8* – Baga-Oygur II (Ibid.: 377, fig. 962); *9* – Tsagaan Salaa IV (Ibid.: 223, fig. 332); *10* – Tsagaan Salaa II (Ibid.: 179, fig. 119); *11* – Muzdy-Bulak (Molodin, Cheremisin, 2002: 60, fig. 1); *12* – Tsagaan Salaa IV (Molodin, Zotkina, Cretin et al., 2020: 139, fig. 3); *13* – Baga-Oygur V (Kubarev, Tseveendorj, Jacobson, 2005: 477, fig. 1347); *14* – Tsagaan Salaa IV (Molodin, Zotkina, Cretin et al., 2020: 139, fig. 3); *15* – Baga-Oygur I (Kubarev, Tseveendorj, Jacobson, 2005: 348, fig. 847); *16*, *17* – Baga-Oygur-4 (right bank, field research of 2019, drawings by the authors); *18* – Tsagaan Salaa IV (Kubarev, Tseveendorj, Jacobson, 2005: 301, fig. 657); *19* – Khar-Chuluu (Kubarev, 2009: 338, fig. 1107); *20* – Baga-Oygur IV (Kubarev, Tseveendorj, Jacobson, 2005: 433, fig. 1182); *21* – Khar Salaa III (Kubarev, 2009: 122, fig. 275); *22* – Baga-Oygur-2 (right bank, field research of 2019, drawings by the authors); *23* – Khar Salaa II (Kubarev, 2009: 83, fig. 135); *24* – Baga-Oygur II (Kubarev, Tseveendorj, Jacobson, 2005: 352, fig. 862); *25* – Tsagaan Salaa IV (Ibid.: 241, fig. 405); *26* – Khara Dzhamat Gol-6 (field research of 2019, drawings by the authors); *27* – Tsagaan Salaa III (Kubarev, Tseveendorj, Jacobson, 2005: 206, fig. 244); *28* – Tsagaan Salaa I (Ibid.: 407, fig. 1086); *29* – Khar-Chuluu (Kubarev, 2009: 319, fig. 1033); *30* – Baga-Oygur III (Kubarev, Tseveendorj, Jacobson, 2005: 392, fig. 1026); *31* – Baga-Oygur V (Ibid.: 482, fig. 1362); *32* – Tsagaan-Salaa IV (Ibid.: 285, fig. 596); *33* – Tsagaan Salaa IV (Ibid.: 264, fig. 504); *34* – Shiveet-Khairkhan (Kubarev, 2009: 298, fig. 931); *35* – Baga-Oygur IV (Kubarev, Tseveendorj, Jacobson, 2005: 407, fig. 1086); *36* – Khar-Chuluu (Kubarev, 2009: 325, fig. 1060); *37* – Tsagaan Salaa IV (Kubarev, Tseveendorj, Jacobson, 2005: 217, fig. 310); *38* – Tsagaan Salaa I (Ibid.: 144, fig. 5); *39* – Tsagaan Salaa III (Ibid.: 210, fig. 266); *40* – Baga-Oygur III (Ibid.: 392, fig. 1028); *41* – Baga-Oygur IV (Ibid.: 435, fig. 1187); *42* – Baga-Oygur I (Ibid.: 340, fig. 820); *43* – Tsagaan Salaa IV (Ibid.: 285, fig. 597); *44* – Khar Salaa VII (Kubarev, 2009: 235, fig. 723); *45* – Khar Salaa VII (Ibid.: 235, fig. 725); *46* – Kalgutinskiy Rudnik (Molodin, Cheremisin, 1996: 48, figure); *47* – Tsagaan Salaa IV (Kubarev, Tseveendorj, Jacobson, 2005: 218, fig. 312); *48* – Tsagaan Salaa II (Ibid.: 171, fig. 93); *49* – Tsagaan Salaa IV (Ibid.: 235, fig. 379); *50* – Baga-Oygur II (Ibid.: 370, fig. 937); *51* – Baga-Oygur III (Ibid.: 397, fig. 1050); *52* – Chaganka (Cheremisin, 2004a: 44, fig. 7); *53–55* – Chaganka (field materials of D.V. Cheremisin).

