

Historic and proto-historic shamanic rock art in Siberia: a view from the Altai

Andrzej Rozwadowski*

Resumen

Este trabajo aborda las manifestaciones históricas y proto-históricas del arte rupestre de Shamánica en Siberia, principalmente en la región de Altai Sayan. Este arte proviene de los últimos siglos y se caracteriza por las imágenes que revelan claras correspondencias con la cultura material chamánica etnográficamente documentada. En particular se refiere a imágenes de los chamanes con sus atuendos rituales y su atributo más importante, el tambor. La atención principal se centra en el arte rupestre del valle del Karakol en Altai, donde además del arte rupestre histórico o proto-histórico, también está presente un arte mucho más antiguo. El último arte se fechó en el segundo milenio A.C. y se caracteriza por rasgos que también corresponden a la tradición siberiana del chamanismo. Finalmente el artículo analiza el contexto social relacionados con la colonización de Siberia que posiblemente influyó en hacer imágenes chamánicas en las rocas.

Palabras Clave: arte rupestre histórico, shamanismo, Siberia, Altai.

Abstract

This paper deals with historic and proto-historic manifestations of shamanic rock art in Siberia, mainly in the Sayan-Altai region. This art comes from last few centuries and is characterized by imagery which reveal clear correspondences to ethnographically documented shamanic material culture. It concerns in particular images of shamans in their ritual attire and their most important attribute - the drum. Main attention is focused on rock art of the Karakol Valley in Altai, where besides historic or proto-historic shamanic rock art, also much older art is present. The latter art is dated to second millennium BC, and is characterized by features which also correspond to Siberian tradition of shamanism. Finally the paper discusses the social context related to colonization of Siberia which possibly influenced making shamanic images on rocks.

Keywords: historic rock art, shamanism, Siberia, Altai.

The concept of shamanism and its application to rock art studies has attracted the attention of numerous researchers across the world (e.g. Clottes, Lewis-Williams, 1998; Whitley, 2000; Lewis-Williams, 2002; Boyd, 2003). This contemplation of the connections between rock art and the facets of shamanism, however, has not been discussed in depth within Siberian studies – the very region considered to be the cradle of its most classic form. Moreover, the very idea of “classic shamanism” often implies it has been an archaic Siberian tradition continuing for over thousands of years. A careful reexamination of the rock art of this region, conversely, provides a surprising conclusion: most of the iconography that exists in tandem with ethnographic accounts of shamanism comes from rather recent times. The tradition of artistically placing images on natural rock surfaces in Siberia, admittedly, dates back to prehis-

toric times, but this older art lacks identifiable shamanic figures possessing known attributes found in historical accounts and ethnographical records.

The oldest rock art in Siberia is assumed to be of Upper Paleolithic age, although this is a matter of much debate (Molodin, Cheremisin, 1999; Tratebas, 2012). A greater consensus is found among specialists for the possibility of identifying Neolithic rock art (Zaika, 2009). The Bronze Age, conversely, is truly rich in rock iconography and, as we cross the boundaries from prehistory to the proto-historic times of the Iron Age, this abundance of imagery continues in different types of shapes and forms (Devlet, Devlet, 2005; Rozwadowski, Lymer, 2012). The final stage of rock art making traditions in Siberia occurs during the historical period up to the ethnographic present. Compared to earlier periods, this art is, however, still little understood and insuf-

* Institute of Eastern Studies Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. rozw@amu.edu.pl.

ficiently researched. As in other parts of the world, Siberian researchers have often focused on studying prehistoric art in search of identifying the oldest images, while more recently made rock art images tend to attract not much attention. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the history of Siberia, this art is no less significant as there are many fascinating cultural contexts that it offers, especially ones connected to shamanism.

Examples of ethnographic rock art linked to shamanism come from different areas of Siberia (Devlet, 2001; Devlet, Devlet, 2002; Rozwadowski, Knurenko, 2002; Rozwadowski, 2014), but the most spectacular spread along southern Siberia, especially in the Altai and Sayan Mountains regions. In the Sayans, examples can be found in the area of the upper Yenisei river basin, such as Sukhanikha, the Tus-kol Lake (Kyzlasov, 1990), or among the natural rock surfaces of Ilinskaya Pisanitsa (Rozwadowski, 2012c). Also in Altai rock images are generally found in a multitude of different localities, for example in the Elengash or Bar-bugazy Valleys (Fig. 1 & 2), but one of the richest concentrations is

found within Karakol Valley (Martynov *et al.*, 2006) in the Ongudai region of the Altai Republic. It is situated approximately 200 kilometers south of Gorno-Altaiisk and follows the Chuiski Tract at a height about 900 meters above the sea level. Moreover, from the perspective of the tradition of shamanic rock art in Siberia, the Karakol Valley offers many exceptional features.

