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MYTHS AND RITUALS IMPRESSED IN PETROGLYPHS OF THE ALTAI

Introduction

The Altai is well known for its unique archeological monuments, and numerous petroglyphs are especially prominent among them. Both the location of the petroglyphs along the ancient paths of the nomads and on high-mountain passes across the snow-clad ridges of the Altai, as well as their concentration in particular places, once again confirm our hypothesis that mountain “temples” under the open sky have existed since early antiquity. The dominant center in these “temples” was often represented by peculiar animal “iconostases” that had the largest depictions of animals of different sexes carved on them (Fig. 1). These monuments are characterized by their location on high places and by the depictions on vertical surfaces of separate rocks that are distinguished by their shape which are visible from a great distance (Kubarev, 2001: 77). Areas paved with stones, circular and square-shaped constructions of boulder or slate slabs put on their sides – “stone boxes” – are located at the bases of these rocks. These structures undoubtedly served as altars for sacrifices and rituals in front of sacred, possibly totemic, animal representations. One such rare complex that we discovered in the 1970s is situated near the village of Kosh-Agach on the right bank of the Chagan-Burgazy River. It is noticeable because of the prominent separately standing mountain, Zhalgyz-Tobe, which is thrown into bold relief in the southern part of the Chuya steppe. From afar, the shape of the mountain’s sandstone stacks resembles a pyramid. Yet when approaching the mountain from the south, one can well see that the rocks are not that uniform: they form a kind of amphitheater created by nature. Inside,

a recently built winter hut stands, well sheltered from the wind and inclement weather of all seasons. This location, convenient in all respects, had certainly been selected by the nomads in ancient times. Testimony to this assumption is provided by the debris of pottery and Neolithic stone instruments which we have found around the mountain. Rock drawings, one Ancient Turkic runic inscription, several steles, and Bronze Age graves around the upper portion of the location confirm our suggestion. The Zhalgyz-Tobe complex bears an obvious resemblance to the “amphitheater” and “iconostasis” from Turu-Alty (the right bank of the Barbugazy River). A distinctive feature of the Zhalgyz-Bobe open-air complex is its great acoustic conditions. Here, even soft voices uttered from the top of the mountain are sufficiently magnified as to be audible at the foot of the mountain. It is reasonable to suppose that people of ancient times also noticed this natural phenomenon, and perhaps used it for some ritual purpose, or for prayers connected with the widespread Asian cult of mountains and individual peaks distinguished by their unusual shape and solitary position in semidesert areas.

For the last decade, a small team of Russian, Mongolian, and American specialists have worked in the Altai and Mongolia. As part of the Altai Project, they have conducted systematic research on the petroglyphs dated from the Neolithic to the modern ethnographic period. In previous years, this team discovered and explored several important monuments of petroglyphic art. New graphic materials allow us to address such complicated issues as the reconstruction of the mythology and beliefs of the most ancient animal-breeders of Central Asia.



Fig. 1. Petroglyphic composition with deer figures.
Tutu-Alty. Russian Altai.

Astral symbolism in the art of ancient nomads

In Early Bronze Age Altai and Mongolia, artists (shamans or mediators?) often endowed the domestic and wild animals that they depicted with sacred functions. For this purpose they invented a simple method of marking sacred animals with various magical symbols drawn near the depictions, which were directly connected with astral symbolism and primitive magic. Such compositions recall pictographic writing. In some cases it is possible to sufficiently interpret the narrative subjects of rituals and ceremonial actions that took place thousands of years ago, or even to get close to deciphering some of the mythological beliefs of the ancient population of the Altai Mountains.

A great deal of the sacralized petroglyphic depictions appear in the Middle Bronze Age and in the period of ancient nomads. In the



Fig. 2. Representations of sun-horned animals.
1 – 6, 8, 10, 12 – Tsagaan-Salaa/Baga-Oigur, 7 – Shiveet-Khairkhan,
11 – Khar-Chuluu (Mongolian Altai); 9 – Irbistu (Russian Altai).



Fig. 3. Representations of various animals with astral symbols on horns, bodies, and tails.
1 – 3, 11 – Kalbak-Tash, 7, 16 – Elangash (Russian Altai); 4, 5, 8 – 10, 12, 14, 18 – Tsagaan-Salaa/Baga-Oigur, 6, 17 – Shiveet-Khairkhan, 13, 15, 19, 20 – Tsagaan-Gol (Mongolian Altai).

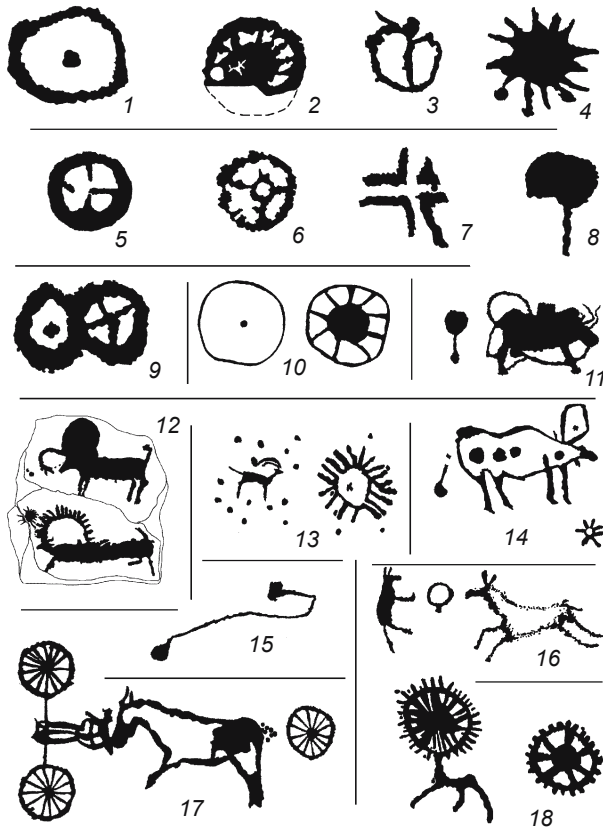


Fig. 4. Astral signs and symbols of various forms.
1 – 8, 17 – Tsagaan-Salaa/Baga-Oigur, 9, 12, 13, 18 – Tsagaan-Gol,
10, 11, 15, 16 – Khar-Salaa (Mongolian Altai); 14 – Irbistu
(Russian Altai).

