

# THE ANCIENT TAMGA-SIGNS OF SOUTHEAST KAZAKHSTAN AND THEIR OWNERS: THE ROUTE FROM EAST TO WEST IN THE 2<sup>ND</sup> CENTURY BCE – 2<sup>ND</sup> CENTURY CE

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In November 2014 one of the authors of this article, Alexei Rogozhinskii, discovered in the Chu-Ili Mountains in the Jetysu (Semirech'e) Region of southeastern Kazakhstan approximately 250 km west of Almaty a new series of unusual petroglyphs. The following May, co-author Sergey Yatsenko also was able to examine them.

The petroglyphs of this series consist of depictions of local wild animals, the targets of hunting by archers depicted with dogs or various predators.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes these are fantastic creatures; in the scenes where we see them or ungulates, the animals stand quietly. This is a masculine world where we see the hunters or warriors and associated male animals. Such scenes often are accompanied by depictions of tamga (nishan) clan signs. Both the animals and the signs in each composition have been made with the same instrument and are equally covered by a patina ("a desert tan"). Moreover, the tamga-signs clearly were an original part of the composition, well integrated into it. These petroglyphs have been created in a distinct style which has been noticed recently in the Jetysu region (Rogozhinskii et al. 2004, pp. 56, 73–74, 83) but never been described in detail by students of rock art in Kazakhstan and which might provisionally be called the "post-Saka style," since the animals are similar to earlier ones of nomads of the late Saka-Scythian period of the 5<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE.<sup>2</sup> But this style has many differences from that of the Jetysu Sakas of this time. Even though the list of subjects remains as before, the petroglyphs of this type include a series of unique motifs and images. Petroglyphs of this style can be tentatively dated to the period after the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, when the local Sakas had lost their independence and new and stronger nomadic tribes from the east had appeared in that region. Moreover, the Sakas had not used tamga-signs.

In what follows, we will analyze for the first time this previously unknown complex of impressive depictions

in an, as yet, little-known style in the context of a very interesting series of heraldic and property signs. These observations enable one to identify the ethno-political affiliation of the owners of such tamga-signs as evidenced in the written sources. The analogies to these newly discovered signs – both synchronic in the 2<sup>nd</sup>–1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE and later, in the 1<sup>st</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE – take us farther west, which indicates the direction of the later migration of their owners to western Kazakhstan and eventually to the European steppes (southern Russia and Ukraine).

## **The natural conditions and traditional economy of the inhabitants of the Chu-Ili Mountains.**

The petroglyphs examined here were found in the central part of the Chu-Ili Mountains, which form the western boundary of the region termed the Jetysu in Kazakh and Semirech'e (= "Seven Rivers") in Russian, a distinct natural and historical zone in southeastern Kazakhstan [Fig. 1, next page]. Current ideas about the extent of this territory formed in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: it is situated between Lakes Balkhash, Sarykol and Alakol and the Jungarian Alatau Mountains on the east and the Chu-Ili Mountains on the west. This is the territory of the modern Almaty Region (*oblast'*) and part of the Zhambyl Region. The largest river of Semirech'e is the Ili, which flows from Xinjiang and divides the entire region into western and eastern parts. The Chu-Ili Mountains extend about 200 km in a SE-NW direction and are part of the northern Tian Shan Mountain system. These are low mountains (the highest of them, Anyrakai is 1183 m), which form the boundary between the Ili and Chu River valleys (Erofeeva 2011, pp. 13–14).

This is a semi-desert zone with a harsh continental climate: the air temperature fluctuates over a range of 79° C, and precipitation averages some 200 mm a year.



Fig. 1. The locations named in this article: 1 – Karakabak Gorge (Mangystau Mountains); 2 – Bayte III temple (Ustyurt Plateau); 3 – Birsasai Gorge (Nurata Mountains); 4 – Sidak sanctuary; 5 – Kemer Range (Karatau Mountains); 6 – Sholakzhideli Gorge (Khantau Mountains); 7 – Akkol Valley; 8 – Tamgaly Gorge; 9 – Issyk barrow; 10 – Eshkiolmes Range (Dzhungar Mountains); 11 – Tokrau Valley (Zheltau Mountains); 12 – Tomar Valley (Tarbagatai Mountains); 13 – Berel; 14 – Pazyryk; 15 – Shiv-et-Khairkhan; 16 – Tsagaan Salaa and Baga Oigor.

Deserts abut upon these mountains. Nonetheless, the list of plants and animals to be found there is quite varied. Several of the rivers of the Chu-Ili Mountains (the Kopa, Kopaly, Aschisu, Zhyngyldy, Chokpar and Sarybulak) continue to flow through the summer months. The lesser rivers frequently dry up by the beginning of the summer, when it is necessary to use wells and rivers in which the water has higher salinity. The river valleys are V-shaped where they cut through the line of the hills, with steep protrusions of cliffs, and often form canyons extending over a long distance (Erofeeva et al. 2008, pp. 44-47).

In the central part of the Chu-Ili Mountains the river valleys are oriented to the north and have wide upper reaches; the river channels have many branching streams which invite extended habitation, the establishment of nomad settlements and creation next to them of numerous petroglyphs. The valley floors are flat, with tall grasses and are suitable for animal husbandry. The low hills between river valleys during the winter are covered with only a thin blanket of snow and were good winter pastures for large herds of horses and sheep. In summer the pastures and camping sites were 50–100 km south of the slopes of the high Zailiiskii (Trans-Ili) Alatau Mountains. This territory of nomadic pastoralism traditionally was the location of seasonal (usually winter) camps of the herders. (Today, when traditional nomadism has disappeared, it is a sparsely populated region with a population density of less than one person per square km.) The landscape and geographic position of the Chu-Ili Mountains made them since the late Bronze Age a zone of “pure” nomadism and specialized herding, and the neighboring zones along the foot of the high mountains of the Zailiiskii Alatau and Jungarian Alatau and the valleys of the major Chu

and Ili Rivers were usually areas of settlement and later of developed urban culture.

This region was of great significance in the system of commercial communications of Inner Asia. In various historical periods here, on the edge of the impenetrable deserts, there were routes leading from Transoxiana to the upper reaches of the Ili River (in northwestern Xinjiang) and to China and also along Lake Balkhash to sources of metals in the Altai Mountains and beyond to southern Siberia and Mongolia. In the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries their control over this region enabled the Turgesh and Karluk Turks to acquire economic and military-political dominance over the neighboring nomads. Here in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries ran the Great Kalmyk Road from Tibet and from the residence of the Jungar khans to the Kalmyks of the lower Volga River.

The petroglyphs of the Chu-Ili Mountains constitute a unique “chronicle” of the history of the migrations and cultural connections of various groups of nomads in Inner Asia.

### **Petroglyph groups in the center of the Chu-Ili Mountains**

The archaeological investigation of the western Jetysu began already in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century many petroglyph sites were discovered and in varying degrees studied, the best known of which being the Tamgaly complex (listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site since 2004) (Rogozhinskii 2011). However until recently, studies have focused along the boundaries of the Chu-Ili Mountains, and their central region has remained completely unknown. Alexei Rogozhinskii began systematic archaeological surveys here starting in 2007 as part of several projects



Fig. 2. The map of archaeological sites in the central part of the Chu-Ili Mountains: A – the main river valley; B-C – upper (tributary) valleys; S 1-3 – the necropolises; I-III the main assemblages of petroglyphs.