To begin with, the valley offers a considerable concentration of petroglyphs (images carved into natural stone) that, from a formal perspective, provide strong similarities to historically and ethnographically documented forms of Altaic shamanism. Here we find numerous images of human figures unmistakably playing shamanic drums. Moreover, the very fact that these depictions demonstrate strong resemblances to real historical drums found in museums also provides crucial support to the argument that considers these petroglyphs date from more recent times.

The figures with drums are tiny in size, which differentiates them from the rock art of earlier periods, and are mainly executed by the 'graffiti' tech-



Figure 1. The stone stela with pecked images of shamans, Bar-bugazy, Altai. Photo by A. Rozwadowski.



Figure 2. Close-up of the stela shown in figure 1.

nique, i.e. single thin cuts made by a sharp instrument (Fig. 3). In addition, they are characterized by an extraordinary attention to detail, especially with regards to the images of drums, which themselves only just measure a few centimeters wide in diameter. A closer examination of the drums reveals the detailed accuracy of the depiction of their internal constructions, including ribbons or metal pendants attached to a horizontal rod located in the inner part of the drum (Fig. 4), or the vertical handle crossed with this rod and topped with a model of a human face (Fig. 5). As ethnographic accounts inform us, this handle materialized the appearance of the shaman's ancestor-guardian, who at the same time was the spirit of the drum (Potapov, 1991: 180). Moreover, there are also rock carvings that only feature this special element of the drum, such as the one found at Bichiktu-Bom in central part of the Karakol Valley (Fig. 6). Meanwhile, other drums images feature motifs painted on known examples of actual historic drums, such as symbols of sun (Fig. 7). Schematic trees frequently painted on historic drums are also present in the petroglyphs, though

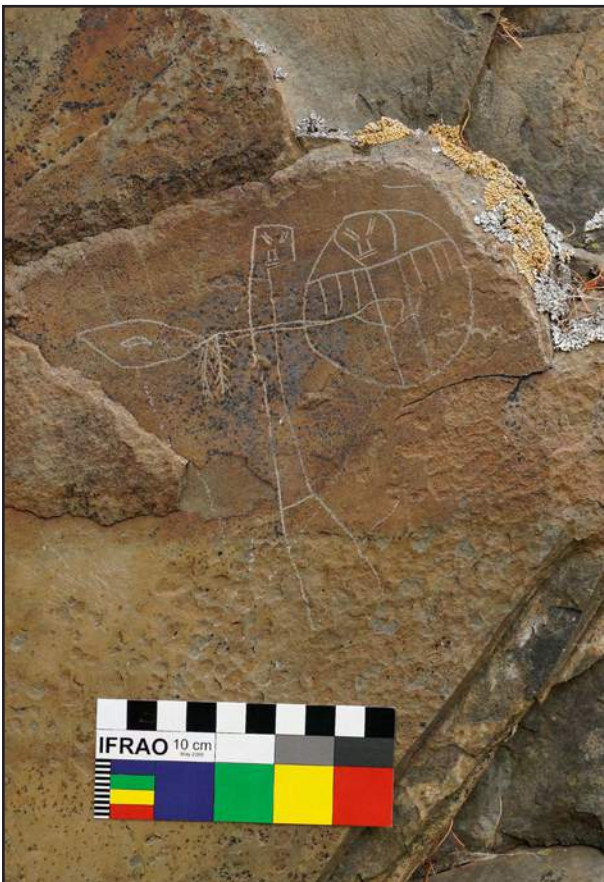


Figure 3. Engraved image of shaman with drum. Bichiktu-Bom in Karakol Valley. Photo by A. Rozwadowski.



Figure 4. Altaic shamanic drum viewed from its inner side, ca. 0,5 m width; collection of the National Museum of A.V. Anokhin in Gorno-Altai. Photo by A. Rozwadowski.

not necessarily depicted upon drums, but placed in direct association with shamanic figures (Fig. 7).

