

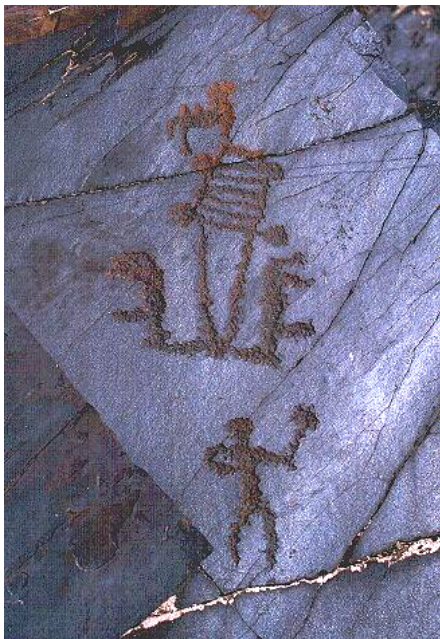
## The forgotten art of ancient Uzbekistan

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When one says 'rock art' our minds are usually directed to the beautifully painted images hidden deep within dark Palaeolithic caverns of France and Spain. Not many people are aware, however, of the huge diversity of different traditions involved in the production of stone images through time and space. They have been discovered on every continent, and in certain places they are as old as those found in Lascaux and Altamira. The advancement of rock art research in different parts of the world varies from region to region. Rock art is still not fully recognised in Central Asian studies, although the beginnings of research inquiries in this area date back as early as the XIX century.

### *Distribution and age of the images*

Currently we know of more than 140 locations of rock art sites in the territory of Uzbekistan. The overwhelming majority of these are 'petroglyphs' (engraved or pecked images in stone) which spread up from the southern borders of the country to the north and across the Tien-Shan in the east to the extremely arid Kara-Kum desert in the west. Their presence in a variety of ecological zones points towards to cultural diversities and, to some extent, testifies to their antiquity; for instance, in arid areas people probably created them when the land was less drier than today. The detailed analyses of images enable us to propose some statements concerning their antiquity, although one must remember that the exact date of their creation remains difficult to obtain at the moment. The methods of direct dating rock art that have been pioneered in recent years involve high costs and only provide a variable reliability of results that do not encourage their future application. The uncertainty of the absolute dating of rock art, should not be, however, perceived as a hindering barrier to other questions like the meaning of the images, the ethnic identity of the image makers, or attempts at reconstructing the social contexts in which the images operated. Furthermore, in some cases, it appears not too difficult to distinguish between older and younger images and their connection to a given pre- or historic period.



The examination of image superimposition, degree of patination ('desert sunburn'), technique of execution (especially in the case of engravings), and stylistic and subject analyses can create the basis for the establishment of a relative chronological scheme. The most productive method among them is the careful identification of motifs. Correlating different rock art subjects with, if possible, the archaeological record makes it possible to distinguish some iconographic elements specific to particular chronological periods. In particular, the images of bulls can be associated with the Stone or early Bronze Age, wheel vehicles could of appeared no earlier than the Bronze Age, and the images of warriors armed with metal swords can not be older than the local knowledge of metallurgy. Thus, considering such aspects of rock art imagery scholars have been able to distinguish four general chronological complexes in Central Asia which

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are applicable also to the prehistoric art of Uzbekistan: the Stone Age (IV-III mill. BC; some images like the paintings in Zaraut-Kamar can be older), Bronze Age (III-II mill. BC), Iron Age (I mill. BC - I centuries AD), and Middle Ages (I mill. AD).

### *Cultural identity*

Most rock images belong to periods about which one can say nothing about the language of prehistoric peoples nor their beliefs. On the other hand, sometimes it is possible to identify a cultural context without the reconstruction of the meanings of the separate images. The careful analysis of rock art can enable us to identify ways of life, like hunting and gathering or nomadism, and suggest which elements (for instance what animals) played an important role in the culture of these peoples. Furthermore, it is also possible to approach the question of ethnicity in the interpretations of Central Asian rock art.