Altai and Mongolia, these are mostly represented by symbols in the form of discs, rings, and spirals included in the context of large compositions of animal forms, or discs with rays on animal horns, bodies, and tails (Fig. 2 – 4). Exactly the same figurative elements are present in small-scale plastic art from the mounds of Ulandryk and Yustyd (Chuya steppe), though these are combined in a different way: the symbol of a luminary (a sun or moon ?) in the form of a disc is gripped between the hoofs of a running deer (Fig. 5), or represented with a bas-relief spiral inscribed in the hip of a ram (Fig. 6), or as a globe-shaped stand for a figurine of a celestial horse which served as a decoration for a woman's metal hairpin (Fig. 7). The symbolical connection between wooden figures of various animals and the sun, and/or the celestial sphere, is even more reinforced by covering these items with sheet gold. In our view, it is quite clear that the depiction of one and the same mythological personage in different media required completely different stylistic methods and technical means. If the sacred essence of zoomorphic representations in woodwork was marked either by gilding, or through different astral symbols



Fig. 5. Wooden figurine of a deer – main decoration of a sacred head-dress. Pazyryk culture. Ulandryk IV, mound 5. Russian Altai.



Fig. 6. Wooden tips of a torque in the form of rams in bas-relief. Pazyryk culture. Barburgazy I, mound 18. Russian Altai.

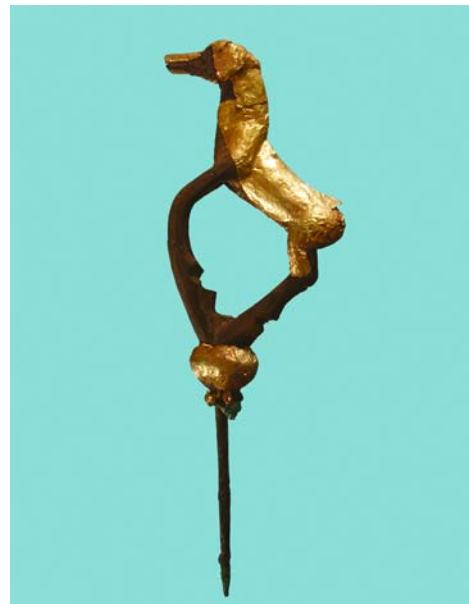


Fig. 7. Bronze hairpin decorated with horse figurine on a globe-shaped stand. Pazyryk culture. Ulandryk IV, mound 2. Russian Altai.

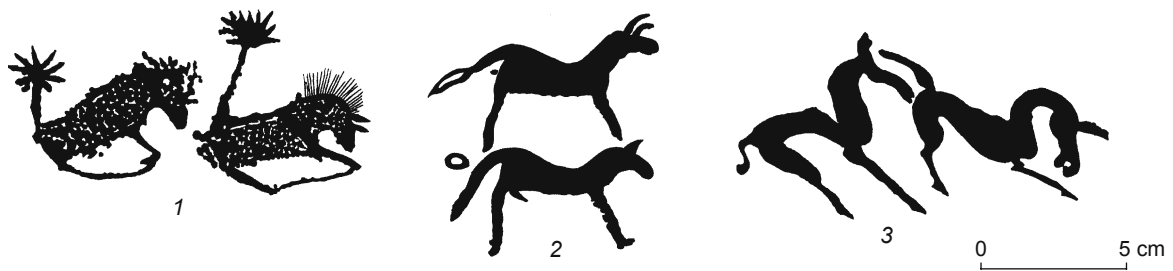


Fig. 8. Representations of paired horse figures on petroglyphs.
1 – Kalbak-Tash (Russian Altai); 2, 3 – Tsagaan-Salaa/Baga-Oigur (Mongolian Altai).



Fig. 9. Representations of winged horses on petroglyphs.
1, 2 – Elangash (Russian Altai); 3 – Shiveet-Khairkhan (Mongolian Altai).

on animals' cruppers, on stone surfaces these symbols were merely carved or pecked, thereby narrowly limiting the creative opportunities available to ancient artists. Nevertheless, the representations of "celestial" horses also occur among the petroglyphs of the Altai. We can point to a drawing in Kalbak-Tash where globes with rays are shown at the ends of the lifted tails of two horses (Fig. 8, 1). This gives us every reason to consider this representation as sacred since there can be no doubt that its subjects belong to the celestial realm. Two drawings are known among the petroglyphs of Elangash (Fig. 9, 1, 2), where a triangular-shaped projection is pecked onto the backs of horses. This projection is associated with a bird's wing. A similar drawing can be found among the petroglyphs of the Shiveet-Khairkhan Mountain in the Mongolian Altai (Fig. 9, 3). On the other hand, the triangular projection on the horse's back might be an unfinished depiction of a horseman. Among several dozen equine figurines from the mounds of the Chuya steppe, only one (from Ulandryk) has been lacerated to make a slot for the insertion of wings (Fig. 10) (Kubarev, 1987: 108).

If we compare petroglyphic drawings with miniature wooden figurines from the burials of the Pazyryk culture, we can identify one more regular feature: the horses were quite often depicted in pairs. Sometimes they are of different sexes (cf. Fig. 8, 2; 11), in other instances they look absolutely the same without obvious sexual characteristics (cf. Fig. 8, 3, and 12). The image of horses in pairs is also common in depictions from Katanda and Ulandryk. A pair of realistic horse figures was found in the mounds of Barburgazy. One

of them has an emphatically distinguished phallus (see Fig. 11). Is it possible that in such paired representations a stallion and a mare were implied? If this is the case, we have to suppose that, according to the beliefs of ancient nomads, such animal pairs accompanying the dead to the other world were meant to graze there on an "eternal pasture" and reproduce new horses for their owners. The cult of creatures of different sexes, or rather, the fertility cult, was connected with the idea of a successful continuation of the human race and the growth of livestock. It had already emerged in Siberia in the Neolithic period and remained there until the ethnographic period (Okladnikov, 1955: 305 – 306). The figures of invariably repeating pairs of people, elk, deer, horses, and many other animals of different sexes, sometimes even depicted in the position of copulation, are widespread among the petroglyphs of Central Asia. In other instances, like the paired figurines of miniature horses that can be seen in the Altai series, they are of the same type (see Fig. 12). Such representations should be viewed as manifestations or vestiges of the ancient twin cult. Thus, in Indo-Iranian mythology the Ashvin twins (the sons of the Sun and the mare, Ashvini) bring wealth and fertility to the people. In the Rigveda, the twins appear sometimes as young people flying on a chariot, and sometimes as miraculous horses (Ivanov, 1974: 107). Paired symbols which reflected a dualistic cosmology along with a twin cult are well known in various forms (or texts) in the whole ancient world (Akishev, 1984: pl. VII; Martynov, 1979: pl. 48, and others). A pair of magical horses, Feitu and Tsueti, appears in ancient Chinese myths, apparently borrowed

from the Indo-European circle of ideas connected with miraculous celestial horses (Yuan Ke, 1965: 225, 246). The twin cult among cattle-breeders can be observed in the Kazakh heroic epics that tell us about the sacrifice of the twin-born horses (Koblandy-Batyr, 1975: 260). The twin motive in the form of paired horse heads is reflected in many figurative objects of the Eurasian peoples. These objects cannot be mentioned here due to their great number.