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The petroglyph complex with tamga-signs of interest to us here was found in the upper reaches of one of the major rivers of the Chu-Ili Mountains. This region is of difficult access, since it is located far from main auto roads and for more than two decades for various reasons has seen little habitation. During these years the ecological niche once occupied by pastoral herding has again been taken over by a growing population of wild animals, among them deer, goats, sheep, wolves, foxes and hares, which attracts hunters to the area. The administration of the Almaty Region so far has not undertaken measures to protect this unique natural and archaeological landscape. Therefore, in the interest of preserving this heritage, the authors of this article have deliberately not indicated the precise location of this discovery (it is absent in Fig. 1), so as not to facilitate unwittingly its destruction by hunters and picknickers. The provisional designation for the geographic objects is A for the valley of the main river and B and C for its tributaries [Fig. 2].

The two parallel valleys of the small rivers B and C are about 3 km long and, where they join at the foot of a tectonic uplift form valley A, which further down has the appearance of a shallow canyon and cuts through a mountain massif with many twists and turns over its entire length of more than 15 km. At the point where tributaries B and C meet, valley C bends 45° and broadens to 70–100 m. Here its left edge is low but the right steep (45–60°) and high (25–40 m), with a great many projecting cliffs. The main massif is composed of shales and above them of Devonian sandstones. The large flat surfaces of the cliffs are covered with a patina. The petroglyphs usually were created on them, but less commonly the images are to be found on the surfaces of the shales which lack the patina.

Besides the petroglyphs, there are other kinds of features here which relate to various historical periods from the Late Bronze Age up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So far there have been no excavations here, only surveys, but many of the seasonal camps have yielded fragments of pottery and other artifacts which allow one provisionally to date the sites (at many of the multi-layer settlements, at least to establish the most recent period of their existence). The detailed mapping of the monuments of all types allows one to establish the characteristics of the archaeological landscape. In the canyons of valleys B and C over a distance of 15 and 10 km respectively are many ruins of nomad winter camps from all periods (in valley B more than 20 have been located). The high concentration of similar sites delimits the main zone of extended habitation.

Next to each camp is a small concentration of petroglyphs from various periods (ranging from a few images up to 100–200), among them inscriptions and more than 40 tamgas (including Early Turkic, Mongolian/Jungarian of the 17<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> centuries and Kazakh of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries). A distinct group of petroglyphs consists of images of different ages and quality of execution on the lower parts of the cliffs alongside the paths used by horsemen which run along the floor of the canyons and connect the settlement sites, and also on the shore at locations for the watering of herds.

In canyon A, there are many smooth surfaces of the cliffs suited for the inscribing of petroglyphs. Yet they are but rarely found here – only along the paths used by horsemen. Likewise, there are very few settlement sites and necropolises. In contrast, in the small elevations at the mouths of tributaries B and C are concentrations of cemeteries of various periods and large settlements, and on the right bank are several assemblages of petroglyphs. Located here are two large cemeteries of the Early Iron Age, in each of which are about 20 barrows. In one of them (S-3) are as well several Bronze Age graves, and at a certain distance to the southwest one finds Early Turkic ritual rectangular stone fences. Small cemeteries containing 3–5 barrows are located close to the places where there is a concentration of petroglyphs.

The three main assemblages of petroglyphs, sites I-III, are located each about 500 m from the other. To the right side of valley A are few petroglyphs, though it is precisely there that where one finds are a great many broad smooth surfaces on the cliffs suitable for inscribing images. (In this zone the drawings are connected with the important locations of traditional communications – on the bends, descents and ascents of the paths for horsemen and the driving of cattle; a small series of engravings of various periods are to



Fig. 3. Petroglyphs assemblage II with the paper silhouettes of the main animal images in "Post-Saka style", summer 2015.

be found at the summit of hills in places where cattle were pastured.)

In general, the system of the siting of these petroglyphs and other features which we have described in this landscape is one common for the Chu-Ili Mountains and has been thoroughly studied for other parts of the Jetysu Region and connected with the traditional system of land use and rhythm of nomadic life (Rogozhinskii et al. 2004, pp. 45–94; Erofeeva 2011, p. 171–78). But one series of the engravings of the Early Iron Age has distinctive features and is concentrated in the landscape in a fundamentally different fashion.

### The scenes with "post-Saka style" petroglyphs and tamga-signs

The petroglyphs of interest to us are concentrated in assemblages I-III. The overall number of the petroglyphs of the given series (including the tamgas) is more than 130, of which 80% are concentrated in the main assemblages (in I—35 images; in II—27; in III—33) and nearby (10 images). Outside of them is one incomplete depiction of a wild animal in the hill zone, two scenes near the path between assemblages II and III (where tributary B enters the canyon of A) and one composition in valley A not far from assemblage III. Within the boundaries of the zone of habitation of the camps, in valleys B and C, such carvings are to be found only at 4–5 locations, and altogether some 10–20 drawings in each valley.

The distinguishing feature of the petroglyphs of the series under discussion is the very large dimensions of

the figures: for example, in assemblage II, the size of the figures is in the range of 28–35, 45–60 and 77–85 cm, and the largest of them measures 105 cm. The petroglyphs of assemblages I and III have similar parameters.

**Assemblage II.** The unique feature of this series of petroglyphs is the predominance in assemblage II of large individual figures, which are positioned on various levels of the cliffs. This is so distinctive, that in each assemblage isolated figures or small groups of drawings have been placed on

surfaces which are oriented so that at some distance from the cliffs they create a focal point for optimal visibility, a zone where all the petroglyphs can be seen simultaneously. Alexei Rogozhinskii had previously detected a similar principle of the distribution of a synchronic series of petroglyphs of the Bronze Age at the Tamgaly site (Rogozhinskii 2011).

In the summer of 2015 in assemblage II in the Chu-Ili Mountains he organized an experiment with paper copies of the depictions of the figures. These white paper silhouettes which stood out against the cliffs were attached to them over the actual images by wetting the paper [Fig. 3]. They helped reconstruct the visual effect which would have been seen in early times before the images darkened and became indistinguishable from the surrounding cliffs. The paper silhouettes were selectively attached to the largest and smallest figures on the main surfaces. The visual effect was observed from various viewpoints in the given location. The optimal vantage point (where simultaneously all of the petroglyphs were within the field of vision and could easily be made out) was, as it turns out, on the same right bank of the valley, 30–50 m from the base of the cliffs.

This experiment made it possible to determine the principle underlying the distribution of the petroglyphs: when viewed from a specific point, the separate images, located at some distance from one another, were visually united into a meaningful group and together formed a single composition against the background of the hill (from the vantage point, this hill has a shape resembling that of a pyramid). We see three levels of depictions. The lowest level is a row of predators (tiger, panther, wolf and bear [?]),



Fig. 4. Assemblage I with the petroglyphs of "Post-Saka style."

arranged from bottom up and from right to left. The middle level is a horizontal row of images of the wild mountain goat (Capricorn) and sheep surrounded by wolves. The highest level has the isolated and largest figure of a wild goat. The experiment showed that the large size of the petroglyphs of this series and their positioning in assemblage II were essential in order to create an image row constructed according to a single concept. In all probability, this same principle in the display of the rock art underlay the creation of the image row of the two other petroglyph assemblages I and III, among which were also tamga-signs of Late Antiquity.

