



# Rock art in terms of tradition: Towards a new conceptualization and understanding of the Central Asian rock art

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## ABSTRACT

*In contrast to the model accepted in Central Asian archaeology, according to which rock art is attributed to archaeologically defined periods, like the Neolithic or the Bronze Age, the paper argues that rock art, as a symbolic message, is more affected by cultural-religious peculiarities than technological innovations, and as such, its conceptualization and presentation should be stimulated more by cultural specific than archaeological terms. Pursuing this idea several main ethnic traditions of rock art in Central Asia can be distinguished: Indo-Iranian, Iranian (Saka), Turkish and Arabic/Islamic. Such conceptualization, based on ethnic criterion, still requires however some comments. Can, for instance, the Turkish art be understood solely within the context of Turkish culture, or could the end of the Iranian tradition be associated to the conclusion of the Saka times? The new traditions, which follow the older ones, are rarely completely new: they often need to refer to older symbols (both as concepts and as images) and to adopt or reinterpret them. Equally important for understanding the tradition of image making is to consider some hidden aspects of continuity, which are of over-ethnic character. This is the main concern of the paper, which addresses this issue on three levels: (1) long lasting symbolism of some very archaic art motifs, like the image of the bull, which in some historical contexts seems to be a stimuli for new symbolic responses; (2) the over ethnic tradition of Asian shamanism, and (3) the power of places, which chosen in the past as rock art locations, in new (recent or historic) cultural circumstances gain new symbolic values.*

## RIASSUNTO

*Nell'articolo, entrando in contrasto con il modello accettato dall'archeologia dell'Asia Centrale, secondo cui l'arte rupestre è attribuita a precisi periodi archeologici, come il Neolitico o l'Età dal Bronzo, si sostiene che l'arte rupestre, considerata un messaggio simbolico, è maggiormente influenzata da peculiarità culturali e religiose piuttosto che dall'innovazione tecnologica, e in quanto tale, la concettualizzazione e presentazione dovrebbero avvenire in termini culturali più che archeologici.*

*Sulla scia di questa idea, si possono distinguere diverse tradizioni etniche nell'arte rupestre dell'Asia Centrale: Indo-Iraniana, Iraniana (Saka), Turca e Arabo/Islamica.*

*Tale concettualizzazione, basata su criteri etnici, richiede comunque alcuni commenti.*

*L'arte rupestre turca, per esempio, può essere compresa se considerata solamente all'interno del contesto culturale turco, o la fine della tradizione Iraniana può essere associata alla conclusione del periodo Saka? Le nuove tradizioni sono di rado totalmente nuove: spesso si riferiscono necessariamente a vecchi simboli (sia concettuali che figurativi) adottandoli tali e quali o reinterpretandoli. Altrettanto importante per la comprensione della tradizione iconografica è l'analisi di alcuni aspetti "nascosti", non prettamente etnici, che offrono un'idea di continuità. Questo è il principale obiettivo dell'articolo, che struttura la discussione su tre livelli (1) il perdurare nel tempo di alcuni temi artistici arcaici, come l'immagine del toro, che in alcuni contesti storici sembra stimolare nuove reazioni simboliche; (2) la tradizione ultra-etnica dello sciamanesimo asiatico; e (3) il potere dei luoghi che, scelti in passato come centri per l'arte rupestre, hanno acquisito in nuove circostanze (recenti o storiche) un nuovo valore simbolico.*

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Rock art studies in Central Asia, likewise in other regions in the world, have constituted for many years part and parcel of archaeology. As a consequence the research has often mainly focused on questions of chronology following an old archaeological paradigm aiming at 'ordering' the prehistory (e.g. Kadyrbaev,

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Mariyashev 1977; Martynov, Mariyashev & Abetekov 1992; Mariyashev 1994). What is obvious but needs to be emphasized is the fact that this way of archaeological periodization was essentially determined by technological criterion (appearance of bronze tools - the Bronze Age, for instance), and, though it was supposed to be only technical analytic tool to classify the prehistory, one may be surprised how little attempt has been done in the study of rock art in Central Asia to move beyond such an archaeological paradigm (see the recent synthesis Tashbaeva, Khujanazarov, Ranov & Samashev 2001). One strategy, which could be read as more cultural than archaeological, was to associate some periods with ethnic values by distinguishing, for example, the art of Saka times or the art of Turkish period. This still favoured however chronological perspective (the Saka art equals with the Iron Age) continuing the fragmented perception of the rock art 'tradition'. From the perspective of how much have been done in the sphere of chronological studies (it is not my intention to undermine the importance of the chronological analyses), I think it is the right time to try to ask other questions which could lead to look at rock art more in terms of culture and cultural tradition. Following this way, I wish to discuss question of continuities in the tradition of Central Asia rock art, which cross the ethnic and territorial borders and which through times stimulated a dynamic function of rock images. This issue is addressed at three levels: (1) the long present symbolism of some very archaic art motifs; (2) the supra ethnic tradition of Asian shamanism, and (3) the power of places, which in new cultural circumstances, particularly in the context of Islam, gains new meanings.