Fig. 3. Image of a bull. Baga-Oygur-5 (right bank), Mongolian Altai.

Fig. 4. Stylized deer figure. Baga-Oygur-2 (right bank), Mongolian Altai.

on monumental stone sculptures and deer stones of the Mongolian-Transbaikal type.

As follows from the analysis of archaeological realities reproduced on deer stones of the Mongolian-Transbaikal type, this style can be dated to the initial stage of the Early Iron Age, although a much earlier date for the emergence of the image of a stylized deer has also been discussed (Kubarev, 2009: 22). The problem of the discrepancy between the areas of the highest concentration of such petroglyphs and stone sculptures

of the Mongolian-Transbaikal type with the figures of stylized deer has not yet been solved. For example, among a little over a hundred sculptures in the Russian Altai, only one sculpture with figures of stylized deer is known, and all other stelae are decorated with animal images in a different style. In the Mongolian Altai, sculptures with the image of a stylized deer are also much less common than such stelae in Central and Northern Mongolia.

In addition to distinctive figures of stylized deer, the "Early Scythian" period or the initial stage of the Early Iron Age in the Altai should include animal figures, such as deer, wild boars, predators, and mountain goats in the posture of "sudden stop", "on tiptoe", or with hanging limbs. These features correspond to the style of the Arzhan-Maiemir version of the animal style. Large numbers of engraved images of this period were discovered and studied during the work of E.A. Miklashevich at the sites of the Central Altai (2012). Images in this style are also known from the Russian and Mongolian part of the Altai Mountains (see Fig. 2, *29–31*, *33*, *34*; 5, 6).

Surprisingly, it is not easy to determine the rock art traditions of the next stage of the Early Iron Age in the Altai, in particular those associated with the Pazyryk culture, which was distinguished by the most vivid decorative and applied arts. Furthermore, these occur much more rarely than those belonging to the Initial Iron Age. Judging by the published materials, there are only a few rock art images in Northwestern Mongolia with the features of reliably identifiable Scythian-Siberian style of the Early Iron Age. There are also only few petroglyphs from this period in the Russian Altai: these are various animal images rendered in the classical style of the Scythian-Siberian pictorial tradition (see, e.g., (Kubarev, 1999)) (see Fig. 2, *36*).

Scenes of torment and images of griffins and other syncretic creatures are almost absent from the rock art of the region. The inhabitants of the Altai of the mid to second half of the 1st millennium BC were also quite rarely depicted in rock art, as opposed to, for example, their contemporaries, the carriers of the Tagar culture. Nevertheless, a significant part of the images of ungulates (primarily mountain goats and deer) obviously belonged to the advanced stage of the Early Iron Age, or 5th–3rd centuries BC (see Fig. 2, *37–40*). A vivid series of petroglyphs from Baga-Oygur III embody the "Scythian" tradition of combining and mutually inscribing animal figures, according to the principle of the "mysterious picture" typical of the Scythian toreutics (see (Kubarev, Tseveendorj, Jacobson, 2005: 400, No. 1056, 1057, 1059; 635, photo 55)).

A remarkable character associated with mythology and rituals of the Pazyryk people appears in the rock

Fig. 5. Image of a boar, the Early Iron Age. Chuy-Oozy, the Chuya River, Russian Altai.

Fig. 6. Images of a deer, mountain goat, and predator (?), Early Scythian period. Chagan River valley, Russian Altai.

art of the region. This is a fantastic image of a horse, with horns on its head, reproduced on the rocks at a number of locations in the valley of the Tsagaan Gol River (see, e.g., (Kubarev, 2009: 28–29, fig. 931)) (see Fig. 2, *34*). Indeed, the practice of "masking" or mythical "transforming" of a sacrificial horse into a deer or mountain goat in the funeral ritual of the Pazyryk people is known from the excavations of the "frozen" burial mounds in the Russian and Kazakhstan Altai (cemeteries of Pazyryk, Tuekta, Bashadar, Berel, etc.). This character clearly played an important role in the mythological bestiary of the Altai population in the Scythian period. The image of a horse with horns possessed a deep multi-layered meaning (for attempts at interpretation, see (Cheremisin, 2005)). It was used in the headdresses of the Pazyryk people and became perpetuated in the rock art of the region.