Some rock art images of human figures are portrayed wearing traditional shamanic attire (Fig. 8A & 8B); sometimes their garb is represented schematically by protrusions emanating from the body. The latter could be a fringe that sticks out-



Figure 5. The top of the handle of an Altaic shamanic drum (ca. 0,5 m width), collection of the National Museum of A.V. Anokhin in Gorno-Altai. Photo by A. Rozwadowski.



Figure 6. Engraved image of the host of the drum or the spirit of ancestral shaman. The image has been digitally marked in black to enhance its visibility on picture. Bichiktu-Bom in Karakol Valley. Photo by A. Rozwadowski.

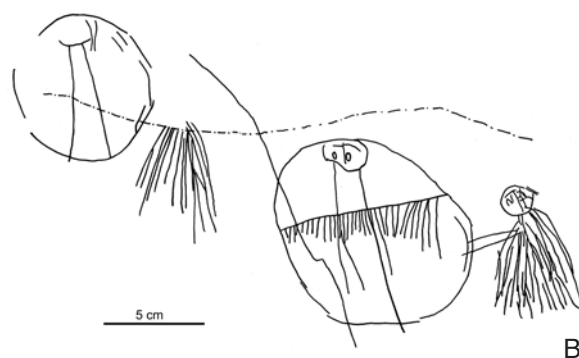


Figure 8. A- The rock surface with two images of drums and shamans (one is not fully represented). Bichiktu-Bom in Karakol Valley. Drawing of the images shown at figure 8B. Photo by A. Rozwadowski. B- Drawing of the images engraved on the rock shown at figure 8A.

ward during the dynamic motions of the shaman while performing a ritual. It cannot be excluded, however, that these lines, at least in some cases, are symbolic expressions of power emanating from the shaman's body. This is seen clearly in figures

9A and 9B where lines spread from the head of a shamanic figure, who holds a drum, and pierces the animal figure beside it. Similar expressions of shamanic potency, or experiences of pain that shamans often claim to feel while in trance, are suggested



Figure 7. On the left – digitally enhanced rock images of shaman with drum, the yurt and trees. On the right – Altai shamanic drum, ca. 0,5 m width (collection of The National Museum of A.V. Anokhin in Gorno-Altaiisk). The arrows show analogous images engraved on rock and painted on drum. Photos by A. Rozwadowski.

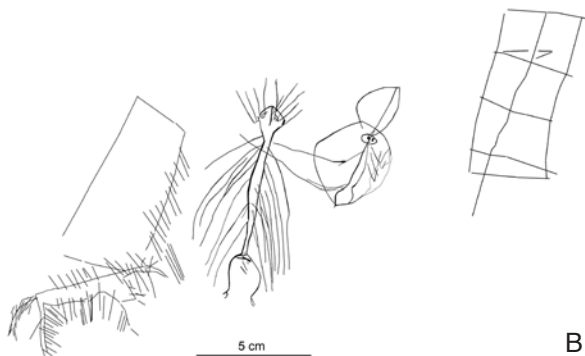


Figure 9. A- Rock with shamanic engravings. Torgun in Karakol Valley. Drawing of the images shown at Figure 9B. Photo by A. Rozwadowski; B- Drawing of the images engraved on the rock shown at figure 9A. Drawn by E. Miklashevich and A. Rozwadowski.

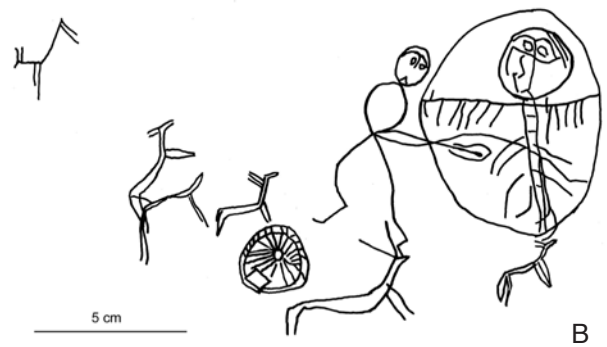


Figure 10. A- A part of more complex composition (see Miklashevich, Bove 2010: fig. 2) with a drumming shaman. Torgun in Karakol Valley. Photo by A. Rozwadowski; B- Drawing of the composition shown at figure 10A.

to be present in San rock art from southern Africa and also in the Upper Paleolithic caves of Europe (Lewis-Williams, 1997).