The oldest rock art in Central Asia predates the first agricultural and pastoral cultures (thus are older than Bronze Age). These are not numerous sites and the clue motif which characterizes this earliest art is the image of bull (Rozwadowski, Hužanazarov 1999). Identification of these images as presentations of wild animals (aurochs) and the lack of features that could suggest an agrarian context of these images is the main argument for the hypothesis concerning their at least Neolithic chronological position. One of such sites, which appears to be of particular interest from the perspective of the issue addressed in this paper, is the Zaraut-Kamar rock shelter in southern Uzbekistan (Formozov 1969).

The Zaraut-Kamar rock shelter appears to be an exceptional site. This is namely because besides the images of bulls (in association with humans - Fig. 1), there are also numerous other images painted on this shelter in later periods, evidently also in quite recent times (like Arabic inscriptions). One painting of a circle filled inside with dots (Fig. 2), which most probably also belongs to more recent paintings, appears to be of special interest. The hypothesis about recent time of its creation is based on the rediscovery of an old photograph taken at the end of the 19th century, just in this region, which presents a village house on the wall of which a painted circle is clearly visible (Fig. 3) (Jasiewicz, Rozwadowski 2001). From the point of view of the form this image strikingly resembles the image painted in the Zaraut-Kamar shelter.

The custom of painting images on the house walls, as ethnographic research shows (e.g. Ivanov 1947), belonged to important rituals connected with the celebration of the New Year (Navruz/Nouruz) in the second half of June, the time of spring equinox. Among a variety of symbols associated with this ceremony the bull was one of the most important. During this sacred time bulls were particularly revered, a whole complex of beliefs was associated with them: bulls were brought into the house, fed on ritual food, decorated.

Comparative analysis of the rock paintings and historical house paintings indicates that the rock image at Zaraut-Kamar could most likely be associated with the New Year ceremony and as such to be created in historic rather than prehistoric times. The state of preservation of the painting and its colour intensity vividly differ from the paintings connected with the bull, correctly believed to be much older.

The original meaning of the earliest paintings in Zaraut Kamar grotto, particularly the bulls, seems to be impossible to reconstruct. But the specific feature of any image is that it can be differently interpreted and be included into semantic-symbolic contexts different from the original ones. From this peculiarity of the image emerges a hypothesis, which attempts to find an answer to the question concerning the reason why the association of the paintings with the New Year ceremony was placed exactly in this rock shelter. On the one hand a stimulus might have been a symbolic nature of the place for paintings, which as such are often perceived by Central Asian people as places sacred and mysterious, thus linked to the sphere of sacrum (so-called mazars). Equally possible explanation could be the suggestion that the choice of the place was determined by images of bulls, which were reinterpreted and as a result valued with new symbolic meanings. Thus it is likely that the prehistoric paintings, although of forgotten original meaning, stimulated actively new social situations.

Another aspect of continuity, which may be traced in the Central Asia rock art tradition, deals with shamanism. The fact that in Central Asia shamanism is an ancient cultural phenomenon does not evoke reservations. But to pinpoint a place and time of its 'birth' remains highly difficult (Rozwadowski 2002a, 2004, in print(a), in print(b)). Mentions about shamans in early historical sources associated with different ethnic groups, particularly Turkish, suggest that the roots of this believing system reach prehistoric times. Since the richest descriptions of shamanism come from Siberia, the territory of Central Asia has attracted much less attention in this regard. But this situation also results from the very rich religious heritage of Central

Asia: being included into the Persian Empire the inhabitants of Central Asia encountered Mazdaism and Zoroastrianism already in the first millennium BC; at the turn of the first millennium BC two great religions, Buddhism and Christianity, had met here; not much later the ideas of Manicheism spread through Transoxania; and in 7th century Arabs brought Islam here. For shamanism, one could say, very little room remains. Exposing shamanism in Turkish tradition might furthermore lead to a conclusion that shamanism was brought to Central Asia from the north by the Turks. The research on shamanistic elements present in different Central Asian nations, both Turkish and Iranian, suggests however that shamanic ideology is most probably of greater antiquity and should not be treated as a Turkish 'import'.