Identification of images from the subsequent Xiongnu-Sarmatian period in the region is complicated by several problems associated with a small amount of local rock art. Additionally, there are challenges in determining the stylistic and content-related features of these petroglyphs. First, the traditions of the previous period with the total domination of the Scythian-Siberian animal style survived in the rock art for a long time, just as in the decorative and applied art of Eurasia. Second, it is very difficult to consider such notions as "dynamism", "laconicism", and "schematism" to be proper scholarly definitions. These can be used to indicate the nature of only individual figures or compositions made by engraving or pecking, but not of any significant array of rock images with a statistically representative group of figures. Identification of the Xiongnu-Sarmatian or "post-Scythian" period in some studies shows that stylistic differences, which scholars discern in individual images, as well as style of petroglyphs from the neighboring regions (primarily, the similarities with the "Tashtyk style" on the Yenisei) (Miklashevich, 1996; Soenov, 2003; and others), have been most frequently used as a basis for attributing representations and their compositions to that period (see Fig. 2, *41–45*, *47*, *48*). E.A. Miklashevich noted new (as compared to the Scythian period) methods of rendering animal imagery in the transitional, "post-Scythian", period in the Altai, and pointed to elements of the Tashtyk style in the petroglyphs of the Ursul River valley in the Minusinsk Basin (1996: 40). V.I. Soenov also mentioned the appearance of features of the Tashtyk pictorial tradition in the rock art of the Altai, relying on the forms of bows and arrowheads represented in the Kalbak-Tash petroglyphs (2003).

An accumulation of tamgas, which differed from the Old Turkic ones, was discovered during the study of petroglyphs at the Kalgutinskiy Rudnik site in the mid-1990s. Two authors of the present article attributed them to the Xiongnu-Sarmatian period (Molodin,

Cheremisin, 1996) (see Fig. 2, *46*). Later, S.A. Yatsenko confirmed this attribution, based on the similarity of the Kalguty tagmas to those from Central Asia and Europe: "…in the Xiongnu-Sarmatian time in the Altai, an accumulation is known at the Kalguty mine… with signs that in almost all cases have parallels in tamgas of Central Asia and Sarmatia" (2001: 59, 106).

The rock art of the Old Turkic period of the Early Middle Ages, along with contemporaneous archaeological sites, such as burial mounds, commemorative complexes with fences, and monumental sculptures, is associated with the cultural traditions of the Old Turkic population of the region. Identification of the early medieval pictorial tradition with various stylistic groups is based on reliable determination of the original style of images represented on rocks using pecking or fine engraving techniques, which became widespread at that time in the vast spaces of the Altai-Sayan (see (Mukhareva, 2007)). It would not be an exaggeration to say that, during the Early Middle Ages, a style emerged as remarkable as that during the prominence of the "Scythian-Siberian" art.

Scholars linked the early medieval petroglyphs at the sites of the Russian Altai to the Old Turkic culture and mentioned the plot-oriented and stylistic features of petroglyphs, which find direct parallels in the evidence of the well-dated closed complexes. In terms of content, visual narrations on rocks apparently reflect the epic tradition of glorifying the chiefs, leaders of clans and military formations, invincible warriors, and unsurpassed hunters (see Fig. 2, *52*). A series of such scenes from the lives of the heroes of the time was reproduced using the technique of fine engraving on a rock in the valley of the Chagan River in the southern Russian Altai, showing a horseman with a bow and arrow who hunts and chases ungulates, as well as scenes of military duels (Cheremisin, 2004a). The technique of finest engraving allowed artisans to render the features of protagonists of their works, such as long flowing or braided hair, mustaches, and beards, and to depict armor, such as helmets, chain mail, bows, arrows, quivers, military belts, and the equipment of heroic horses, including real horse armor, in great detail (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7. Old Turkic mounted warrior, Shin-Oozy, Chagan River valley, Russian Altai.