In the collection of Altai horse figurines, one may see individual items which directly pertain to the celestial cult and the cult of luminaries. The horses are represented on a globe-shaped stand that symbolizes the radiant sun. Their pronounced connection to the sun is emphasized by the gold that covers the entire representation. It is appropriate to remember epithets from ancient sources like: “golden horses,” “horses of morning dawn color” (quoted after (Belenitsky, 1948: 163)). In the sacred Avestian hymns, the sun is called “Like-a-rapid-horse.” Thus it becomes clear why horses were sacrificed at deer-stones and kereksurs (burial structures) in Central Asia, which are also semantically linked to the celestial and solar cult. The Massagets also sacrificed horses to the sun (Herodotus, 1972: 79). Several figurines of horses with comb-shaped bases that resemble a half-moon were found in Altai graves. They crowned the head-dresses of those who had been interred, and were completely covered with sheet gold. This reflects the beliefs of the ancient nomads of the Altai, embodied in these miniature figurines, in a celestial golden horse shining like the sun and the moon. The interpretation that the comb-shaped base is a bird’s head – one more symbol of the celestial realm – does not contradict this hypothesis. This idea is embodied in a more explicit way in a pair of horse figures from Barburgazy (see Fig. 11). Solar and lunar signs are carved on their bodies signifying that they are celestial horses. Similar depictions of horses with symbols of the sun are found among the Oglakhty petroglyphs (Vyatkina, 1961: fig. 1 – 3). O.S. Sovetova, calling them “notable” describes the style of the depictions, decoration, and origin of the Tagar “ornamented” horses in detail (Sovetova, 2005: 36 – 45). A unique pair from the petroglyphs of Kalbak-Tash, with their manes and tails forming sun rays, belongs to the circle of these cosmic horses (see Fig. 8, 1).

According to A.K. Akishev, the Saks of Dzhetyysu identified horses with the image of the sun: “A team of four Issyk horses is a quadriga. The Sun, the entire Cosmos, appeared in the Indo-Iranian myths in the form of a chariot” (Akishev, 1984: 33). Representations of mythical winged horses appear among the petroglyphs of Central Asia (Bernshtam, 1949: 130) and the Minusinsk Basin (Chlenova, 1981: fig. 4 – 6). Researchers are unanimous in their opinion that the appearance of such



Fig. 10. Wooden horse figurines with holes for inserted ears and horns in the head and a slit for inserting wings in the back (shown with an arrow). Pazyryk culture. Ulandryk IV, mound 3. Russian Altai.



Fig. 11. Wooden paired horse figurines with astral symbols on their cruppers and front legs. Pazyryk culture. Barburgazy I, mound 18. Russian Altai.



Fig. 12. Wooden paired horse figurines of the same type (the twin motif). Pazyryk culture. Ulandryk IV, mound 2. Russian Altai.

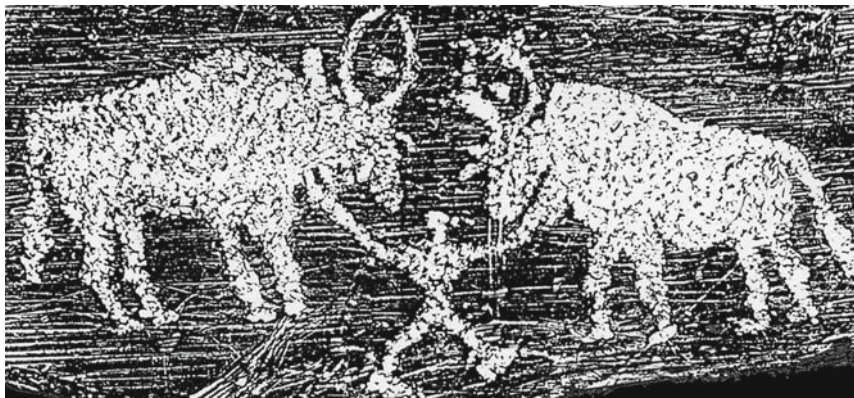


Fig. 13. Scene “Subdual of celestial bulls” copied on micalent paper. Khar-Salaa. Mongolian Altai.

depictions in Siberia was prompted by notions about the legendary horses of Fergana and Tokharistan. These horses were believed to have originated from the copulation of mares from the royal herd with unusual winged horses that lived in a cave high up in the mountains (Bichurin, 1950: 285).

The decorative canon that developed in the period of the ancient nomads, or the so-called “Altai animal style,” is manifested in an especially typical way in the depictions of deer on the petroglyphs of Shiveet-Khairkhan, one more unique monument of the petroglyphic art of the Mongolian Altai. The images of deer are the most numerous here. This is quite understandable since the deer has always been one of the central figures in the Indo-Iranian and Turkic-Mongolian mythologies. The deer’s cosmic essence is clearly highlighted: in the petroglyphs the same ancient solar symbol – a disc with rays – is depicted on the horns of individual deer (see Fig. 2, 3 – 9). In other drawings, the bodies of deer are filled with geometrical figures – squares, triangles, and ovals with dots or even deep holes in the middle of the horns (see Fig. 3, 6, 7). Such signs are also connected with astral symbolism. In other graphic versions of the mythical solar deer, this symbol looks somewhat different: a slanting cross, a circle (see Fig. 3, 8, 9), lozenge, or a Φ -shaped figure located on the head, between the horns or even on the back of the animal.