**Assemblage I** is distinguished from the other two by having the largest concentration of petroglyphs of different periods, which occupy almost all of the

3—after Samashev et al. 2007



Tamga-sign No. 1 is very unusual, in that it comprises three different signs connected at their ends. The central sign is S-shaped; the two side ones resemble one another (presumably indicating related clans). Most likely such an unusual combined sign symbolizes kinship or military union of the three clans. An identical sign is on a cliff in Karakabak Canyon in the Mangystau Mountains of western Kazakhstan, where even the slope of the signs from left to right on that image has the same angle [Fig. 5.3]. While the flanking signs have no precise analogues,<sup>3</sup> the central sign

Fig. 5. The semantic center of assemblage I: 1-2 - male goat image and Tamga-sign No. 1; 3 - the sign's analogy (Karakabak Canyon, Mangystau Mountains).

convenient surfaces of the cliffs with varying kinds of display. The inscribed images of the given series are distributed on vertical and sloping surfaces in the middle part of the massif, with a single orientation, facing frontally toward the valley [Fig. 4]. Many images have been incised over older ones, and then in turn at some later time were subjected to restoration or the addition of new details. To a degree this helps to establish the relative age of the whole series of engravings at the same time that it creates some problems.

The central section that we would propose embodies the meaning of the assemblage is composed of three parts, analogous to a triptych created on contiguous surfaces of a large projection of the cliff. The widest vertical surface is almost entirely occupied by large images of alternating wild animals: from bottom to top: two goats (male and female) and a camel, facing left; confronted goats; and two standing male goats facing left. Above the upper one is the complex Tamga-sign No. 1, 10 x 25 cm in size [Fig. 5.1-2]. The figure of a wild animal (43 cm) is shown pierced by two feathered arrows. Both lower animals also have been pierced in the spine by arrows. The petroglyphs of this series cover earlier drawings made in a different style and with different parameters (analogous images are known from Tamgaly and have been dated to the Late Bronze Age) (Ibid., pp. 192-94, Fig. 155.1-3, 6). The uppermost image of a goat has been inscribed over the silhouette of a feline predator. All the figures, including the tamga, seem to have been carefully "restored" by abrading in the Middle Ages, judging from the color of the patina.

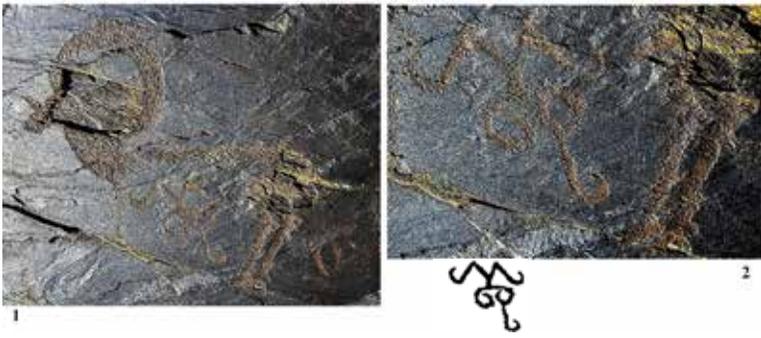


Fig. 6. The upper focal point of the "Post-Saka style" petroglyphs in assemblage I: the incomplete male goat with tamga-sign No. 2.

(apparently the most prestigious among the three) is widely known. At the turn of the era it was depicted on the coins of Chorasmia [Fig. 7.1, No. 6]; in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE it was the sign of an aristocratic clan of the Alans from the lower Don River, and its owners were among the most politically active in Sarmatia (Yatsenko 2001a, pp. 85–87, Figs. 1.1, 5.44, 8, 10, 19.6).

The inclined second surface of the "triptych" depicts on its upper part two male goats, turned toward the right. The lower figure probably is unfinished. The drawing partially covers a small figure of a male goat from the early Saka period (the 7<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE).

The third inclined surface rises above the others and, in general, above the remaining surfaces with petroglyphs of the given series which have been preserved in assemblage I. The surface is split by a deep crack, which opened after the petroglyphs had been inscribed. The bottom and middle register of the

cliff is occupied by images of wild animals of the Late Bronze and Early Saka times which are superimposed over one another. Here is an unfinished image of a male goat analogous to the drawings of the series on the lower slabs. In the upper part of the composition is a large (40 cm) image of a male goat on the background of whose unfinished silhouette is the very precisely imprinted Tamga No. 2 (15 x 16 cm) [Fig. 6.1-2]. The back legs of the animal cover a small depiction of a male goat drawn in the Early Saka style.

The spread of Sign No. 2 in the Iranian nomadic world graphically reflects the migration of a number of ethnic groups westwards. At the same time, in the 2<sup>nd</sup>–1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE, an identical sign is found on coins of the Chorasmian kings [Fig. 7.1], and in the Early and Middle Sarmatian graffiti on the walls of the temple at Bayte III (Ustiurt Plateau in western Kazakhstan) (see, first of all: Olkhovskii and Yatsenko 2000; Yatsenko 2005) [Fig. 7.2].<sup>4</sup> In the 1<sup>st</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> centuries CE we see it on the famous stone lion sculpture No. 2 from a barrow near Olbia (Drachuk 1975, Pl. VII, No. 503; Yatsenko 2001a, p. 67). A related sign, very close in shape (the lower arc slopes to the left, not the right) is in the Sarmatian cave sanctuary Ak-Kaia I on the sacred rock Ak-Kaia in the eastern Crimea where the signs date to the 1<sup>st</sup>–early 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries CE (Solomonik 1959, pp. 113–17, No. 57; Yatsenko 2001a, p. 69) [Fig. 6.3]. It is important to stress that in all cases where such signs in Kazakhstan or Ukraine are placed within a group (which is the result of combined action of several clans: Yatsenko 2001a, pp. 64–65, 80–81),

they occupy the position of honor in the center of the composition [Fig. 6.2-3].

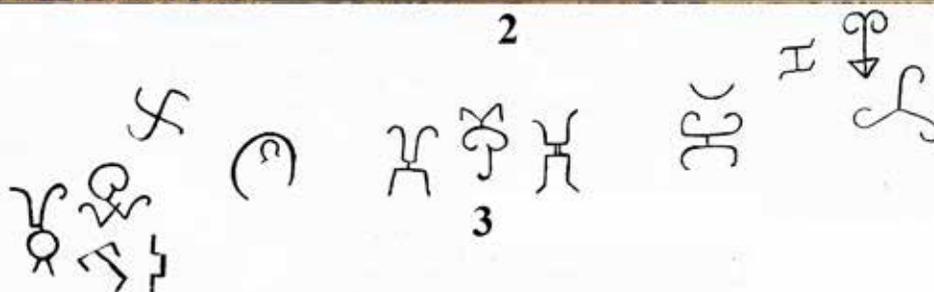
Among the other petroglyphs of the given series which are located on the same level of the massif to the right of the

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14

1



2



3

Fig. 7. The analogies for Sign No. 2 on Fig. 6: 1 – the kings' signs of Chorasmia / Kwarezm on coins, ca. 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE – 1<sup>st</sup> century CE (after Vainberg 1977); 2 – the stone slab from Bayte III temple walls (the NW Ustiurt Plateau), the signs of later visitors, ca. 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE – 1<sup>st</sup> century CE; 3 – Ak-Kaia I cave Sarmatian sanctuary in Ak-Kaia sacred mountain, Eastern Crimea, mid-1<sup>st</sup> – mid-2<sup>nd</sup> centuries. CE (after Solomonik 1959, No. 57).