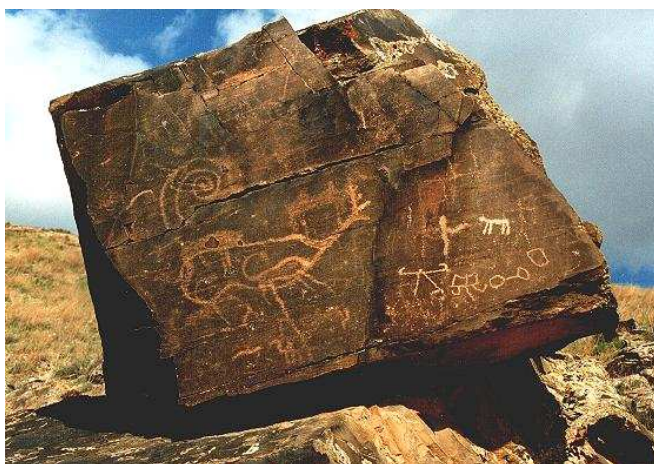
When we look at the history of this part of Asia we notice that the area within present day Uzbekistan was in constant state of struggle between Turkish and Iranian speaking peoples since time immemorial. This is an important point and can be understood in relationship to the ethnic identity of the ancient peoples inhabiting the area between the Amu-Darya and Syr-Darya. This 'polarity' is also reflected today amongst the Turkish speaking Uzbeks, who reside in the north, while the Iranian speaking Tajiks populate the southern part of Uzbekistan. The latter are the descendants of a very archaic Indo-Iranian heritage which extends back to III and II millennium BC. This was the time when the land of Uzbekistan and adjacent regions were within the migration routes of the Indo-European tribes, who by the end of II millennium BC expanded into India and Iran.

The Indo-Iranians have been the earliest ethnic strata with which the tradition of rock art could be supposed. From the Indo-Iranian linguistic unity two linguistic branches derived: Old Indian (known as Vedic and appeared in the Indian subcontinent in the second half of the II millennium BC) and Old Iranian. Of course, it is difficult to distinguish if these peoples, who populated the entire of Central Asia, represented a supposed 'Indo-Iranian unity' or were divided separately into Indians and Iranians. The analyses of petroglyphs in



Sarmish-say Valley in Uzbekistan and Tamgaly in southern Kazakhstan, however, led us to conclude that some important correspondences between rock imagery and Indo-Iranian myths can be discerned. These parallels concern the importance of single motifs, among which the bull plays very significant role, as well as some structural correspondences dealing with symbolic associations between recurrent sets of images and mythical ideas (see additional reading).

Another important feature of prehistoric art in Central Asia is the so-called 'animal style', which was connected with the early Iranian nomads described by the Greeks as Scythians and the Persians as Sakas. The distinct characteristics of the animal style were applied in various media, like wood or metal objects (especially gold), as well as in rock art. It testifies, moreover, that Uzbekistan was once within the sphere of their cultural activity; a view supported by historic sources. This was the time when first appeared the rock images of horses and horse riders accompanied by the first metal tools, like swords. Zoomorphic images dominate the animal style, but we also can encounter the representation of human



figures as well. Artists represented the images of animals in dynamic poses as if they wanted to catch them in the action of movement. The bodies of animals are often filled with different ornamental designs, and the spiral, for example, appears to have been one of their favourites. Similar motifs can be found in Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan but also in more northern parts of Central Asia, southern Siberia (the Altai, Khakassia, Tuva), Mongolia and along the Karakom Highway. The art of the Sako-Scythian nomads take us closer to

some aspects of their beliefs. By placing a great deal of emphasis on the wild fauna the art manifests their strong affinity with the natural world. The most important animal was the deer and its image was carved onto countless stones and rocks across Asia. Another specific feature of this art, but not very common, was the intentional superimposition of images which distinguishes it from the earlier art of the Stone or Bronze Ages.

The historic period of Uzbekistan and Central Asia begins in the middle of the first millennium AD. During this time fundamental transformations began which created new conceptualisations of the land that were connected with the appearance of a newly crystallised Turkish culture. The Early Turkic peoples quickly dominated vast areas of Central Asia, and were subsequently incorporated into the tide of Islam. We are not sure how these movements influenced the tradition of image making on stones but it is clear that rock art had changed its character dramatically. Now we find the images of mounted



warriors that seem to reflect a time of frequent conflict and the cult of the warrior-hero. From the quantitative point of view the images are less numerous than previous time periods. Islamic ideology of the cult of the one and only god must have influenced the 'collapse' of rock art tradition rooted in pre-Islamic beliefs (like the cult of nature, or shamanism). So, does this mean that rock art in Uzbekistan has been predominately produced in prehistoric and early historic periods? As we will see in the next section, newer research has cast new light upon this mystery.