In Mongolia, as well as in the Altai, many animal representations are accompanied by contoured circles and pecked discs – the signs of the sun and the moon. On the drawings they are located both within the circle, formed by the horns of the bulls (Fig. 13), and above the circle of horns (see Fig. 3, 11 – 13, 15). In some cases, horns are carved in the form of entire oval discs above which a series of large dots is purposefully arrayed, and in one instance 14 rays project from such a disc (see Fig. 2, 11). Solar signs are noticeable in the tips of tails executed in the form of a circle with a dot in the center

(see Fig. 3, 19, 20), or globe-shaped, sometimes of a clearly hypertrophied size (see Fig. 3, 13). The symbols of the sun and moon can be seen in the decoration of bulls’ bodies (rounded, semi-lunar, cruciform, and stellar figures) (see Fig. 3, 1 – 5). In a way, such signs serve as a code-key which makes it possible to identify the cosmic, probably lunar and solar, semantics in the representations of the bulls.

Formal similarity to solar and lunar signs (a circle with an inscribed cross or dot in the center) can be seen in the wheels of a uniaxial carriage depicted among the petroglyphs of Baga-Oigur. Astral signs similar in shape often appear in the Altai as single drawings (see Fig. 4, 1, 3, 5, 6), and at the Tsagaan-Gol in one instance they are rendered as a pair (see Fig. 4, 9). Versions of this form, in which the center of one or both circles has been chipped with a deep hole of projected rays, can be found in the valleys of the rivers Khar-Salaa and Tsagaan-Gol (see Fig. 4, 10, 18), in the latter case one of the signs has a zoomorphic appearance – it is stricken in the place of the head of a very stylized animal figure. It would be reasonable to interpret these images also as signs of the sun and moon, but it is very difficult to prove this, since the wheels of Bronze Age chariots were depicted in the same way (see Fig. 4, 17).

Perhaps, we can also see the bowl-shaped indentations on rock surfaces in the Tsagaan-Gol valley, which appear in organic combination with the figure of a goat and the traditionally inscribed graphic symbol of the sun – a circle with rays and dot in the center (see Fig. 4, 13), as astral signs. Such representation of the sun, now executed in continuous dotted indentation, was found in the same location on a separate stone (see Fig. 4, 4).

Among the rarely encountered magical signs in the Mongolian Altai there is a cross (see Fig. 4, 7; 14) and an oval disc with a descending stripe. The single example of the latter is known among the petroglyphs of Baga-Oigur (see Fig. 4, 8), but earlier we had discovered – and



Fig. 14. Representations of bulls and astral symbol in the form of a cross. Pass to the Tsagaan-Gol valley. Mongolian Altai.

D. Tseveendorj (1999: 131) published – the symbols of exactly the same shape from Khar-Yamaa. Similar signs on a smaller scale decorate two hemispheres over the head of a ram and the horns of a bull in the drawings from Baga-Oigur (Fig. 15). It is clear that these two drawings should be included in the group representing sacred animals that are marked with solar symbols. Perhaps this sign's meaning has something in common with another sign – a rounded disc joined by a thin line-stroke to a disc of smaller diameter (see Fig. 4, 11). The location of this symbol behind a bull once again informs us about the sacred election of this animal and its dedication to higher solar gods. We should mention two more signs of unusual form which we discovered in the Khar-Salaa valley. One of them is a pair of carved bowl-shaped cavities connected with a sinuous line, the other one is a circle with a short triangular projection in its lower part (see Fig. 4, 15, 16). If the second sign is located between two depictions of horses and can be identified as a symbol of the sun and the celestial realm, the first one is not accompanied by any other drawings which would allow us to uncover its semantics. However, it can be considered to be one of the main astral symbols of the Early Bronze Age if it is taken to be analogous to the other “spectacle-shaped” signs widespread among the petroglyphs of Karatau, Tamala, and Dzhungaria. The meaning of such signs and their combinations was revealed by the research of the petroglyphic drawings of Saimala-Tash (Martynov, Mariyashev, Abetkov, 1992: 128 – 132).

In contrast to the numerous animal figures marked with astral signs, anthropomorphic representations of solar divinities appear in the Altai very rarely (Fig. 16).

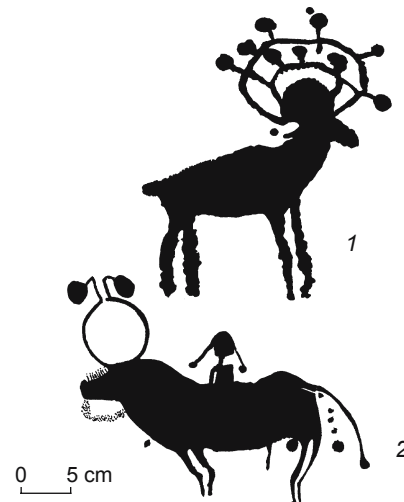


Fig. 15. Representations of the ram and the bull with astral symbols on their horns. Baga-Oigur. Mongolian Altai.

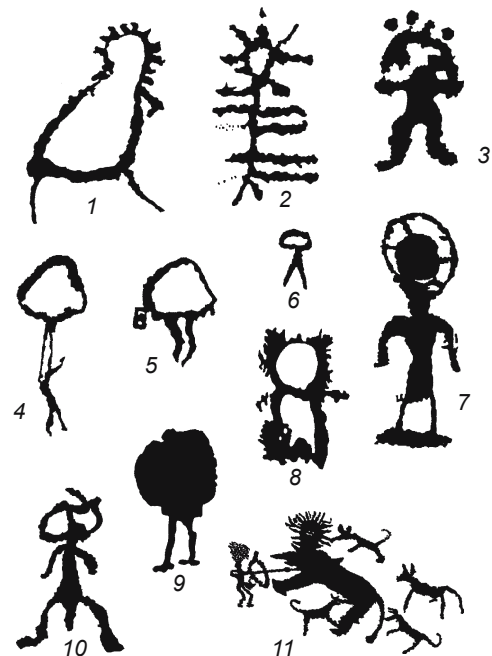


Fig. 16. Anthropomorphic solar creatures with heads or head-dresses (?) of various shapes. 1 – 8, 11 – Tsagaan-Salaa/Baga-Oigur, 9, 10 – Tsagaan-Gol (Mongolian Altai).

They look very schematic, one may even say primitive. The main feature that distinguishes them from the depictions of ordinary people is their contour, or silhouetted head (or head-dress?) of exaggerated size. Sometimes a halo composed of rays of light or a series of dots is shown around it. The sex of these beings is unclear, but the presence of a phallus in at least two figures shows them to be certainly masculine gendered (Fig. 16, 4, 10). A “walking” sun is depicted in a wholly

different way on a single miniature petroglyph in the Tsagaan-Gol valley. Beneath the rounded disc, the ancient artist depicted two legs, but these are the legs of a bird and not of a human being (Fig. 16, 9). Thus, what we have here is a new type among the petroglyphs of the Altai: an ornithomorphic representation of a lunar or solar divinity.