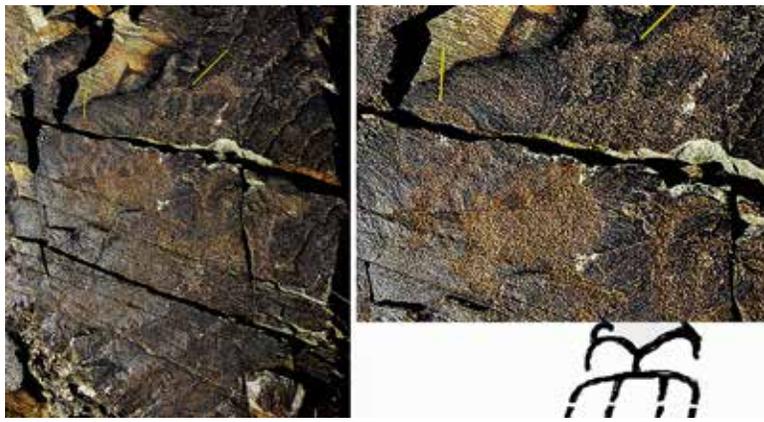


Fig. 8. The scene from assemblage I: male goats, the medieval images of camel and goat (on the left) and Tamga No 3 in the upper part.

“triptych” is the important scene of an attack by a wolf on a male goat and separate images of ungulates, which in their details correspond with the incised images in assemblage II. The severely damaged lower level of the massif retains several surfaces with drawings in this series. On one of them, apart from a medieval camel and goat, again depictions of male goats repeat, between which is Tamga No. 3 in

Fig. 9. The archer with costume of Yuezhi-Kushan type in a petroglyph composition of “Post-Saka style,” Chu-Ili Mountains.



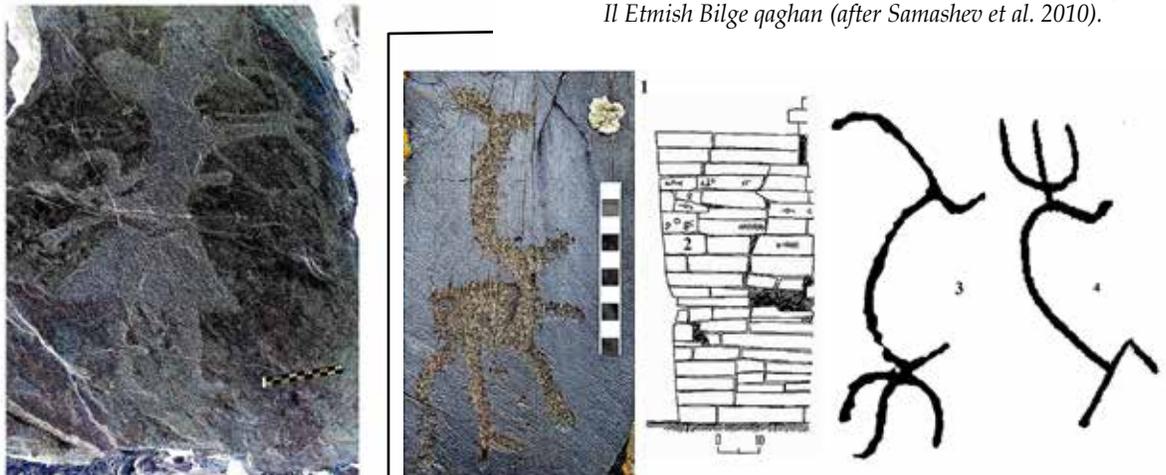
the shape of a comb with four short teeth on the bottom and a vertical line at the top (between the second and third “teeth”), from which extend symmetrically to the sides arc-shaped branches. From the left element extending upwards is yet one more short bent line. Probably the right part of the sign had the same shape, but that area had some later “restoration” [Fig. 8]. Tamga No. 3 is probably one of the most important in our collection. We know only one identical

sign in the Eurasia of that time, on coins of the early Kushan Empire (Ibid., Fig. 28.101). It is connected with the Yuezhi elite. Of interest in connection with this is the fact that the series of petroglyphs of the “post-Saka type” in the Chu-Ili Mountains include a composition with a typical archer in Yezhi/Kushan costume (Yatsenko 2001b; 2006, pp. 170–87, Figs. 110–134) [Fig. 9].

On the nearby surfaces is a series of other tamga-type images: in the shape of the print of a horse’s hoof, another with two concentric circles, and a short line with a bent end. Unfortunately these signs exist in isolation from the petroglyphs of the series under review here; hence their identification remains problematic.

**Assemblage III** has yet another group of surfaces with very large (70–80 cm) images of wild animals (bulls, male goats and wolves) and anthropomorphic figures. They form several panneaux oriented to the south and can be made out from the opposite side of valley A. Here is Tamga No. 4 (22 x 10 cm), which has a complex shape [Fig. 10.1], but it is inscribed on a slab

Fig. 10. Tamga-sign No. 4 from assemblage III and its incorrect analogies: 1 – Tamga-sign No. 5; 2 – Bayte III temple; 3 – the Early Turkic sign from Akkol Lake; 4 – the Early Turkic sign of Il Etmish Bilge qaghan (after Samashev et al. 2010).



of the cliff oriented westward, in the direction of the canyon. It is unique and has only distant analogues [Fig. 10.2-4].

The neighboring surface is oriented similarly, on which at the top is a scene with wolves and male goats in the style of the series being studied, and below, an Early Turkic figure of a mounted standard bearer. None of these petroglyphs can be seen from the valley.

Outside of this system of compositions are two isolated surfaces with drawings in the same style, which are located next to the path between assemblages II and III. One of them is a palimpsest, in which outline drawings of two male goats have been superimposed on drawings from the Bronze Age. Lines crossing the trunk of one of them create a complicated design. On the second surface, oriented southeast, are two isolated groups of individuals. On the left sits a front-facing anthropomorphic figure in a distinct pose with legs widely spread apart. Pointing down between the legs is a triangular projection (a phallus?). In the hands of the person is a bow, from which he shoots at the male goat. On the left above the figure of the Bowman is a rounded spot and below it an indeterminate wild animal. The right part of the picture depicts from top down a horseman, a tiger and a bull with horns shaped like a lyre. From several parameters (the small dimension of the figures and their orientation) these carvings do not enter into the overall system of what the petroglyphs depict but add to the list of motifs and broaden the range of possible analogues for the identification of the entire series.

Of particular value is the composition found in the habitation zone of the middle part of valley B. On its surfaces is depicted an important group of individuals: the center is occupied by a large image of a fantastic animal with the trunk of a horse, the tail of a feline predator, the head of a wolf with open

jaws and from whose head extend backwards two long horns with curved ends. Its body is decorated by intersecting lines; on the shoulder is the imprint of a horse's hoof. In front of the animal lies a prostrate man, next to whose arms is a bow. Below the beast is a man on bended knee with arms extended to the sides. To the right further down is a tall figure of a man, who is having intercourse with a (she-)wolf from behind. Above the syncretic beast is the image of a male goat. It is possible that the composition has not been preserved in its entirety: the lower part of the stone is chipped from some recent damage.

Assemblages of petroglyphs close to ours in style and in part in subject matter have been found earlier at Sholakzhideli Gorge in the Khantau Mountains (the northern part of the Chu-Ili Mountains). In one scene with running animals (male goats and deer), near one male goat is the unique Tamga-sign No. 5 [Fig. 11.1]. Such compositions also include an image of a winged deer, known for the ancient Iranians [Fig. 11.2].