The representations found in the Karakol Valley often only depict the figure of a shaman with drum; however, more complex compositions can also be found. One example is seen in Fig. 10A (and 10B) where several schematic representations of animals are moving towards a shaman engaged in drumming. The drum is rather large and circular in shape and has a horizontal rod in its center. Below the shaman and to the left is a small circle with numerous radiating lines that is surrounded by animal figures. This circle has the striking appearance to that of a yurt being viewed from the top, as if one were flying over it as a bird, and the small circle placed off-centre from the middle is probably the smoke hole, while the lines are the timbers making up the frame of the roof. Moreover, yurts also appear in other shamanic compositions along the rocks of the Karakol Valley – the one seen in Fig. 7, however, is depicted as how one would normally view a yurt when standing on the ground. The yurt in Fig. 10 may have been depicted in such a manner

to emphasize the smoke hole in the ceiling of a yurt which was, in fact, a symbolic portal through which shamans journeyed to other worlds on soul flights, *kamlanie*.

In addition to rock art images found along the sides of the Karakol Valley, similar images have also been carved into small stone plates dating from historical times, which can be perceived as a kind of ethnographic mobile art. One example (Fig. 11A & 11B) features a complex scene involving several human figures embedded within an array of other graphic elements that are difficult to identify what they depict. Some human figures can be recognized as shamans for they hold circular shapes easily identifiable as drums. One shaman, in particular, is holding unusually accurate copy of the Altaic pattern of shamanic drums.

Another aspect of the Karakol Valley, which deserves our attention, is it the fact that it also contains much older examples of Siberian art found within the context of prehistoric burials. In the village of Karakol there was discovered stone lined graves with images painted and engraved onto the slabs lining the walls of the grave dating to the Early



A



B

Figure 11. A- Stone plate with numerous engravings, including images of shamans with drums – see figure 11B. Stored in local School Museum in Karakol. Photo by A. Rozwadowski; B- Drawing of the plate shown at figure 11A (after Kubarev 1998: fig. 79).



Figure 12. Burial stone slab with paintings discovered in Krakaol in burrow No 2. The Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography in Academgorodok of Novosibirsk. Photo by A. Rozwadowski.

Bronze Age at the beginning of the second millennium BC (Fig. 12 & 13) (Kubarev, 1988, 2009). The iconography may have associations with shamanism in general, or at least with its symbolic codes, which can be interpreted as the core elements of Classic Siberian shamanism. The art of these tombs is rich in the representation of human figures wearing elaborate animal disguises and these figures are also frequently associated with the depiction of animals.

Human heads are often replaced with animal ones in the scenes of art from the Karakol graves; for example, there is a red painted figure with a wolf-like head (Fig. 13). The heads and bodies of some anthropomorphic figures are also 'decorated' with feathers (Fig. 12, 13, 14) and their hands hold objects that resemble branches or, perhaps, animal



Figure 13. Burial stone slab with paintings discovered in Krakaol in the grave No 5. The Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography in Academgorodok of Novosibirsk. Photo by A. Rozwadowski.



Figure 14. Human head decorated with feathers, detail of the paintings shown at figure 12.



Figure 15. Close-up of the anthropo-zoomorphic figure, the whole scene shown at figure 12.

tails (Fig. 12). Additionally, instead of hands and feet some figures possess birds' or predators' claws (Fig. 15 & 16), while from their heads there radiate lines or emerge animal horns. One figure, in particular, spreads its arms that seem to be adorned with ribbon-like elements, *bakhroma* (Fig. 16), which look similar to shamans' coats preserved in ethnographic collections, and below its arms there are figures of a wild goat and a bird. Overall, all the features discussed above correspond symbolically with the idea of zoomorphic transformation that is the characteristic of Siberian shamanism: disguises that identify a human being with a certain type of animal or bird, the universal metaphor of shamanic flight in Siberia (Pavlińskaia, 1994).

The art of the Karakol graves is also significant from a chronological point of view as they are solidly anchored to archaeological contexts. Rock paintings or engravings, unfortunately, are commonly devoid of such contexts, so their age often remains a matter of conjecture. However, a relationship between the rock art and the funerary art of the Early Bronze Age in the Karakol Valley is possible to establish. Specifically, among the rock surfaces rich in historical engravings, one can also find a few petroglyphs that are almost identical to some of the images painted on the grave slabs (Fig. 17). Hence, it can be concluded that they could be of similar age, and the Early Bronze Age funerary art reflected one aspect of prehistoric shamanism connected to death and burial, while the rock art images engaged with the shamanic potency of the hillsides of the Karakol Valley. Furthermore, the art of the grave slabs code an ancient expression of shamanic experience (Rozwadowski, 2012c), while the historical rock art engravings of the Karakol Valley provide a unique record of traditional Siberian

shamanism. Thus, within the same region we find historical images only a few centuries old situated amongst examples of early or proto-shamanic art created over four thousand years ago.