Identical graphic solar and lunar symbols as well as motifs of sun-horned animals, or a “walking” solar divinity, are known from other monuments of the petroglyphic art in the Altai (Okladnikov et al., 1979: pl. 7, 4; 29, 1, etc.; Kubarev, Jacobson, 1996: fig. 132, 284, 467, 508, 616, etc.), Mongolia (Okladnikov, 1980: 68; Tseveendorj et al., 2004: fig. 55, 211, 314, etc.), Kazakhstan (Mariyashev, Goryachev, 1998: fig. 2, 11, 17, 63), and Central Asia (Martynov, Mariyashev, Abetekov, 1992: fig. 12, 20, 49 – 54, 67, etc.). Similar solar symbols are found among petroglyphs in Tuva. They are similarly located near animal representations and are often combined with “masks” dated to the Bronze Age (Devlet, 1998: pl. 11, 32; 14, 37; 15, 20). The wheels of carriages and chariots, horses, and other animals are also marked with solar signs in the Bronze Age petroglyphs of Northern China (Gai Shanlin, 1989: fig. 231, 253, 259, 304, etc.). It is important to remember the numerous “sun-headed” zoo-anthropomorphic representations in polychromic paintings and engravings of the Karakol culture in the Altai. Having been found in closed burial complexes these representations made it possible to determine the period of their creation with more precision, as well as to discern the meaning of several characters from the petroglyphs of Tamgala and Saimala-Tash (Martynov, Mariyashev, Abetekov, 1992: 28). This, in turn, made it possible to acquire a certain cultural and chronological reference point that has allowed scholars to give a relatively precise dating to similar subjects in the petroglyphic art of the Altai (Kubarev, 1992, 1993).

The meaning of the scenes and a reconstruction of mythological ideas

The representation of a fantastic deer at Tsagaan-Salaa in the Mongolian Altai (see Fig. 2, 8) is a unique illustration of the astral myth about the origin of the sun, the moon, and the stars. A row of five “golden” luminaries is depicted on its horns, above its back, and on its tail. Each luminary has from seven to nine rays. The multiplicity of luminaries in this scene (possibly associated with the sun and moon) reminds us of the Altai myth about the brightest stars, Uch-myigak – “three Siberian does” (the Constellation of Orion), that ascended into the sky when fleeing the pursuit of a hunter. The celestial archer Erkhij-mergen who “brought down the extra-

luminaries with a shot” (Neklyudov, 1992: 172) is also connected with the solar cycle of Mongolian myths. In our opinion, an authentic fragment of the cosmogony myth is represented on the petroglyphs of Irbistu, an ancient figurative complex, recently discovered in the Kosh-Agach Region of the Altai Republic (Kubarev et al., 2002). This rock miniature includes a depiction of a bull and a solar sign in the form of bow-shaped cavity framed with seven rays (see Fig. 4, 14). On the bull’s body three rounded spots are carved, which can be interpreted as a depiction of the Constellation Orion, a well-known astral symbol of Eurasian peoples (Potanin, 1883; Neklyudov, 1992; Eroshkin, 2002; and others)*. Zoomorphic representations with similar signs appear on other Altai petroglyphs (Oroktoi (Karban) at the Katun River (Okladnikova, 1984: pl. 25, 5), at the right bank of the Chaganka River (Labetsky, 2000: fig. 1)). These images are dated to the Bronze Age, as is the drawing from Irbistu.

An even more vivid illustration that confirms the mythological character of individual animal depictions is represented by a small but, in our opinion, quite easily deciphered subject of a petroglyph from the valley of the Tsagaan-Gol River. On each opposite facet of the same stone, a figurine of a goat or a ram is pecked (see Fig. 4, 12). On the northern facet, its horns form a solid round disc (moon?), and on the southern facet, the horns look like a bow with short rays. The bow reaches the back of the animal (rising sun?). For a more cogent and correct perception of the solar image the artist has additionally carved a small disc with 13 rays – one more symbol of the sun – in front of the animal’s horns.

One can judge the mythological meaning of individual representations among the petroglyphs of the Mongolian Altai on the basis of a very curious scene which we discovered in the middle section of the Khar-Salaa River. We are not going to analyze the entire composition, but we would like to highlight a large taurine figure with lyriiform horns which smoothly turns into a frontally depicted female figure (Fig. 17). This unusual and original artistic invention, which appears for the first time among the petroglyphs of the Altai, probably demonstrates a direct connection between the celestial bull and the female divinity. Such a new contamination reminds us V.V. Ivanov’s article, in which he writes that sacred “bulls possess a (visible or invisible) sign of their belonging to the divinity” (Ivanov, 1991). The question of whether this may apply to the exact divinity represented in the drawing immediately comes to mind. Archeological traces of the cult of the sacred bull are found in many ancient cattle-breeding cultures. The bull as a personification of

* See (Berezkin, 2005) for more detail on the mythological motif of cosmic hunt.

a god on earth was already known in the ancient Iranian mythological tradition of 3000 – 2000 BC. Apparently, at the same time or somewhat later, representations of divine bulls marked with magical signs appeared among the petroglyphs of the Altai.

One more composition is interesting in terms of its semantic reconstruction (Khar-Salaa VI). On this composition, the bull literally lifts a man on its horns. The man is depicted with widely spread legs and raised arms (Fig. 18); in one hand he holds a shepherd's stick or staff. In contrast to the drawing with the figure on the bull's horns described above, this figure is that of a male (the phallus is shown). Therefore we should offer a different interpretation of this scene. For that purpose, as in the first case, we need to employ data borrowed from world mythology. Thus, an Old-Iranian myth describes the combat with and slaying of the primordial bull by the cultural hero, Ahriman, just as Greek mythology depicts the hero, Theseus, accomplishing the same feat. "Such myths could be connected to a ritual contest with a bull, as well as a sacrifice of a sacred bull" (Ibid.). It is possible that the culmination of a similar ritual is depicted in our composition. Although it is a great distance from Greece to the Altai, such a comparison is more than acceptable since representations of mythical bulls happen to be in some of the earliest petroglyphs of Khar-Salaa. These belong to the time when the first Indo-Iranians migrated with their herds to the area of the Altai mountains and steppes. K. Jettmar called the people of Caucasian appearance "Proto-Tohars." These were the same people whose mummies were found in the Gumugou burial ground (Northwestern Xinjiang). Jettmar suggested that these people migrated to this area around 1500 BC and compared their head-dresses (felt caps with feather plumes), which were well-preserved in the graves, with the feather head-dresses of the "sun-headed" beings in drawings and engravings of the Karakol culture of the Altai (Jettmar, 1998: fig. 6, 7; Kubarev, 1988: fig. 18).

