

***Petroglyphic Compositions of Altai and the Himalay: Methods of Art Analysis***

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***Abstract***

The article is devoted to comparative analysis of petroglyphic compositions of Altai and the Western Himalay. The authors examine a number of plots referring to the Bronze Age, make a number of preliminary conclusions as to how close the artistic realization of the same mythological subjects is, and how regional features are reflected. Special attention is given by authors to such a widespread in both the regions plot as depiction of dance. In order to perform analysis the authors employ a paleochoreographic approach, which affords on the one hand to partially restore the kinetics of the dance and on the other to reveal its semantics.

**P**etroglyphs are one of most interesting pages of art history in Eurasia. Research in the area of art history comparing masterpieces of ancient art in two mountainous areas 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. It can be explained by the fact that most plots in rock carvings are identical and besides archeological research on both the territories was

conducted similarly. Secondly, we think it reasonable to concentrate not only on the historical aspects of petroglyphs but mostly on their artistic and expressive values. Petroglyphs are above all pieces of art, artistic and philosophical synthesis reflecting the outlook of the ancient man. Thirdly it should be pointed out that while the Altai petroglyphs both Russian and Mongolian have been studied well enough research of Himalayan rock carvings is practically missing but for the work of Shimla expert O. C. Handa [1]. 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, D. Tseveendorj and others [2,3,4,5,6].

We concentrated on this subject because rock carvings if looked at from the point of view of art history are a specific genre, which in the framework of ancient synthetic outlook is placed between art and ritual. Rock carvings do not only reflect aesthetic ideas of the man about the world so much as the fundamental perception of the structure of the Universe. The fact that petroglyphs are more of a ritual than of an art character as we understand it is confirmed at present by a number of important points: choice of the location, themes [3], which reveal a sacral character of the image. Besides the technology of the carving and depicting, which requires a free command of tools, sense of materials, makes us think that these skills could not belong to anybody but to someone like a priest. Of course, this is open to discussion and we can obtain argumentation only by way of reconstruction; however, the above said has its ground. If we find similarity in plots, forms and methods between petroglyphs in Altay and the Himalay, we can speak about parallelism of the outlook between the two cultures in mountainous areas. There have been preserved a number of important plots referring to the Bronze Age in the petroglyphic heritage of Altai and the Himalay. These carvings disclose the foundation on which the outlook of the ancient man was based two thousand years BCE As an example let us look at the most bright theme which reflects a myth about the heavenly deer. The fact that this mythologem is widely spread in Eurasia is pointed out by A. Golan [7]. 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. As an example, we can give the composition of the Tsagaan Salaa complex in Western Mongolia. The deer surrounded by dogs is depicted in the center, lower and on the left, there are archers (Fig. 1).

There are a number of details, which prove that this composition is of mythological but not everyday character. Above all, it is the composition: 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 sacral action.

Let us compare with a similar composition in the Himalay. One of the most ancient pictures carved on a stone slab in the form of an irregular square with maximum width of 70 cm. also depicts a scene of sacral hunting. This composition was found in the place of Burzahom located 24 km to the northeast of Srinagar near the village of Telbal, which has become famous for important archeological findings, proving human activity since the Stone Age [1] (Fig. 2).

In spite of the fact that this image is referred by Indian colleagues to the neolith age, we can point out that it has much in common with pictures found on the territory of Mongolian and Russian Altai, dated to the Bronze Age and depicting hunting, figures of archers, arms and type of stone carving. However, from the point of view of the composition the local specific is evident. The Altai composition is more structured and focused. Here like in easel painting one can single out the center of composition and power lines. The Himalayan scene of “heavenly hunting” differs in details namely by the figure of the deer, pierced by a long spear of the second hunter. An interesting detail – two suns draws our attention. Duality is an important mythologem in traditional culture of Eurasian peoples. It is reflected, for example, in twin myths. Duality of the sun is emphasized by double contour of each image. Emergence of swastika ornaments on Eurasian territory exactly in Bronze Age confirms significance of solar symbolism and sun sacralisation [8]. It can be assumed that the depiction of two suns is a reflection of ambivalent essence of the god, more so because ethnographic studies on the Kinnaur Valley have stated presence of ambivalent deity. As for the petroglyphs, the above given example of compositions shows similarity of plots, interpretations, and artistic realizations. We can suppose similarity of semantics.

Let us look at another plot: image of dancing figures. To perform analysis of such compositions it is effective to employ paleochoreographic approach, because ancient ritual actions were often connected with rhythmical and dancing mysteries, which is confirmed by ethnographic data including that from the Kinnaur Valley [the author’s archive]. Paleochoreography is a branch of study, which restores the dancing component of primeval art on the basis of petroglyphic and sculpture images. Scientists from Novosibirsk, in particular V. V. Romm have been actively developing methodology of this study [9]. It includes a theoretical aspect (attempts to disclose semantics of ancient dance, its cultural and evolutionary meaning), as well as a practical aspect (restoration of ancient dance as such by

using primeval images of dance positions). This determines two basic scientific problems: definition of kinetics and semantics of ancient movements.