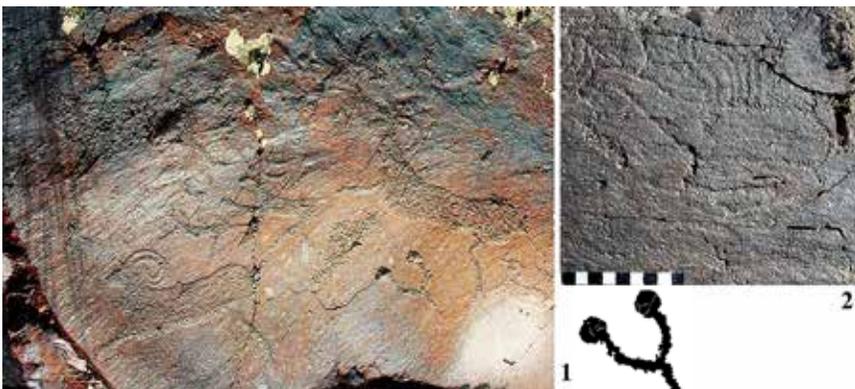
All tamga-signs of this series in the Jetysu region can be connected with the depiction in profile of a standing (in one case, running) male goat and appear either above or below it [Figs. 5-6, 8, 11]. This underscores the special role of these sacral "pure" animals, which is typical for the mountain regions of Central Asia up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### A complex of visual images

The specificity of this style was determined by the combination of animal style of more eastern origin (similar to that of the Northern Altai "Pazyrykians" and unknown for Jetysu Sakas of the 7<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE), unusual compositions with anthropomorphic personages (a problem which will be analyzed separately in a future article) and tamga-signs. The latter were unknown for Sakas of Jetysu and other regions of Kazakhstan and represented types unknown for Pazyryk culture and other, more eastern cultures of the Saka-Scythian era.

One can draw a series of important conclusions about the role of the petroglyphs of the given series in the structure of the archaeological landscape. Two functionally different zones can be reconstructed: the zone of habitations or camps of valleys B and C and, most probably, a sacred zone, the region where the tributaries meet in canyon A. At the latter, apart from the burying of the dead, an important role would have been played by certain ceremonies probably enacted at the optimal

Fig. 11. Khantau (the northwestern part of the Chu-Ili Mountains), the petroglyphs in "Post-Saka style": 1 - hunting male goats with two dogs and Tamga-sign No. 5; 2 - a winged deer.



vantage point for viewing these petroglyphs. In all sections where there is a concentration of the rock art (assemblages I-III) there is a common principle underlying the organization of the row of images, but the specific content in each case differs fundamentally from that of the others, among other things on account of the inclusion into the system of clan signs of various types.

This feature sharply distinguishes our series of petroglyphs when viewed against the background of rock art of earlier periods and in many cases openly stands in opposition to it. For example, deliberately ignored is the principle of accumulation characteristic for rock art of various periods, in accordance with which the earlier drawings were in part renewed, re-worked, supplemented by one's own carvings and thus included in a new composition. Especially indicative are the multilayer compositions, where the depictions of the Early Saka type (the 7<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE) have been crudely covered over. The distinct repertoire and artistic refinement of the petroglyphs of the post-Saka style also point to the absence of continuity with local traditions of rock art. The post-Saka style images appear to be of a different kind, although they do include many stylistic features from the cultural traditions established earlier in the Saka era [Fig. 12].

The homogeneous nature of the given series of petroglyphs is evident in the similarity of the technique of their execution and in the stylistic specificity of

the figures, which can be termed the "application style." The contours of the silhouetted figures are not burdened with details, and the smooth lines convey only the characteristic elements which help identify the typological features and the incomplete action, which can only be guessed at in the static profiles of the individuals. The delicate elements — almond-shaped eyes, solar signs (volutes) or a complex interweaving of lines on the bodies, jaws with bared teeth or paws of a beast with talons — accent the most important semantic qualities of the individuals. All this sets the given series of carvings off from the archaic traditions of rock art both of the most ancient periods and of later ones, but shows an affinity with the Early Saka animal style art with its aristocratic spirit which is everywhere represented in Central Asia by analogous images and subjects both in petroglyphs and in small artifacts.

The list of animals of the Chu-Ili Mountains almost entirely matches those on the artifacts of Scytho-Siberian art of the 5<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE. The closest coincidence in iconography is on some artifacts of the Saka-Scythian era in the late stage of Pazyryk culture of the neighboring northern Altai Mountains (in wood, felt and metal found at Pazyryk, Berel and other sites) [Figs. 12.3,4,6,9,15,18,20] and partially in Tuva and the Minusinsk Basin (Khakassia). For the same territory of Jetysu in earlier times (whose necropolises have been only partially studied) our petroglyphs provide a small number of analogues in the Issyk barrow and on sacred bronze wares from special funeral treasures

(cauldrons and tables) which usually are found by accident. Many stylistic analogies are provided also by more distant artifacts from the Ordos region and neighboring parts of Inner Mongolia [Fig. 12.14,17] "with clear elements of Pazyryk influence" (Kovalev 1999, p. 81, Fig. 2).

The petroglyphs of our series have as well important specific features. For example, the image

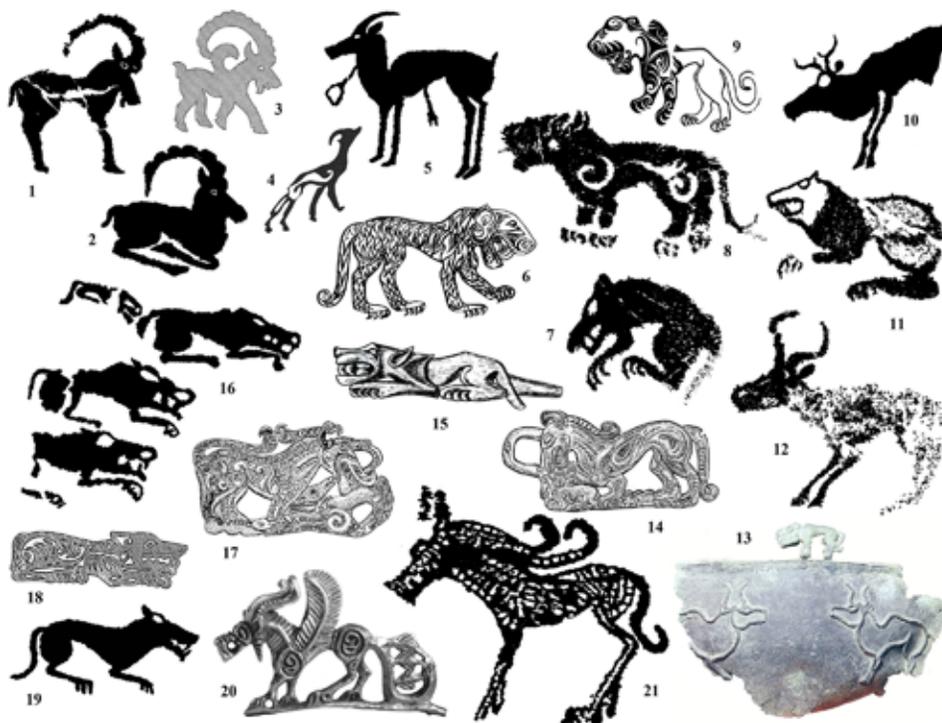


Fig. 12. The main animal images of "Post-Saka style" and some of their early analogies in Pazyryk culture (3-4, 6, 9, 15, 18, 20), in Mongolia and Inner Mongolia (14, 17) and Jetysu (13).



