

The features of new rock carvings in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan

Abstract

Au cours du dernier siècle, de nombreux pétroglyphes ont été réalisés par les bergers d'Asie centrale, souvent à proximité de sites anciens. L'analyse des gravures récentes des sites de Tcholpon-Ata au Kirghizstan et de Tamgaly au Kazakhstan permet de dégager des traits communs, reflets d'une nouvelle perception du monde, mais éclaire également sous un jour nouveau les pétroglyphes de l'Age du Bronze et des époques ultérieures.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are famous for their large number of petroglyph sites. In South Kazakhstan, the site of Tamgaly has been included in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2004. The particularity of the rock carving sites of both countries is the continuity of this kind of art. The main petroglyphs date back to the Bronze and Iron Age, but the tradition of rock carving was perpetuated in the Middle Ages, especially in the Turkic era, and in more recent times, like in the Dzhungarian period (XVII-XVIII AD), and continued in the last hundred years. Each year, Kazakh and Kyrgyz shepherds produce new rock carvings in order to kill time.

In 2009, Jean-Marie Guastavino published an article in *Adoranten* about new rock carv-

ings in the Bohuslän region which questioned the notions of graffiti and rock carvings. We would like to contribute to this debate by analysing new rock carvings from the sites of Tamgaly, near Almaty in Kazakhstan, and of Cholpon-Ata, on the north bank of the lake Issyk-Kul in Kyrgyzstan. We will consider only drawings -and not names nor inscriptions- from the last hundred years.

At both sites, the number of new rock carvings is extremely low. There are less than thirty drawings in Cholpon-Ata and about twenty in Tamgaly. However, there are some recurrent topics and features at both sites:

1. The petroglyphs are made in the same proportions of the former petroglyphs on these sites and are produced on similar stones with almost the same orientations. There are

Fig. 1. Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan.



Fig. 2. Tamgaly, Kazakhstan.





Fig. 3. Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan.



Fig. 4. Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan.



Fig. 5. Tamgaly, Kazakhstan.

Fig. 6. Tamgaly, Kazakhstan.



usually 20 to 50 cm large, and never more than 1 meter. There are not always easily accessible and are sometimes hidden. Most of the new petroglyphs were carved with the same technique as the older ones by using a large stone as tool. Few new drawings were made with narrower and shallower incisions.

2. The drawings are made in a naturalist style, sometimes with many details (Fig.2 and 5). The motives can be identified without difficulty. In the former periods, the style was less naturalist and more stylized and contemporary shepherds are seldom able to recognize the subjects of these former petroglyphs (Fig.9).

3. The natural environment, namely the mountains, is very often depicted (Fig.1 and 4), which was never the case in older drawings. It seems that this kind of representation has appeared in the last thirty or forty years.

4. Animals, primarily goats and horses, sometimes dogs, constitute the main part of the pictures (Fig.1 and 2), similar to former times.

5. Another main topics of the pictures are weapons (Fig.3) and new means of transport, such as automobiles and airplanes (Fig.4 and 5). Weapons can be pictured alone or in the hand of a hunter or a soldier. In Central Asia, the representation of chariots was quite common in the Bronze Age, and hunting scenes often appeared in the Iron Age.

6. The site in Tamgaly was used by the Red Army for manoeuvres. Military subjects (tanks, aviator) (Fig.5 and 6) and communist symbols (Red star, Lenin, etc.) (Fig.7) appear regularly.

The representation of Lenin comes in some other Kazakh sites (Fig.8) and constitutes a



Fig. 7. "V.I. Lenin", Tamgaly, Kazakhstan.

Fig. 8. Portrait of Lenin, Kazakhstan.



Fig. 9. Bayan Zhurek, Kazakhstan, (Picture: Boris Zheleznyakov).



Fig. 10. Osh, Kyrgyzstan.

kind of "communist mythology", like the sun-heads of the Bronze Age!

7. Sexual representations, which are various in Central Asia in the Bronze Age, were not present on the new rock carvings from both sites but are known in other sites (Fig.10).

The study of new rock carvings allows many comparisons with the petroglyphs of the Bronze Age (and other periods). The new drawings reflect simultaneously the persistence of a former mode of thinking and the constitution of a new "mythology". Their study would probably be a great help to archaeologists in order to understand the petroglyphs of the previous times.

*Dr. Luc Hermann
Institut für archäologische Denkmal-
forschung
Sportplatzstraße 5
3385 Markersdorf
Austria
lhermann2@hotmail.com*

References

- Guastavino, Jean-Marie**, Graffiti or rock carvings?, in Adoranten, 2009, p.104-106
Hermann, Luc, Les pétroglyphes de Tcholon-Ata au Kirghizstan, Paris, 2010
Hermann, Luc, Die Petroglyphen von Tamgaly in Kasachstan, Paris, 2011
Sala, Renato and Deom, Jean-Marc, Petroglyphs of South Kazakhstan, Almaty, 2005