If one perceives shamanism as an ecstatic journey to the source of knowledge then the Indo-Iranian symbolic-ritual context, which dates in Central Asia to third/second millennia BCE, undoubtedly contained a shamanic component (Rozwadowski 2002b, 2002c, 2003; cf. Francfort 1998). It cannot be excluded that this shamanic ingredient had been transmitted to Indo-Iranians via ancient Finno-Ugrians, with whom the Indo-Iranians were in contact in early stages of their history. In the rock art from the Indo-Iranian times we find images whose interpretation within the paradigm of shamanism seems possible. Some of them are distinguished by specific costume features, which till ethnographic times characterized Central Asian shamans. Whatever definition of shamanism one would propose, such features of petroglyphs like: likening humans to animals, anthropo-zoomorphic metamorphoses, dances (most probably also ecstatic), and elements of shamanic costumes (Fig. 4), cannot be ignored as they belong to peculiarities of historically documented shamanism. In exceptional examples one can also find graphic expressions of visions (Rozwadowski 2001, 2003), which might have accompanied shamanic experiences.

Shamanic practices were not unfamiliar to Iranian Sakas of the first millennium BC, who, to some extent, had continued the Indo-Iranian tradition. This hypothesis is supported by ancient writings of Herodotus and archaeological discovery of cannabis seeds in the Pazyryk kurgans in Altai. Recent studies on petroglyphs of the Saka time (Lymer 2002) also suggest that their crucial symbol of deer sometimes appears in associations with images which might have been trance-induced.

The process of cultural transformations, which was of great consequence, begun in the second half of the first millennium AD when Islam entered the lands of Central Asia. The tradition of image making on rocks began to gradually decline. Islam certainly did not have a friendly attitude to worshipping images of humans and animals, and as such did not accept local ancient beliefs concentrated on the cult of nature and ancestors. But it was only an official declaration. The process of adaptation of Islam to local cultural circumstances in fact was more flexible. The new incoming faith assimilated many aspects of old local beliefs giving them a new ideological veil (e.g. Sukhareva 1960; Basilov 1992; Snesraev, Basilov 1995). As a result a specific form of so-called 'folk Islam' arose. It is particularly noticeable in 'valorisation' of places, which obtained the status of holy places (Lymer 2000). To their pre-Islamic roots point, among others, the widespread beliefs in healing properties of these sites where till now people gather on Fridays to read Muslim prayers. Particularly interesting is the fact that in some of these places one can find rock images, some of which at least, come from pre-Islamic times (Rozwadowski 2004: 104-117). Logically, the places needed to function as sacred were sacred long before the advent of Islam, which only changed (or tried to change) the character of their sacredness. Other aspect of continuity in the sphere of sacredness of landscape express the custom of decorating trees or bushes with votive ribbons and pieces of fabric, which one can find nearby rocks with petroglyphs (like in Tamgaly in Kazakhstan – Fig. 5) as well as in classic Muslim sanctuaries (like the Shah-i-Zinda Mausoleum in Samarkand).

This short paper only signals an attempt to find a different way, from previous ones, of reading and conceptualizing the rock art in Central Asia. Understanding of rock art requires understanding of culture and its dynamics as it has been showed in numerous breakthrough studies (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1981). As rock art consists of symbolic forms, its reading should include the position of such symbols in wider context of cultural tradition, which usually have longer 'lives' than archaeologically defined periods. Through time, the symbols have crossed ethnic and technologically defined time limits, stimulating new responses and participating actively in new contexts. More detailed analysis (Rozwadowski 2004) show that some ancient cultural elements, particularly those related to the older rock art traditions, have survived in Central Asian culture, though often in a transformed manner. Even if we concede that the ancient ways of rock art production largely disappeared, its individual motifs as well as its more complex (and long-lasting) symbolic associations were not entirely eradicated.

#### (FOOTNOTES)

<sup>1</sup> Neolithic in the north of Amu-Darya River is only a conventional term - the people in this area had not adopted Neolithic economy in the full sense of the term, and while in south of Amu-Darya true agriculture existed, here in the North the pastoral economy was introduced by the Bronze Age pastoralists.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'shamanic' could be replaced here by 'extatic'. The theoretical issue of shamanistic rock art in Central Asia I discuss in: Rozwadowski, in print (b).



fig. 1



fig. 2



fig. 3



fig. 4



fig. 5

**FIGURES DESCRIPTIONS:**

*Fig. 1. This bull surrounded by human figures is believed to be of Mesolithic age. Zaraut-Kamar, southern Uzbekistan, photo by author.*

*Fig. 2. This oval motif, Zaraut-Kamar rock shelter, was possibly painted in historical times. This pictograph reveals close formal resemblance to the image painted on the Tadjik house wall (see Fig. 3), photo by author.*

*Fig. 3. Photograph of the inhabitants in front of the house with an oval motif painted on its wall (see left side of the photo). This painting is very similar to the pictograph in the Zaraut-Kamar rock shelter. Photo by Leon Barszczewski, late 19th century.*

*Fig. 4. Tracing of the image engraved on the tomb slab dated to the early second millennium BC, Karakol, Russian Altai. Note the arms which look like birds wings, and the claws instead of human feet. After Kubarev 1988 (fig. 33).*

*Fig. 5. Votive ribbons tied to the bush in front of the rock with petroglyphs, Tamgaly, Kazakhstan, photo by author.*

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