Fig. 13. Some compositions with anthropomorphic personages from Valley A (1) and Valley B (2).

of a fantastic animal in the composition from valley B has no analogue in Pazyryk art (Barkova 1987; Chekryzhova 2004, pp. 13–16), but is almost an exact copy of a unique golden figurine of a monster from the “Siberian Collection” of Peter the Great which is of unknown origin [Fig. 12.20]. The complete coincidence of the iconography (the synthesis of elements of wolf, tiger, horse or other ungulates) is supplemented by stylistic analogies in small details (the shape of the eye, which extends over the muzzle; the decorative “chevron” on the shoulder; the axial line on the trunk, which crosses the tiger skin background). The iconographic parallel to this mythological character can be seen in a series of depictions on the belt plaques from northern China, which are often accidental finds (Bunker 1997, pp. 44–45, Figs. A32, A44; Bunker 2002, pp. 96–97, 122–23, Nos. 63, 94; Bogdanov 2006, Pls. XXXVII.2-4, LIX).<sup>5</sup> The syncretic image of a wolf-shaped monster here also includes elements of a feline predator (the curved tip of the tail), of ungulates (the S-shaped horn, lying back along the spine) and has complex decoration on the body. The fantastic figure is often shown in scenes where it is devouring its prey, in a static pose bent over its victim – a fallow deer or other ungulate.

An important characteristic of the petroglyphs of this series is the presence in it of a rich and complete set of anthropomorphic images and of complex motifs, among them ones in which the mysterious monster

participates, bent over the prone figure of the archer [Fig. 13.2]. The correlation of iconography with Ordos compositions is evident, but there the victim is a wild animal instead of a human. Apparently, the presence in the given context of a scene showing coitus of a human with a wolf can be considered the visual version of a motif from local mythic genealogy. It is significant that this motif is repeated twice on a composition in valley A. We see also coitus with cows [Fig. 13.1].

Beyond the borders of our study’s locale, this scene appears twice in the eastern part of Jetysu, in the Eshkiolmes Mountains (Gorge 10). That most significant zone of petroglyphs in Kazakhstan contains many sets of depictions which can confidently be connected with the pictorial complex of the area between the Chu and Ili Rivers. In addition to the coincidence of subject matter and style between the two series of petroglyphs, they have in common the stratigraphic position in the palimpsests: everywhere they have been crudely superimposed over the carvings in the Early Saka animal style. The distinctive feature of the Eshkiolmes carvings consists as well in the abundance of depictions of realia (of objects and weapons), which has enabled the entire series to be dated to the 5<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE (Rogozhinskii et al. 2004, pp. 83–84, Fig. 8).

Northeast of Jetysu/Semirech’e, which is the main territory of the distribution of our series of petroglyphs, a large assemblage of similar carvings has been documented in the locations of Tsagaan Salaa, Baga Oigor and Shivet Khairkhan, which were nominated in 2011 by UNESCO as the “Petroglyph Complexes of the Mongolian Altai” (Kubarev et al., 2005, pp. 94–106, Nos. 40–42, 1055–1059 etc.; Jacobson et al. 2001, Nos. 38, 40–41, 956–960 etc.; Kubarev 2009, Nos. 310, 311, 907–909 etc.).

Moreover, in the Zeravshan River valley, at Bironsai Gorge (on the southern slopes of the Nurata Mountains), Uzbekistan, is an expressive series of petroglyphs, including large figures of wolves shown crouching on the ground, ungulates (male goats, deer, wild boar) and also anthropomorphic figures which in many elements are similar to the carvings from Jetysu (Khuzhanazarov et al. 2002, pp. 179–87) [Fig. 14]. All the carvings here



Fig. 14. Petroglyphs similar to Jetysu “post-Saka style” in Bironsai Gorge (Nurata Mountains, Uzbekistan).

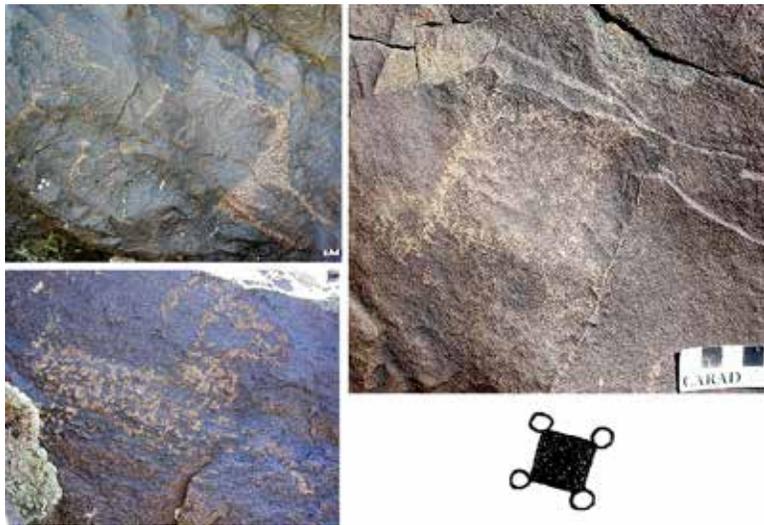
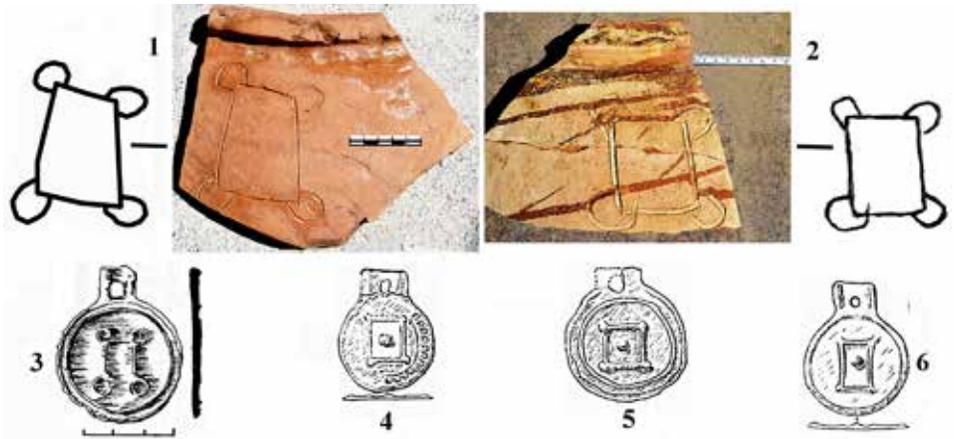


Fig. 15 (above). An animal and Tamga-sign No. 6 from the Tomar valley (Tarbagatai Mountains).

Fig. 16 (right). Analogies to tamga-sign No. 7: 1-2 - the Middle Syradarya Basin, Kang-kü/Kangju empire ("khum" big jars from Turkestan/Yassy citadel, after Erbulat A. Smagulov); 3 - Bitak necropolis (near Scythian Neapolis, the Central Crimea), Grave 56 (after Alexandr E. Puzdrovskii); 4-6 - Kobiakovo necropolis (Don estuary region), Graves 65/1957, 23/1962 and 25/1962 (after Victoria M. Kosianenko).



also crudely cover over earlier ancient petroglyphs which made up a panneau on two wide surfaces of the cliff. Among the monuments of rock art known to us, this one is located the farthest to the southwest in the area of distribution of petroglyphs of this series which we have found in the Jetysu region and is connected with a very significant group of early nomad clan signs.

In addition to the region of study (Jetysu/Semirech'e), we publish here a series of tamga-signs of the same period found in the territories adjoining it.

### Compositions near the northern shore of Lake Balkhash and in the Zaisan Depression

Several important compositions with tamga-signs have been found on the northern boundaries of Jetysu.