Old Turkic petroglyphs created using the engraving technique are not so numerous in the Mongolian Altai. However, just as in the Russian Altai, these appear in the same rock complexes with runic inscriptions and tamgas, although in smaller quantities (see Fig. 2, *49–51*). Distinctive features of a representative series of petroglyphs at the Shiveet-Khairkhan site in the valley of the Tsagaan Gol River, which was executed in a technique of careful pecking (Kubarev, 2009: 123–124, fig. 278–280: 129, fig. 309; photos 11, 12), make it possible to speak about a special stylistic group within the Old Turkic petroglyphs of the region (Mukhareva, 2007: 195).

Thus, in the Early Middle Ages, there was a vibrant visual tradition with unique local stylistic groups in the region under study. Its chronological boundaries were the 6th to 9th centuries AD. The semantics of the plots appear to be related to visual expression of the Old Turkic epic tradition.

Unlike many regions of Eurasia where rock art developed only in antiquity and the Middle Ages and almost did not appear at later periods, in the southern Russian Altai, the traditions of rock art did not vanish, despite significant social and economic changes. For example, a special area of distinctive petroglyphs created in the Modern period and in contemporary times is located in the valleys of rivers flowing from the spurs of the South Chuya Range (see Fig. 2, *53–55*) (Cheremisin, 2004b; 2008). A completely different picture is observed in the neighboring regions of the Mongolian Altai with rare rock representations, which can be described as "paleoethnographic". This can be explained by the specific nature of the ethnic and religious situation in the region.

Almost all multi-layered petroglyphic sites in the central part of the Russian Altai (Bichiktu-Bom, sites of the Ursul River valley) and in Kosh-Agachsky District bordering Mongolia (Elangash, Chagan) display "popular drawings of the Altaians". In the south, the ancestors of the modern population, the Telengits of Kosh-Agach, who inherited—along with the landscape—all cultural, man-made objects from the previous generations of cattle breeders and hunters, continued the traditions of rock art, which were close and understandable to them. They often renewed ancient drawings, included ancient figures into their plots, modernizing them, and reproduced their multi-figured "canvases" next to or on top of the petroglyphs of the past centuries.

Along with depictions of nomadic life with large number of figures of horsemen, scenes of migrations with men and women dressed in traditional clothes, hunting scenes with guns and dogs, and compositions of herding livestock, completely new subjects appeared. These are realistic images of permanent and portable dwellings, including yurts with people inside, firearms (coulter multuk-guns), sleighs on runners, ornamented carpets, smoking pipes, and some other things taken from real life.

This art differs in its content from the traditional art of ancient times and Middle Ages, which focused on myths or epics. However, the religious and mythological component of rock art is manifested also in the Contemporary Period. The Altai shamanism is one of the most important subjects of petroglyphs in this period. Numerous figures of shamans are represented wearing special ritual clothing, headdresses with feathers, and holding tambourines. There are separate images of shamans' drums. These petroglyphs are usually made by the technique of fine engraving. Images are most often not carved, but simply scratched on ancient patina, and are distinguished by the almost complete absence of desert varnish. There are also polished figures and renovated ancient images.

Modern inscriptions on the Mongolian Altai rocks reflect a completely different tradition, focused on the word and text. Many of the newest figures are accompanied by inscriptions and texts. The nature and content of these images indicate a complete departure from the previous tradition, which was rich in content and included examples of the highest artistic skill.

Conclusions

Traditional stylistic analysis, the most recent studies of palimpsests, and comparative research on evidence from excavated closed complexes make it possible to establish a reliable periodization and chronology for various types of rock art in the Russian and Mongolian Altai. The suggestions about the content and chronological positions of the identified stages in the rock art of the region and in individual compositions and images will be supplemented and clarified with new research and new evidence, which is so abundant in this amazing region of North Asia.

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