Petroglyphic heritage of Altai and the Himalay is various and interpretation of a number of plots is much complicated due to their conventionality. Paleochooreographic reconstruction method of kinetics of figures affords to give more exact interpretation to separate images as well as to big compositions. It is evident that that the role of the dance in primeval culture was manifold. The dance is practically one of forms of non-verbal communication [9], but this communication is realized in two forms – communication with each other (everyday form) and communication with spirits (sacral form). Sacralization of rock pictures as such and their locations enable us to state that it is the sacral form which several compositions of Altai and the Himalay belong to. According to ethnographic data rhythm is at the bottom of primeval dance forms, moreover the rhythm is syncopated which has been preserved in a number of folk dance systems [7], besides the dance included step and jump combinations accompanied by noise instruments. In this case, we can regard the dance as an inherent part of human being existence along with rhythm and noise – natural components which existed together with the man not isolated from nature [9]. It is expedient to suppose that the dance as a ritual action disclosed important outlook ideas of ancient people.

The starting point of analysis for us is rhythm and pose, as there is no fixed movement in the dynamic art of dance. From this point of view, it should be of interest to mention a number of compositions in Russian and Mongolian Altai and the Himalay. Widespread figures in mushroom like hats referring to the Bronze Age present a curious dancing image in Russian and Mongolian Altai [7]. There are several interpretations of this, thus, A. P. Okladnikov called similar images found in Eastern Mongolia warriors [6]. V.D. Kubarev makes the same conclusion after analyzing petroglyphs of Altai and Mongolia [4]. E.A.Novgorodova sees them as a certain ritual [5].

The image in ‘mushroom like hat’ on the whole is identical in all compositions of Altai. The figure is carved en face, legs are given in profile and bent at knees. There is a protruded object on the belt (a tail, a bag, and a club), a mushroom like hat (or hairdo) on the head, probably a spear in hand. This image can be single, but a chain of figures seems more interesting, which can be observed in a number of biggest Altai complexes (Kalbak-Tash, Russia, Shiveet-Khairkhan, Mongolia). Let us look at the Kalbak-Tash complex. First of all, it should be mentioned that the main composition is a ritual scene. It has three definite tiers.

In the upper tier these is an image of a fanciful beast (so called monster) ascending vertically. The position of the image makes researchers believe that it is an image of a deity. The middle tier is a row of people dancing and striding in mushroom like hats. The central figure differs from the others, it is bigger in size and the chest is hatched. The size of the central figure, methods employed by the artist to depict

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it as well as the position- right in the center of the composition - all this makes us consider the figure very important. It can be regarded as a victim or as the performer of the ritual (shaman). The low tier - is a frieze of figures of deer heading in the same direction as the figures of people. Analysis of the composition makes us suppose that its main idea is devoted to a Deity ritual, which begs the Deity for mercy and prosperity for the whole community. The three-tier composition can be interpreted from various positions. It can be a three-fold structure of the world in traditional culture: the heavens, people's world, the underground world. This is clearly seen in the picture.

Kinetics of dancers is quite characteristic. The row of dancers gives rhythm, basis of the dance and the pose affords to figure out the amplitude of movement (Fig. 3). According to choreographers the pose with bent knees («plie» in choreographic terms) - is a basis of folk dance, the so called 'soft legs', which allows to make a step, a jump and get down to knees, etc. Feet of dancers do not always firmly 'stand on the ground'; they are protruded that presupposes a jump. In the complex Shiveet - Khairkhan we also see three tiers of dancers, among the figures described above one can see an image with typical movement of arms in a smooth curve, the left hand is up, and the right is down (Fig.4).

Triple repetition can be a reflection of three worlds into which the ancient man divided his universe. There is a distinct difference from the others figure, it seems to be a shaman leading the ritual. In this complex, we also see a reverse movement. The main movement is in the direction from left to the right (as well as in Kalbak-Tash), but on the nearby surface figures are moving in the opposite direction. Closer analysis of two similar compositions gives us a number of interesting observations. First of all kinetics of movements (relieve, plie, identical position of arms, rhythmical repetition of figures in the row) tells us it is a dance. We can imagine the kind of dance: most probably, it is a movement of the row in two directions, though it is probable that it was a circle movement.

Ancient artists had no idea about the perspective that is why the artisan carving dancing people saw only a row of dancers. Secondly as for the images themselves, we agree with V. D. Kubarev and A. P. Okladnikov that they are warriors. The mentioned authors based their decision on the presence of armament (a protruded object at the waist is considered by V. D. Kubarev to be a club), while for us the main feature was the pose of images. It is of interest that we can see it not only in ritual scenes as described above, but also in battle pictures. The figures only change position of arms - now they are gripping bows, however the leg position is unchanged. Thus, the ritual dance in Kalbak-Tash and on one of stelaes in Shiveet-Khairkhan can be hypothetically interpreted as warriors' dance.