The question remains to when the Karakol Valley petroglyphs were created featuring representations of shamans documented in the ethnographic present. Broadly speaking, some researchers argue the oldest representations of such a type may date to the first centuries AD (Bokovenko, 2006), while



Figure 16. Stone slab with engraved images, burrow No 2 in Karakol (after Kubarev 1998: fig. 33).

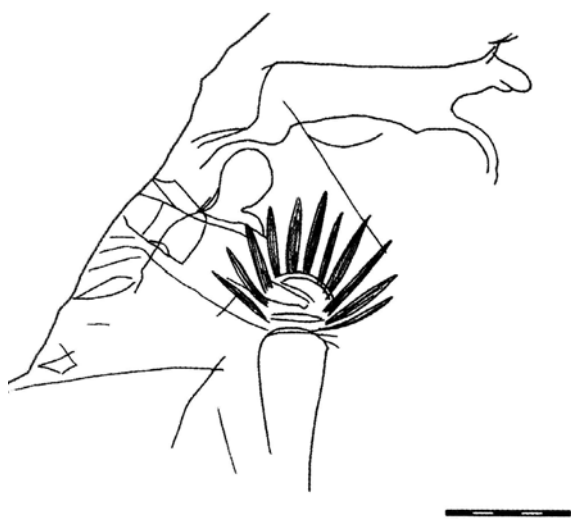


Figure 17. Engraved image on the rock in Bichikti-Bom in Karakol Valley (after Miklashevich, Bove 2009: fig. 3).

others, such as Kyzlasov (2008), are convinced they began to appear in Siberia much later – the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – and are a manifestation of the cultural identity of the Siberian aborigines in response to the expansion of Tsarist Russia.

Taking into account the above latter hypothesis, it is worth noting that when Russia started to administer new lands and began to collect taxes (*yasak*) from the indigenous tribes and peoples, each individual was registered in tax documents. As the natives could not write, they signed the papers with pictograms, which usually were related to their profession. Hunters, for example, used to sign the record by drawing the bow and arrow, while shamans used to draw a circle with an internal cross, i.e. a drum. Drawing a symbol of the drum actually was a common way by which the shamans of many Siberian peoples signed their documents, especially among the Evenks, Yakuts and Yukagirs. One Tungus shaman signed a document with a schematic drawing of a man standing on a horse and holding a drum (Sipchenko, 1965: 178-204). The drum was, thus, a sign by which shamans used to identify their office. On the one hand, it clearly demonstrates the significance of this instrument as a symbol of shamanic practice, while, on the other hand, it allows us to argue that a mark used for signing official bureaucratic paperwork (i.e. paying taxes) could also behaved as a *tamga* sign that could of marked out ancestral territories by being cut into the natural rocks of hillsides. Furthermore, this hypothesis is interesting from the fact that the image of a single drum can actually be found in several examples of

rock art. Kyzlasov's hypothesis, therefore, though difficult to prove fully, directs our attention towards a fascinating and new social context of the symbol of the drum in aboriginal societies: one that developed from the direct result of the colonization of Siberia. Furthermore, as we know from other parts of the world, such contacts were often expressed in rock art (Klassen, 1998; LaFave, 2005; McDonald, 1998; Ouzman, 2005).

All in all, the problem of identifying shamanic rock art in Siberia involves complex factors, and this methodology should not be solely applied to the rock art of the historical period up the ethnographic present, though it is this very art that ethnographically documented shamanism in its most vivid expressions. There is, however, evidence that suggests some structures coding the shamanic perception of the world can be identified in older forms of rock art from the Bronze and Iron Ages, such as the iconography found in the tombs of Karakol village (Rozwadowski, 2012b, c). Shamanism most probably evolved in a dynamic manner as a response to new cultural contexts, though some ritual attributes known from ethnography, such as the iconic drum, were probably not in use throughout the entire history of Siberian shamanism (Rozwadowski, 2012a).

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