#### 1. Tarbagatai Mountains.

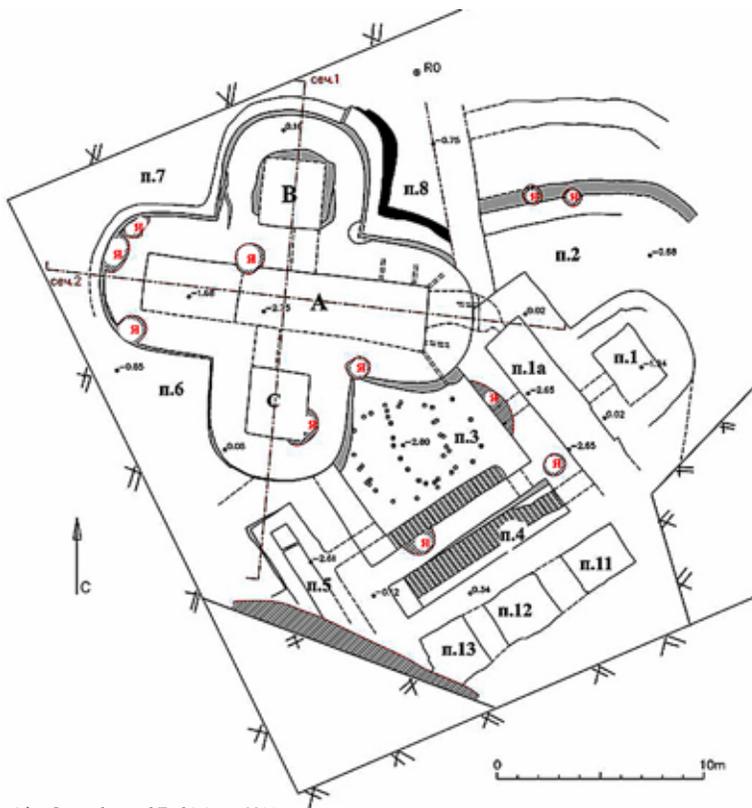
In 2008 in the Tomar valley of the southwestern slopes of the Tarbagatai Mountains (the Saur-Tabagatai mountain system, separated from the Altai Mountains by the Zaisan Depression) A.E. Rogozhinskii found a

composition in the same style with several male goats and Tamga-sign No. 6 on the valley floor [Fig. 15]. This sign is one of the most interesting and important in our collection.

Identical signs starting in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE are known on the territory of the western neighbor of the Wusun, the Kangju (Kang-kü) "nomadic empire." The expedition of Erbulat Smagulov unearthed them in the oldest citadel of Turkestan (Iassy), on large "khum" jars (Smagulov and Yatsenko 2014b, Fig. 6.1) [Fig. 16.1-2]. They were found in a cross-shaped building measuring 18 x 18 m (in 2011, the stratum of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> century BCE: Smagulov and Erzhigitova 2013, p. 88) and in Section No.

13 of the southeastern building (in 2015, the stratum of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century CE) [Fig. 17, next page]. This indicates that a noble clan with such a sign lived in Turkestan for no less than three centuries.

A series of signs analogous to those found at Tomar is known farther west in the European steppe zone. There they are always found on artifacts of one or another type – on miniature bronze mirror-pendants, which likely were among the gifts to young women who were getting married (such mirrors often were inscribed with the sign of her clan). These Sarmatian/Alanian nomadic girls married husbands from the local agricultural tribes, "late Scythians" of the Central Crimea or Maeots of the Don River estuary. All such mirrors date to the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> to mid-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE (the early stage of Late Sarmatian culture). In the Crimea, a mirror with an identical sign was found in Grave 56 of the Bitak necropolis (the border of Scythian Neapolis) (Puzdrovskii 2007, Fig. 129.7; Smagulov and Yatsenko 2014b, Fig. 7.2) [Fig. 16.3].<sup>6</sup> At the other end of the Sea of Azov near Don River mouth in the necropolis of the Kobiakovo fortified settlement three such mirrors



After Smagulov and Erzhigitova 2014

Fig. 17. The locations (designated by Cyrillic "Я") of "khum" big jar finds with Tamga-sign No. 7 in the earliest citadel of Turkestan / Yassy in 2011 (a cross-shaped building) and in 2015 (room 13).

were found in Graves 65/1957, 23/1962, and 25/1962 (Smagulov and Yatsenko 2014b, Fig. 7.3-5). The signs from Kobiakovo belonged to a related clan, whose emblem differed only in having an additional dot in the center [Fig. 16.4-6].

Around 150 CE near the mouth of the Don settled a group of "Late Sarmatians" – the new wave of nomads which migrated (according to the most important modern specialist on the Sarmatians and Early Alans, Vladimir Iur'evich Malashev) from the center of northern Kazakhstan across the southern Urals region. This group was probably closely connected with the Kangju "nomadic empire" (i.e., with the center of the mid-Syr Darya River region). One can now connect its migration with information in the *Hou Han Shu* / the Book of the Later Han (後漢書) (118) on the renaming of Yancai to Alanliao, as related in the report of Ban Yong dated between 94 CE and 125 CE. Prior to that time, no fresh information about the Western Regions

had made its way to China for about a century. Probably this group, like some earlier ones, were called Alans (Yatsenko 2011, pp. 200-02). Modern anthropologists consider the "Late Sarmatians" to be most closely related to part of the population of the mixed Jety-Asar Culture of the ancient Syr Darya estuary, established, according to new data, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE by some neighboring groups on the northern periphery of the Kangju "nomadic empire" (Chikisheva 2011, p. 353, Fig. 2; Kitov and Khozhailov 2012, p. 455; Khozhailov 2013, pp. 478, 481). Another component part of that culture seems to have originated farther east and has been connected with the late Tagar Culture of the Saian Mountains (Balabanova 2012, pp. 87-88).

## 2. The northern shore of Lake Balkhash

The horizontally placed variant of the S-shaped Tamga sign [Fig. 18] has been found among the petroglyphs in the "post-Saka style" north of Lake Balkhash near the small Tokrau River. Such marks in the period from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century

CE were known both in Central Asia and in Sarmatia (Yatsenko 2001a, Figs. 5.44, 28.150-151).

## Kangju "nomadic empire" tamga-signs in the Kemer Mountains (middle Syr Darya region)

In the Kemer Mountains on the northern slopes of the low Karatau Mountains, Alexei Rogozhinskii found in 2009 three signs of partly similar design from related clans on adjacent horizontal surfaces of small cliffs, at the foot of which was an ancient nomad site. They are not accompanied by other images. One of them has been covered over by modern images [Fig. 19, next page]. These signs have no precise analogues in the steppe and desert zones of that period. This is one of

Fig. 18. (1) two dogs (?) and Tamga-sign No. 7, Tokrau River, north of Lake Balkhash and (2) analogy, Bayte III temple wall, Ustiurt Plateau (after Samashev et al. 2007).