The coitus subject, or the so-called scene of "sacred marriage," occurs very often in the petroglyphs of the Mongolian Altai. For example, in Khar-Salaa VII in a small composition of wild goats and deer, the central and most important element is represented by the coitus scene (Fig. 19). It is easy to determine the sex of the copulating beings. A male-contoured figure with bent legs in the area of his knees has phallus and testicles; the silhouette of a female figure has a rounded belly (the sign of pregnancy?), her hands support her wide spread legs. One more character is present in the scene – an archer shooting a goat. In this drawing, the head of the copulating male is connected to the bow, and his arm is directed towards the back of the goat. With this simple gesture, the artist connected all the participants of the ritual or mythological scene, in which the fertility

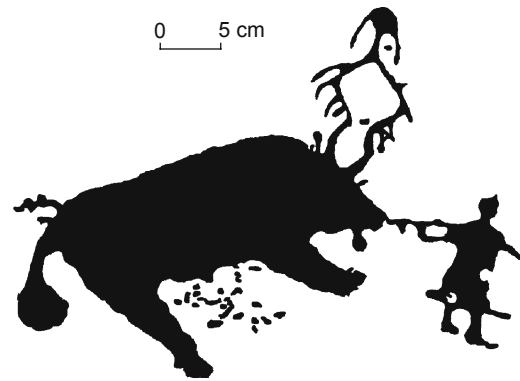


Fig. 17. Representation of a bull whose horns are stylized similar to a female figure. Khar-Salaa. Mongolian Altai.

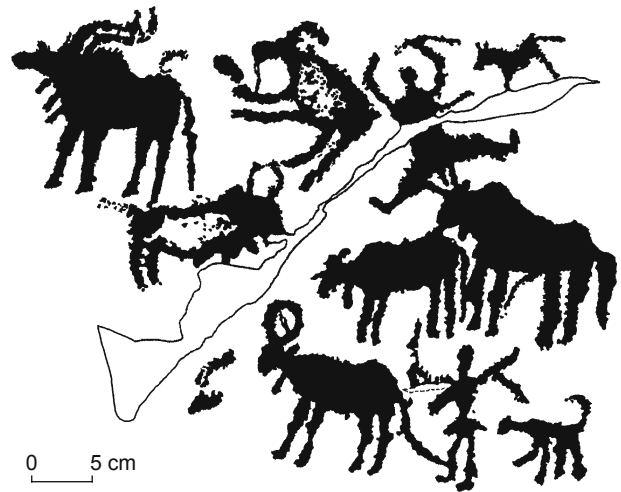


Fig. 18. Scene "Fight with the bull." Khar-Salaa. Mongolian Altai.

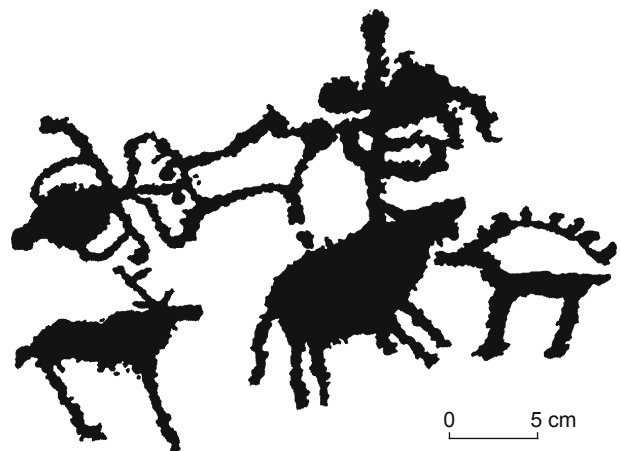


Fig. 19. Scene "Sacred marriage." Khar-Salaa. Mongolian Altai.

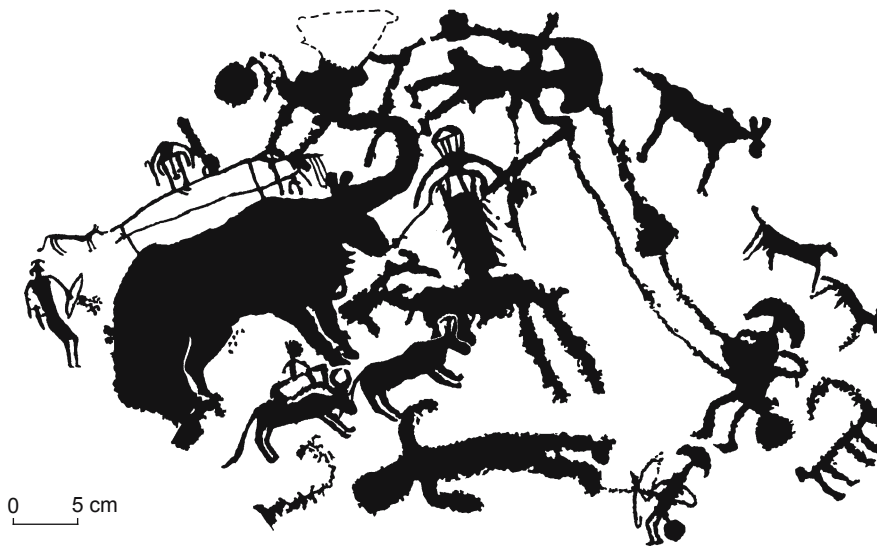


Fig. 20. Composition of several scenes: "goddess" with a bull, warriors combat, prostrate giant, etc. Khar-Salaa. Mongolian Altai.

cult and the desire for a successful hunt are combined. It is interesting to observe that such "records" or pictograms, possibly rendering archaic ideas of intimate relations between the hunters and the proprietress of the forest or mountains for securing a bountiful hunt, were preserved among the peoples of Siberia until the modern ethnographic period (Potapov, 1991: 181 – 182). Another similar scene of coitus is located not far from the composition described above. Here the human figures are extremely schematic, it is still easy to identify a male (the phallus) and a female (wide spread legs) who is probable holding a goat by its leg. In the coitus scenes of the petroglyphs of Central Asia, the animal representations, usually of goats and bulls that served as the symbols of fertility, are often accompanied by female figures. Ancient nomads sincerely believed that the fertility of animals could be transferred to a woman in the mysterious moment of conception.