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For comparative analysis, let us turn to petroglyphs discovered in the Himalay. Indian researchers refer them to Eneolithic Age, though materials and poses of images afford to refer them to the early Bronze Age. Compositions are no doubt 'dancing', but differ greatly from the Altai ones. First of all our attention is attracted by the gesture – hypertrophic hands with open fingers raised up. (Fig.5).

These can be single images, in the context of this research the contours of women figures (we see elements of clothing and hairdo) are of much interest. Four figures identical in size are in one row, legs are turned in profile, the body is en face, arms with open palms are raised, however the elbow is at an angle smaller than 90 degrees that makes a rhombus (curved) position of arms above heads (Fig.6).

Rhythmical almost ornamental position of dancing women (priestesses) proves that this image reflects a dance. This pose static at first sight if of much interest as well. Feet en profile, arms above heads can also be interpreted as a prayer, but reflected at some intermediate stage. There are also images with arms fully stretched up. In our case arms are not fully stretched up which allows us to visualize the amplitude of movement.

Looking at the dance from left to right we can observe the amplitude as each time the elbow is becoming more elongated, although it can be a random effect. Active fingers make an accent on expressiveness of hands, which is a typical feature for a number of Asian folk dance choreographies. The Himalayan dancing women are straight and thin, elongated to maximum and we can imagine the next dance position – a sharp upward movement as if flared up flames.

Another kind of dance is depicted in organic paint in Almora. Figures of people in one row are carved on stone surface. Men are holding each other by the hand to form a chain as if they are performing a group dance. Though the figures are schematic one can see a certain dance logic. First of all, it is a row of seven figures hands down and connected thus resembling ornamental zigzag. The same can be seen in the line of legs. Zigzag ornament, one of most ancient and widespread in Eurasia creates a particular dynamics in figures. In spite of static and schematic figures, we feel their movement is activated by two zigzag lines and seems like demonstrating a sequence of movements up and down (Fig. 7). Of course, it is practically impossible to restore old dance kinetics on the basis of this small piece. However, we can single out two important points: firstly, we see a row of people, secondly we feel movement, expressed in an ornamental position of arms and legs, and thirdly we have ethnographic data. The photo below shows a fragment of ritual dance during the autumn festival in the village of Lippa (Himachal Pradesh (Fig. 8). During the dance, man and women (men are going first) are moving in broken line on the territory in front of temples.





Figure 1: A scene of sacral hunting Tsagaan Salaa,



Figure 2: Petroglyphic composition from Burzahom near Srinagar (Iammu and Kashmir)



Figure 3: "Dancing warriors", Kalbak-Tash

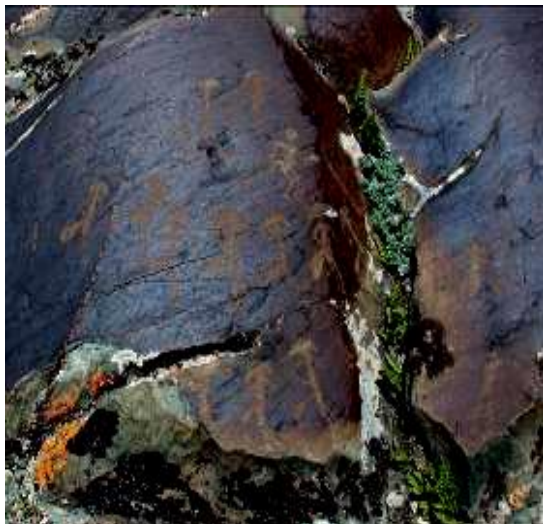


Figure 1: "Dancing warriors", Shiveet-Khairkhan



Figure 5: Figures with raise hands, the Himalay



Figure 6: "Dancing priestesses", the Himalay

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Dancers are dressed in national clothes. The movement has a syncopated rhythm (three steps, dash forward and backward and another step offbeat). Hands are joined in the same zigzag as in the petroglyphs. According to the local custom, the dance can last the whole night with changing participants.

The kind of dance observed at the festival and reflected in Himalayan petroglyphs is a certain circle dance, ritual dance which is typical not only for Russians. The meaning of the roundelay varies from entertainment to magic [1].

Paleographic approach to interpreting pieces of ancient art with regard to their conditionality is valuable enough in the study of petroglyphic compositions. It helps to discern dancing and common movement of figures. This is important for correct understanding of scenes in the complex. On the other hand, thanks to this approach we can restore kinetics of ancient sacral dance, plastique of the man, reflected in rock carvings.

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Figure 7: 'Roundelay', Almora, Uttarakhand Himalay



Figure 8: Traditional folk dance, Lippa, Kinnaur, the Himalay



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