

MYTH, EPOS AND RITUAL IN PETROGLYPHIC COMPOSITIONS OF ALTAI

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ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to the problem of analysis and interpretation of petroglyphic complexes of Altai. Altai is known by its significant amount of petroglyphs which are amazing by quality of mastering. Some compositions of Mongolian and Russian Altai are real masterpieces. The authors of the paper make stress on semantics of the plots reflected in the rock carvings in cross-border territories of Russia and Mongolia. The main point of the analysis concerns with spiritual background of the ancient art. As rock paintings are connected with sacred sphere of human life, the main thesis of the research is that petroglyphic compositions reflect ritual, mythological and epic plots. The paper presents three compositions depicting all these fields. The first composition is located in the complex Kalbak-Tash, Russia. The central part of this composition reflects the procedure of sacrifice ritual. This composition has a pyramidal structure with the image of monster on the top, line of dancing men in the middle, and frieze of deer figures in the bottom. The central figure of man has an empty chest that means death. So the whole composition can be interpreted as human sacrifice to the monster (or god) for prosperity. The second composition contains the mythological plot. The composition is located in the complex Tsagaan-Salaa (Mongolia) and depicts the myth of heavenly deer widely spread in Eurasia. The third composition also is situated in Mongolia, complex Nuhun Otok. The composition illustrates the epic legend about the duel of two heroes, which always finishes by friendship. Such legends are the important part of the Mongolian epic stories. According to this short research the petroglyphs of Altai are closely connected with the spiritual sphere of human being.

INTRODUCTION

Altai is among the richest treasuries of ancient art. The region is known for more than two hundred unique monuments of rock paintings and hundreds of thousands petroglyphs which are situated there. Petroglyphs are one of most interesting pages of art history in Eurasia. Research in the area of art history in aspect of studying epic, mythological and ritual background is quite few nowadays and this determines the significance of the topic. Before getting down to the analysis it should be noted that first of all Altai is regarded broadly including Russian as well as Mongolian territories, which are also called Great Altai.

All historic periods of rock art are presented in these territories. The most ancient period - Paleolithic is presented by dotted paintings of bulls and horses in Ukok Plateau, also in famous

Gurvan Thsenkher Cave in Mongolia. Their age is 12-14 thousand years. Mesolithic period (9-7 thousand years BC) is presented by a small number of images in the form of a circle with a dot, and a crescent-shaped and horseshoe marks located near the grotto Kuyus in the middle flowing of the Katun, and some other monuments. Neolithic and Chalcolithic (6-3 thousand years BC) are well represented in large complexes such as Kalbak Tash, Elangash, Kuyus, Bichiktu Bom and others. The paintings of these periods have diverse subjects, expressive images, complicated content. Period of bronze is characterized by a series of monuments on the shores of the rivers Biya and Katun. Except this, the researchers found sufficiently large number of monuments belonging to the era of early nomads and ethnographic time in Altai. It should be noted that the petroglyphic compositions repeat in the border regions of

Russia and Mongolia. That indicates similarity of cultures that have passed through the territory of Great Altai.

Study of petroglyphs in the Great Altai shows some common traits which form compositional structure of each petroglyph. The first feature is a lack of chaos in the interaction of basic compositional elements. Even in small fragments the plot is clear, figures are closely linked. So we can speak about something like supertask which had been set by the ancient artist before he applied images to stone. The second feature is that the petroglyphic composition is fully subdued to material, namely, the plane of the stone. Often the story of composition depends on the rock texture and shape of the stone which it is applied to. And, finally, the third feature that should be noted is special rhythm of petroglyphic compositions, or even musical character. Repeating of images, plots, abundance of frieze motifs - all these together cement the rock paintings.

Researches in the field of ancient art, namely petroglyphs relate to several problems. First, the rock carvings are a source of historical and archaeological researches which illustrates historical and cultural processes of the ancient periods. Second, the rock paintings are integral part of religious practice. However, it is important to interpret the rock paintings as works of art from the point of the problem of reflection the main mythological, epic and ritual plots in compositional decision of rock paintings.

As for the Altai petroglyphs, their study has been going on for two centuries already. The most fundamental are the works of A.P. Okladnikov, V.D.Kubarev, E.A.Novgorodova etc. This works deal with historical foundations of each composition, also concerns to some ethnographic features. We'll try to study deeper the connection between compositions of mentioned complexes and mythological, epic and ritual background. Myth, epos and ritual are the most ancient forms of peoples' spiritual life. All these forms have

different types of connections with Heavens, world of Gods.

As examples, we can consider fragments of petroglyphs located on the territory of Altai - Nuhun Otok and Tsagaan Salaa (Mongolia) and Kalbak Tash (Russia). We'll begin with ritual background and the most bright example of ritual depiction is the central part of the complex known as Kalbak Tash (pic. 1, 2), located in the Altai Republic (Russia). The plot is based on the ritual actions, sacrifice. The composition has a pyramid structure, the highest point of which is the image of fantastic creature, so-called "monster". Pyramidal structure specifies the composition as striving upward to the sky, to the higher realms of existence. In this case, the monster can be seen as a deity of sacrifice.