Another composition rich with pictorial elements is very interesting in terms of its semantic deciphering. In this composition two warriors with spears oppose each other, but the main role is played by a massive bull and a female (Fig. 20). There is no doubt that this is a woman. Her long, flapping clothes, along with her braids and high miter-shaped headdress are all obvious signs of her gender. In one hand she is holding a rein leading to a bull's muzzle, in the other hand she holds an object in the form of stick or staff, the opposite end of which is being grasped by a man. This object may also belong to a man since a half-preserved depiction of a man with a similar "instrument" is known. The woman's legs are hidden under the flap of her clothes and are directly adjacent to a large silhouette of a goat

figure. On the bull's back, a rectangular load-bearing pack of rectangular shape is carved with separate lines. A woman with long braids is represented on top of the pack. Behind the bull a human being wearing a crescent-shaped headdress and armed with a dagger and bow is depicted. In the lowest part of the scene and, more precisely, on the forefront lies an unarmed giant, at whom a person in a crescent-shaped headdress shoots. This composition is unique because it may contain figurative elements of at least four myths which transmit the texts of Indo-European mythology in a very general way. The first and most important theme is a sacral connection between the goddess and the celestial bull. The second subject is the ritual contest with the bull and the bull's sacrifice. The third and fourth fragments are dedicated to the combat of cultural heroes and to the myth of giants. Incidentally, the giant, who is depicted at the bottom of the composition lying in a prostrate position, could also be a divine hero from whose body the world was created. "These beliefs are rooted in extreme antiquity. Great numbers of peoples have myths which tell us that the universe was formed from the body of primordial giant, hero, or divinity. The Orphic hymns of the ancient Greeks describe the creation of the world from the body of Zeus. The Persians had Ormuzd, the Finns – Ilmatar, the Tibetans – Goddess-Mother Klumo, the ancient Chinese – the Titan Pan Gu" (Evsyukov, Komissarov, 1985: 91).

Especially impressive are the compositions of numerous figures from Khar-Salaa VIII, where the main and the most significant figures are represented by bulls, around which all of the events of the mythological scenario unfold. Some of the figures are executed in the

so-called decorative style, others using the contour and silhouette technique. They are often paired, sometimes opposed, or located one behind the other, or one above the other. Several depictions of bulls are distinguished by their great size (from 120 to 200 cm long), emphasizing the fact that these animals have been set apart as sacred over and above other animals.

At first sight there doesn't seem to be anything supernatural or mythical in these drawings. Thus, for example, one of the scenes (Fig. 21) seems to be quite commonplace and mundane: a woman leads two bulls by the reins to a small dwelling (a rectangular figure with a square prominence in its upper part), inside of which one can easily notice two small human figures (children?). Yet the shape of the horns, which form an almost ideal circle, along with additional non-functional decorative elements like a series of little circles on the bulls' chests, as well as the ornamentation of crossed lines on the body of one bull, relate directly to ideograms connected with graphic symbols of the sky. These signs suggest that the subject belongs to a mythological narrative, and these bulls represent sacred animals. In ancient Mesopotamia, in Central Asia of 3000 – 2000 BC, in ancient Iranian and Indian traditions, the Bull is first of all the image of the lunar deity. In Iranian mythology, the moon is described as "The-Bull-possessing-semen," in Sumerian and Akkadian mythology, the god of the moon is named "Sin" (Ivanov, 1991).

The largest bull figure in Khar-Salaa appears in another composition executed on a horizontal surface of residual rock (Fig. 22). An outline of a circle joins the bull's big moon-like horns. This circle is undoubtedly related to solar and lunar symbols which "brings" the figure of the bull near the celestial realm. The rein which is connected to the bull's muzzle is held by a woman (?) in a high headdress. The contents of the scene and its characters' iconography resemble the composition with the four mythological subjects described above. These are also closely related in terms of their typography. In this scene there are

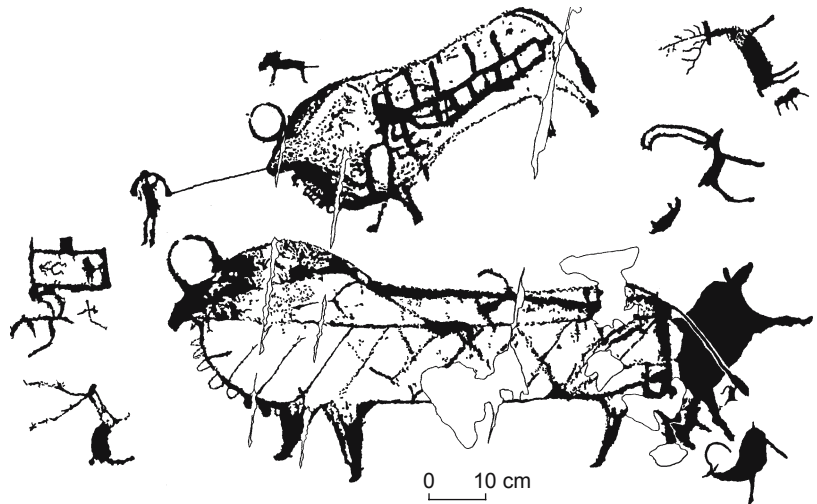


Fig. 21. Scene "Female and celestial bulls." Khar-Salaa. Mongolian Altai.