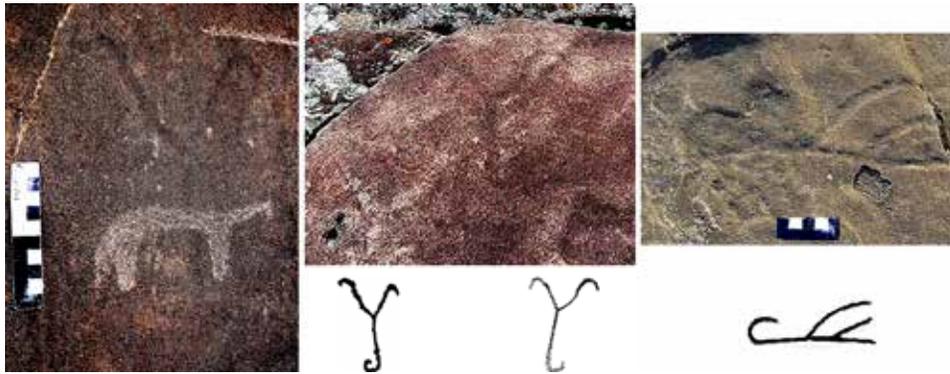


Fig. 19. The types of tamga-signs from the Kemer Mountains (Karatau mountain system, the Middle Syr Darya Basin)

few situations where signs of the Karatau Mountains can be dated prior to the early Middle Ages.<sup>7</sup>

### Ethnic identification of “post-Saka style” petroglyphs and tamga-signs

The graphic features of the “post-Saka style,” in conjunction with the depiction of previously unknown property tamga signs, allows one to date such petroglyphs to the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> to 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE, the time of the appearance there of the Wusun from eastern Xinjiang and of part of the Yuezhi from Gansu.

It is important to take into account that starting in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE the region of the Chu-Ili Mountains was a border zone of the Wusun and Kangju “nomadic empires.” According to the *Han Shu* 漢書 (95), in the western part the Wusun left in place the previous Saka inhabitants of the region. Judging by the petroglyphs in the series of interest here, the Sakas in the early period of the rule by the Wusun retained in part the traditions of their art. It is problematic to attribute the signs which accompanied the images of the wild animals to the Wusun themselves, since neither in their homeland in eastern Xinjiang nor in their later political center in northwest Xinjiang does one find such identity marks or series. They may have belonged to other immigrants and subjects of the Wusun, the Yuezhi, part of whom, according to the information in the same annals, were detained by the Wusun in their new possessions. It is as yet difficult to provide a definitive answer to the question about the interpretation of “post-Saka style” and “non-Saka signs.” Either such property signs for some reason could have been used by neighbors of the Yuezhi-Sakas, or (which is more likely), the Yuezhi borrowed the images and style of Saka rock art.

From the Chinese annals we know about the migration of nomadic groups from the Wusun into Kangju territory (the mid-Syr Darya region), for example, the horde of the rebellious Pi Kong Ji prince in 11 BCE with 80,000 followers. He was killed by the Chinese in 3 BCE.

Contemporary anthropologists have determined that the homeland of the tribes of the Middle Sarmatian

and northern Xinjiang, such as Alagou, the Nilka necropolises, etc. (Chikisheva 2011, Fig. 4). A similar conclusion was reached by one of the authors of this article as a result of the analysis of Central Asian innovations of various origin in the region south of the Altai (Yatsenko 1993, p. 67). Evidence of this also is to be seen in the fact that the language of the direct descendents of the “Middle Sarmatians”, the modern Ossetians of the Caucasus, is closest to Khotanese Saka (Bailey 1977, p. 43). Undoubtedly the route of such migration was across the Jetysu region.

### Other migrations of tamga sign groups; western analogies to the Xiongnu signs

The existing literature has already examined the question about the migrations of the owners of some clan tamga-signs from Central Asia to the European steppes (Vainberg and Novgorodova 1976; Yatsenko 1992; 1993, Fig. 1; 2006b).

Recently Sergei Voroniatov proposed that the Mongolian Xiongnu elite played a significant role in the traditions of use and in the actual shapes of the Sarmatian tamgas of the 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE (Voroniatov 2014) [Fig. 20, next page]. Unfortunately, his view is open to criticism, in part because a “specific” way of placement of signs on animal bodies and some artifacts in both cultures in fact is widely documented by examples from the steppe and semi-desert region right down until recent times. Only about 20 types of the simplest Xiongnu signs (really popular in many other societies) have close analogies for some non-powerful clans in Sarmatia. To attribute some of the Mongolian petroglyphs with tamgas to the Xiongnu and then use this dating in arguing the case can also be problematic, since they may in fact come from the earlier Saka-Schythian period (cf. Yatsenko 2001a; Marsadolov and Yatsenko 2004; Torbat et al., eds. 2012). One might also question whether the defeated and dispersed Xiongnu would have retained sufficient prestige so that their clan signs be emulated in the west. One can at best only cautiously suppose that such analogies in the signs *might* have arisen in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE and in the first century CE in the

Fig. 20. Examples of Xiongnu tamga-signs.



border lands of the Kangju, where the Sarmato-Alans, who had not yet found their European home, and small groups of the Xiongnu arriving there between 36 BCE and 91 CE would have come into contact.

Clearly there is a great deal more to be learned as the petroglyphs in remote regions of Central Asia become known and can then be compared across the broad expanses traversed by the migrations of early nomads who interacted with other nomadic groups and with the populations of sedentary centers. The evidence of tamga-signs is hugely important for establishing the location and possible identity of kin groups at the same time that its interpretation will continue to be controversial. We hope that our publication of the newly discovered material here will contribute significantly to that discussion.

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## Notes

1. The creators of the petroglyphs usually did not depict directly scenes of the killing of the wild animals which were

the object of hunting but rather implied it. For example, the image of a hunter usually was replaced by one or two dogs or arrows in the body of wounded animals; predators chased ungulates but had not yet caught them.

2. According to Achaemenid texts, Jetysu Sakas were known as Saka Haumavarga (for their images, see Yatsenko 2011b).

3. A mirror-image variant of the lower sign is known on an unpublished whetstone of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE from Tanais at the mouth of the Don River. For the criteria for establishing similarity and difference of signs accepted in the current literature and for the means by which new types were created among the ancient Iranian-speaking peoples and their sources, the mechanisms of borrowing signs, see Yatsenko 2001a, pp. 15–17, 19–23, 25–27, Figs. 2–3. For the classification of signs (based on the Early Turkic signs of Kazakhstan), see Rogozhinskii 2014. Cf. on the problems of the identification and description of Early Turkic signs, Yatsenko 2013.

4. In the round two-story Bayte III temple on the walls of the small cross-shaped courtyard, the worshippers left three large assemblages of tamga-signs. Each of them bears traces of several actions by representatives of several clans, where the signs were a substitute for a contemporary signature at the conclusion of agreements accompanied by oaths. Sometimes in a single horizontal row were from 3 to 11 or more signs (Yatsenko 2005).

5. Note, however, Kost 2014, which systematizes a great deal of what is known about the belt plaques which have been found in documented archaeological contexts.

6. It is significant that a second most ancient sign from the Turkestan citadel is identical only with one found in the Bitak necropolis in the Crimea (!) (Yatsenko and Smagulov 2014a, Fig. 6.1), but it dates from the earlier Middle Sarmatian Culture, the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE (Puzdrovskii 2011, p. 378, Fig. 2.1).

7. On Kangju signs from oasis settlements see, first of all, Smagulov and Yatsenko 2008, 2010 and 2014a. Especially important is the largest collection of signs in pre-Islamic Transoxiana, 103 types found in the Sidak sanctuary from 2001–2012 (Smagulov and Yatsenko 2014b, Figs. 1–2). Although the sanctuary was founded in the early Kangju period, only the latest layers, of the 5<sup>th</sup>–early 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, have as yet been studied. Many signs were not only the marks of local believers but also the marks of pilgrims from various parts of Transoxiana (Bukhara, Samarkand, Chach, Otrar). The signs were engraved on votive pottery and also on special large "khum" jars that contained the bones of the dead (Smagulov and Yatsenko 2014a).

– translated by Daniel C. Waugh