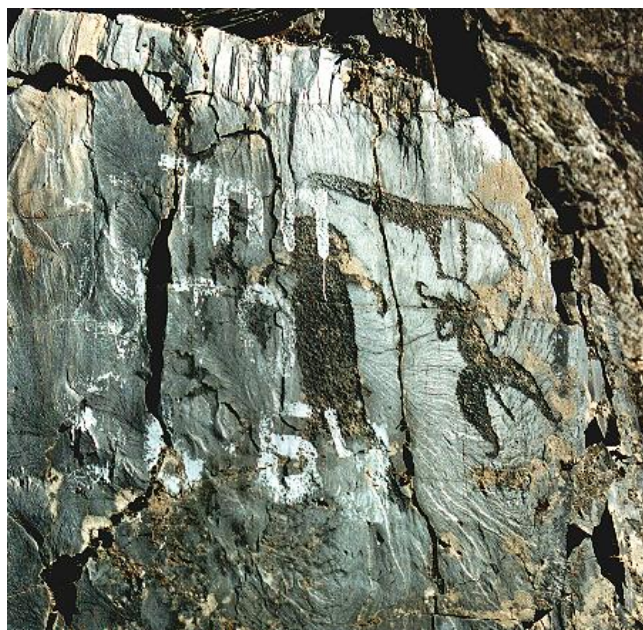
### *Where archaeology and ethnography meet*

Archaeology has always been involved in ethnographical discourse. In the case of rock art studies it was often limited in seeking ethnographic analogies, which could substantiate various hypotheses put forward by archaeologists. Within last decades one can observe a new shift in rock art research towards the understanding of ethnographic contexts. Of course, ethnographic sources create useful interpretative contexts for rock art from the so-called 'ethnographic present', but until recently there was no suggestion of a contemporary tradition in the rock art of Uzbekistan. The situation changed when we started to look more carefully at the ethnographic data available from this region. In a

collection of photographs made by Leon Barszczewski at the end of XIX century we found one photo representing a group of Tajiks in front of a house on which white geometric motifs were visibly painted. This discovery was especially important when a similar motif was discovered on the wall of a rock shelter in the Zaraut-Kamar Gorge (near Sherabad), in the mountains of southern Uzbekistan. Analysis of the Zaraut-Kamar images indicated that there was a cultural connection with the Tajik custom of house painting and the New Year feast celebrated with the advent of spring (at the end of March). The ritual feast is commonly known as Nouruz, and it has links with older Iranian (Persian) traditions.

The rock paintings in Zaraut-Kamar can be divided into different chronological phases. The oldest are supposed to come from Mesolithic (ca. seventh mill. BC) and are an exceptional find of this period within Central Asia. The age of the more recent paintings is not clear. Some scholars believe that they were created in the Iron Age or during Medieval times. The new analysis of the Nouruz rite has led us to rethink the question of the age and ethnic context of rock paintings in Uzbekistan. They are only known at a few sites - Zaraut-Kamar, Sangi-Dzhiumon, and Aksakal-Atasay - and were believed to be several thousand years old, but now it is very probable their age is rather only a few hundred years old. The context of the paintings from these sites may have been connected with the celebration of the New Year Nouruz rite. The fact that they were discovered in areas still populated by Iranian speaking Tajiks strengthens this hypothesis. This is reinforced by the fact that the images are well preserved for the red paint is still clearly distinguishable. The paintings were not found in cave environments, which can preserve them from Central Asian climatic conditions for thousands of years, and strongly suggests a more recent origin.

### *The future of rock art in Uzbekistan*



Uzbekistan is most famous for its splendid medieval architecture. In recent years a lot of effort has been taken to enliven this historic heritage. On the other hand, rock art is not as spectacular as Registan or the Shah-i-Zinda complex and the sites are less accessible. In order to see the mysterious painted or engraved images on rocks one must travel hundreds kilometres through sands of desert or treacherous mountainous paths. Not many people are able to reach these remote places, but it is the duty of all to be aware of this heritage and to know that these often enigmatic images have been endowed with specific power serving as a kind of communication system. However, in locations more easily accessible we often

find examples of the destruction of images, like at Sarmish-say Valley in Nuratau Mountains, which is one of the richest rock art sites in Uzbekistan. The tradition of rock art in Uzbekistan spans from the prehistoric to contemporary times and we should be concerned with the process of creating a social awareness of their great significance - indispensable if we want to preserve the long artistic tradition of countless peoples who inhabited the land of Uzbekistan since prehistory.

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