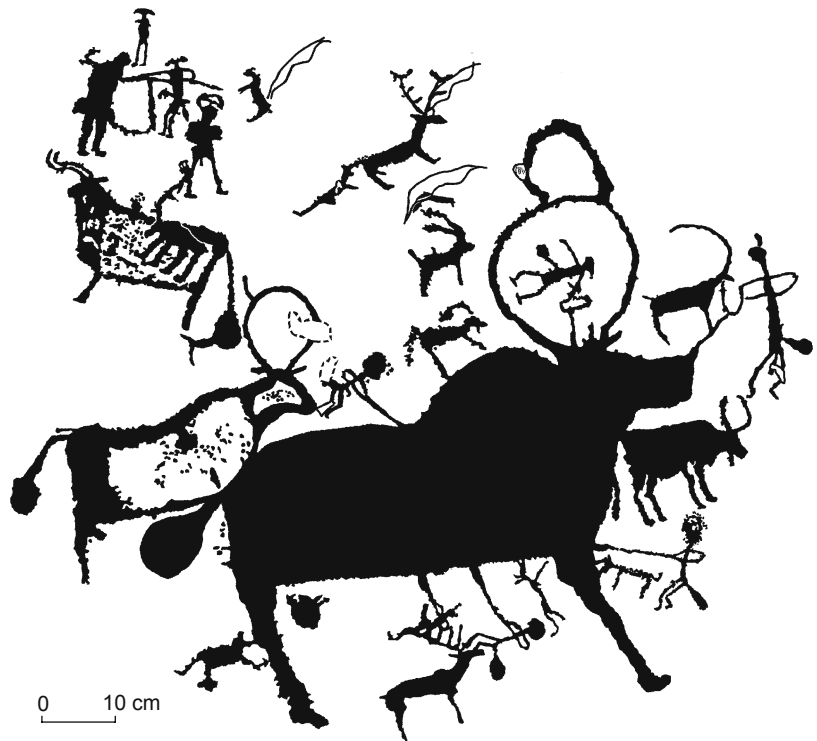


Fig. 22. Composition of several scenes: "goddess" with the bull, killing-sacrifice of the celestial bull, and combat of the hero with the giant. Khar-Salaa. Mongolian Altai.

three mythological motifs: a fight with a giant (upper left), the connection of the female divinity with the bull, and the sacrifice of the bull, in which four warriors with "tails" are aiming their spears at the bull's chest, stomach, and back. The fourth warrior (his figure is depicted inside the ring-shaped horns) shoots his bow at the bull's head.



Fig. 23. View from the east to the location of petroglyphs in Khar-Chuluu.
In the foreground are the representations of sun-horned bulls,
at the background – the sacred mountain Shiveet-Khairkhan. Mongolian Altai.



Fig. 24. Scene “Cosmic predators hunting
for sun-horned elk.” Tsagaan-Gol. Mongolian Altai.

This study by no means contains all of the subjects of the Mongolian petroglyphs that can be correlated to particular mythological texts, but even the ones that we examine here do bear a striking resemblance to the Altai petroglyphs. These petroglyphic monuments are similar in their composition, in the characters involved, and in the mythological content of their scenes. Dozens of expressive compositions with many figures, and celestial bulls, deer, female divinities, and warriors armed with spears and clubs play the main role in such compositions in Elangash, Irbistu, and Kalbak-Tash. In some scenes, men accompany (guard?) bulls, women, and children; in

other compositions, they fight with each other, or even do combat with the giants (Kubarev, 1987; Kubarev, Jacobson, 1996: fig. 132, 150, 284, 449, 451 – 459, etc.). Consequently, the Mongolian Altai petroglyphs of the Bronze Age are undoubtedly close in cultural and chronological terms, and serve as a valuable historical resource allowing us to make a reliable reconstruction of the religious and mythological beliefs of ancient cattle-breeders and hunters of Central Asia.

Yet it is possible that some compositions among the petroglyphs of the Mongolian Altai illustrate ancient rituals or ceremonies related to yearly sacrifices to gods, spirits, or “owners” of the mountains and woods. The sacred location where these rituals were performed in ancient times could be picturesque rocks, called by local residents “Khar-Chuluu” – lit. “Black Stones” (Fig. 23). The total quantity of drawings (both scenes and individual depictions), including previously unknown petroglyphs, amount to at least 250 drawings, according to our calculations. They are mainly located on rock and stone surfaces which face south (Fig. 24). The first drawings were made in the Bronze Age, on the horizontal surface of a giant block that was probably left after the glacier’s movement down the Tsagaan-Gol valley, on the very top of the ridge. These consist of representations of a dagger, a large figure of a deer, and a bowl-shaped cavity. Much later, smaller figures of goats and hunters were pecked over them. If we try to decipher the meaning of the first, more ancient layer of drawings, what we see is a laconic pictogram. It can be “read” approximately in this sequence: (1) deer – sacrificial animal; (2) dagger –

instrument for performing the ritual; and (3) bowl-shaped cavity – a “vessel” for the blood of a sacrificial animal. Such an interpretation of the possible function of the bowl-shaped cavities which are often located on horizontal surfaces is not new; A.P. Okladnikov has already attributed the same purpose to a series of holes on the petroglyphs of Mongolia (Okladnikov, 1983: 33). He writes that “by means of magic they needed to secure abundant prey, to make the animal voluntarily go towards the wishes and will of the hunter in order to become his sacrifice so that the animal will feed people who are hungry and longing for the food of its sacrificial flesh and blood. Yet, it was no less important to consider the needs of the next day, which also threatened the tribe’s survival with the possibility that the sorrows of famine and even death by starvation might ensue ... to ensure the fertility of the animals... and to reproduce; to increase by means of sacred rituals not only the quantity of animals, but also the power of the human community that stood against natural forces and hostile human groups” (Okladnikov, 1980: 97).

Conclusions

Ancient sanctuaries with petroglyphic representations, both known and recently discovered in Central Asia, functioned for many thousands of years and belonged to hunters and animal-breeders. Predominant scenes of hunting, depictions of the main trade animals and armed people apparently testify to regular ceremonies and magical rituals with a particular worldview in the background. This worldview endowed the sun and the cosmos with the ability to reproduce both dead people, as well as slaughtered animals. For example, a ritual reflected in the compositions of the sacred “altar,” situated at the eastern foot of the Shiveet-Khairkhan Mountain, directly points to the fact that ancient people always cared about lost tribesman and the animals they killed, and that they tried to be active participants in a ritual of “resurrection-birth” for both men and prey. This hidden and mysterious sanctuary was also a place of sun worship, and prayers to the good and evil spirits upon whom depended the well-being of entire community, family, and individual person, according to the ancient worldview, were offered up here.

Some scholars view petroglyphs as an inexhaustible source of information on the mythological beliefs of ancient tribes. Others think that they record only real historical events or memories of hunting and the ancient economy. By way of compromise between these two views, one might summarize these opinions by referring to the brief but concise conclusion of A.P. Okladnikov, who writes: “In regards to such a remote time, one cannot speak exclusively about everyday art, or exclusively

about mythological creativity. The mythological realm was undoubtedly interconnected with the quotidian realm, and both realms were influenced by factors functioning as a specific synthetic complex” (Ibid.: 76).

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