

Ship Engravings in Armenia?

Introduction

During an expedition in October 2011 in the Syunik province of Armenia, the *Institut für archäologische Denkmalforschung* (Austria) documented rock art on the slopes of the Ughtasar Mountain.

The Ughtasar is an extinct volcano located 20 km north of Sisian, whose rock art was discovered in 1966 and partially published in 1970 by Karakhanian and Safian. Many important panels remained undocumented, and no further publications have appeared on the Ughtasar rock art to the present day.

We focused our research around a small crater lake situated at 3270 m a.s.l. in a five hectares area where we found approximately 100 carved rocks.

Rock Art

The engravings were executed by pecking on the dark patina of basalt rocks lying on the ground. These rocks are usually of small dimensions, with a maximal height of 100 cm and between 70 and 150 cm wide.

The petroglyphs depict a large number of animals, mainly goats, as well as some wolves and felidae. Bulls, snakes and deer appear more rarely. 15 % of the engravings represent anthropomorphs, primarily worshippers, and some hunters.

By stylistic comparison with ceramics from graves, we dated this rock art from the transitory period between the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age (Hermann 2011: 17-18).

Ships?

Two rocks (n°17 and 18) focused our attention due to the special features of their engravings:

Rock 17 (Fig.1), facing west, shows a 23x17 cm figure, with two horizontal and parallel lines, which are open on the right side, and going up and closed on the left side. Six vertical and parallel lines stand on the upper horizontal line, but two lines in the centre are smaller and intersect. On the right of this representation, there are four vertical lines of various dimensions. The longest of these lines has four smaller additional lines.

Rock 18 (Fig.2), facing west and about 3 m south of Rock 17, depicts a 15x12 cm figure similar to the first one of Rock 17, although there are only four vertical and parallel lines standing on the upper line. On the right of this picture, there is most probably the representation of a felid. Both petroglyphs cannot be interpreted as animals, due to unrealistic anatomy and the absence of a tail, but show features very similar to representations of Scandinavian ships (Fig.3) (see also Hedengran 1995; Kaul 1998). However, we do not know any similar depictions in Armenian rock art nor any attested representations of a ship. Furthermore, the altitude of the site, and the fact that the nearest navigable waters are 90 km distant, raises questions.

If we interpret them as ships, we have to put them in a symbolic context in relation with other petroglyphs of the site, such as the snakes. The picture of this animal often appears in Ughtasar, and is usually a symbol of re-birth. The snake is also associated with the ship in Scandinavia (Kaul 1998: 221ff).

Conclusion

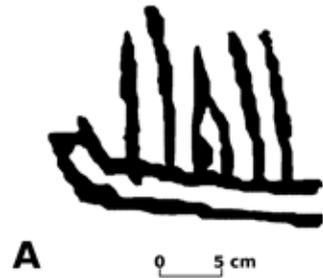
Both petroglyphs are most probably depictions of ships. Their common features on two



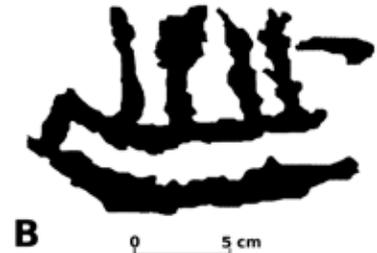
Fig. 1: Rock 17, Ughtasar



Fig. 2: Rock 18, Ughtasar



A



B



Fig. 3: A - Rock 17; B - Rock 18, Ughtasar; C - Litsleby (Tanum, Sweden)

separate rocks a few meters apart exclude happenstance, and prove the intentionality of this kind of representation. Furthermore, the iconographic comparison with Scandinavian ships allows us to interpret them as such.

The absence of similar pictures in Armenia does not discredit this interpretation, but is more to be seen as a challenge to further research the Caucasian rock art and re-explore formerly published sites.

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