Picture 1. Kalbak-Tash. Central part (graphic copy)

Furthermore, horizontal division of the composition allows to clearly identify three levels. First level - monster image is symbolic marking of the celestial world. The second level is the world of human beings. Here the very scene of sacrifice lies. The figures of dancing (marching) people are almost identical, their location sets the rhythm and movement of the composition. The central figure is the largest, and can be interpreted as the most significant. Here we can recall the ancient Egyptian reliefs where the most significant figure of the pharaoh was the largest. An empty chest of

the central figure symbolizes the lack of soul or life. This man is sacrificed to the deity.



Picture 2 Kalbak-Tash. Central part (photo)

The whole composition is clearly divided into two parts by hidden vertical formed by the central figure and the figure of the monster. It's interesting that the monster is placed vertically as if it descends from heaven to earth, thereby maintaining this vertical.

And finally, the third level – a graceful frieze of deers which can have several interpretations. For example, in this case, deer can symbolize abundance bestowed by heavenly deity in exchange for the victim. Movement of the figures in the frieze begins clearly from the conventional vertical which once again emphasizes the importance of reflected events and focuses attention on it.

So we can see that the structure and process of the sacrifice ritual is clearly depicted in the composition. The dynamics of the ritual actions are rhythmically organized and we can observe the whole procedure.

As an example of mythological plot in rock painting we can mention the composition in the complex Tsagaan-Salaa (Mongolia). It reflects a myth about the heavenly deer. The fact that this mythologem is widely spread in Eurasia is pointed out by A.Golan [Golan, p.40]. The idea of the myth is that the deer – golden horns is running across the sky (in some cases it can be an elk or a horse) and a hunter (a predator) catches and kills it.

Then the deer can resurrect which means sunrise, red sunset is associated with the blood of killed deer. One can often come across this plot in Altai. In the presented composition the deer surrounded by dogs is depicted in the center, lower and on the left, there are archers. (pic.3).



Picture 3 Tsagaan Salaa. A scene of sacril hunting.

There are a number of details, which prove that this composition is of mythological but not everyday character. Above all, the deer is a dominant of the whole picture, it is oversized and it seems to be drawing all movement in the composition. At the same time, the figure of the deer is static in spite of the overall dynamics. The primeval artist masterfully depicted running dogs, targeting archers but the huge deer seems to be excluded from this action. The spectator realizes that it is not just a deer. It is especially clear because petroglyphic complexes in Altai have preserved wonderful hunting images the structure of which differs considerably. It is not a mere hunting, but a sacrifice, a sacril action.

And the plot concerning the epic story is also can be met in petroglyphs of Altai and here let us look at the composition from complex Nuhun Otok (Mongolia) which was conditionally designated as "War". It is a multi-figure composition with several recurring motifs: schematically depicted archers isolated and paired (shooting at each other), large images of four goats, extending downward through the entire composition. "War" of Nuhun Otok belongs to sufficiently spread plots in petroglyphs of Mongolia. A.P. Okladnikov describes the fragment of Havtsgayt composition

in which "male archers with "tails" were minted and sent arrows at each other" [Okladnikov, 1981:76]. The author calls this piece "battle composition" [ibid.] The authors of the monograph "Petroglyphs of Tsagaan -Salaa and Baga Oygur " made on the basis of studies conducted in Altai, conclude that "there are no wider war battle pictures , but there are several fight scenes with opposing soldiers shooting each other with bows and arrows" [Kubarev etc. 2005:86] in Altai petroglyphs. Analyzing complexes of Tsagaan -Salaa and Baga-Oygur authors of the monograph notes that the petroglyphs, united by the theme of war and military matters, relates to Bronze Age and early Middle Ages. These carvings allow to research complex of weapons of ancient warriors of Altai and determine the chronology of composition, reveal semantics of images and plots [there same]. The composition is as follows: two archers stand opposite each other, they are almost identical. Moreover, the ancient artist unites two figures, creating, on the one hand, somewhat sign or symbol, and, on the other hand, matching equality of opposing sides. The archers shoot at each other, and this scene is repeated several times in the composition, but the point of victory or defeat of one side is not reflected.



Picture 4 Nuhun Otok. Archers.

Figures remain fixed symbolizing balance of the powers. In other words, two archers shooting each other are not the enemies but guarantors of peace and tranquility. This interpretation is confirmed by the analysis of the epics which according to

some researchers [Okladnikov] it emerged in Bronze Age or late Neolithic. Several epic stories in Western Mongolian contain a duel of two heroes which ends by friendship and fraternization. Such plots are described by Russian scientist B.Ya. Vladimirtsov.

So in conclusion we can say following. According to this short research the petroglyphs of Altai are closely connected with the spiritual sphere of human being. Basing on these examples we showed how the sacred plots reflected in rituals, epos and myth became the plots of petroglyphic compositions. This proves the significant position of the rock-carving art in primeval societies.

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