

Esther Jacobson-Tepfer. *The Hunter, the Stag, and the Mother of Animals. Image, Monument, and Landscape in Ancient North Asia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 413 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-020236-1.

The most recent book by Esther Jacobson-Tepfer is a definitive work that culminates from a long career of devising productive analytical paradigms for studying the often-assumed straightforward art of the Eurasian steppe. In this magnum opus, she considers artistic images and motifs as contributing to and constituting “signifying structures” of beliefs among early herders and hunter-gatherers. The accompanying narrative of centuries of changes in artistic vocabulary, execution, and context aims to elucidate shifts in beliefs amidst the *longue durée* of social and economic transitions from the Neolithic through Bronze Ages. Although the narrative extends, within the late chapters, into the upheavals of the Early Iron Age, the main emphases and strengths of this book lie in the novel analytical approaches applied to the earlier eras for which current archaeological remains are relatively scarce and for which plausible explanations of the seemingly enigmatic and changing artistic traditions are equally few.

The book focuses on the Siberian taiga and Altai mountain regions of North Asia, where forest-steppe meets grassland-steppe. The swathe of examined rock art includes findings from the corners of the converging countries of Russia, China, Mongolia, and even Kazakhstan, though the majority of data for this book come first from decades of previous scholarly documentation in Russia and second the author’s own extensive fieldwork in the Mongolian Altai (Jacobson-Tepfer et al. 2010). In her comprehensive engagements with the large corpus of data, Jacobson-Tepfer couches the extant information exceptionally well within the history of Russian scholarly practice. She deftly demonstrates the effects of contemporary politics throughout the Soviet and post-Soviet eras on survey agendas and methods to document rock art, on human-induced destruction of art in the landscape, and on interpretive approaches to the art produced by pre-historic hunters and herders.

That said, one of the largest obstacles in modern scholarly pursuits of prehistoric art and its meanings, she argues, is the seeming fixation on ethnographically documented shamanic traditions that have “claimed the passionate attention of modern scholars” (p. 318; cf. Price 2001). In contrast to traditional approaches to early rock art, which seek to explain the images and settings through a framework structured by ethnographic records of shamanistic logics and practices, Jacobson-Tepfer employs ethnographic studies at the end of analyses as one of many possible sources for assisting in interpretation. This tactic allows greater rational room for more subtle patterns or alternative symbolic structures that might guide interpretation (p. 314); in many ways, it lets the art speak for itself. In this same vein, Jacobson-Tepfer places her theoretical considerations of an “archaeology of belief” at the end of the book, again allowing the rock art to breathe, so to speak, and letting the data and its many patterns guide our study of past beliefs and the societies that engendered them.

In regard to the recurrent proclivities toward ethnography-derived shamanistic explanations of prehistoric art, Jacobson-Tepfer maintains that much of this art is characteristically *pre-shamanic*. Rather than seeing shamanism as a natural and innate belief of steppe peoples, much less the foundational belief system of Siberian prehistoric groups, she argues through her presentation of prehistoric developments that “drawing on the archaic roots of myth and clan cults, shamanism was in some sense a late-comer, the last layer of belief within the deep sedimentation of time” (p. 351). Her overarching narrative is thus not one of timeless traditions but rather of continual transitions – in subsistence regimes, in social practices, and in beliefs and their artistic renditions. Her careful considerations of the long and fluid time frames of rock art present the shift from hunting to herding not as a watershed event but as a long transformative process. Most notably, there appears a significant delay between evidence in the archaeological record for pastoral lifeways and the appearance of herding motifs in rock art (p. 159). These shifting lifeways are presented as closely related to shifts in beliefs, and as demonstrable through changes in styles, themes, and contexts of rock art.

Jacobson-Tepfer purports an archaeology of belief as the most apt paradigm for studying the range of art on stone. She presents it as an alternative to an archaeology of structured religion, and an approach that seeks not concrete meanings as a way of understanding past societies and their art. Although in several instances her explanations of the art appear to fall into the attractive traps of determining specific beliefs and ideas, her overall model for an archaeology of belief provides a way of exploring ancient art and structures free of articulated or systematic constructs of religion (cf. Rowan 2011). The components and settings of these images intimate a structure of underlying beliefs, even if we may, as Jacobson-Tepfer rightly does, only pose conjectures of the specific ancient beliefs.

It is within such a paradigm of belief that Jacobson-Tepfer constructs her model of signifying structures. The first chapter, in which she outlines her approach, confirms the tightly interwoven and structured relationship between myth and art upon which “signifying structures” are fabricated. Each of these artistic structures, she argues, is “composed of *image/object* + *pictorial context* + *physical context*...its effect shifting depending on the physical context” (p. 11). In the variable of *image*, she closely considers specific elements and their often modified appearances from so-called natural conditions. In the case of animals, images are often “evocative” of actual creatures rather than realistic depictions of them (p. 39), and even animals or people that may have been attempts at realistic renderings often occur within compositions that are themselves unrealistic. Jacobson-Tepfer repeatedly provides explanations, couched within logics of structured belief systems, as to how seemingly conflicting images, such as the hunting of wild

animals and couples in sexual embrace (pp. 136-43), may in fact be seen as complementary components of a narrative trope.

The subsequent variable of *pictorial context* unpacks the complex palates only to reassemble them via a logic of belief that makes sense of the seeming enigmatic configurations. Pictures are compositions alloyed from real beings and experiences but meant to form *displaced* rather than *direct* narratives (pp. 168-69) of a mythic world. The scenes and their components should thus not be taken as unadulterated reflections of the contemporaneous society. The collective components are seen not as totemistic motifs of a systemic shamanistic pantheon but as beings and actions that only together reflect mythic tropes of pre-shamanism beliefs. The even broader variable of *physical context* addresses rock art as contextualized within both *place* (ritual or habitation) and *path* (hunting or herding migration routes) of the ancient and changing landscapes. The larger geographical context of these composite pictures relate to a destination, embedded with both practical and ritual significance, of thoroughfare as well as habitation for the hunters and herders.

For example, the combined consideration of image element, total picture, and physical context is especially important for the interpretation of figures of the so-called chariots of the steppe. Their placement, as images etched onto high hilltops reaching for the sky or even as objects placed within burials, suggests a ritual significance of the journey of deceased to the afterlife. The notion of a swift vehicle speeding across the rugged, even if “open,” steppe is markedly displaced from reality and meant to reflect more mythic narratives (p. 205; Figs. 6.1-6.2).

Yet while the *physical context* for art etched onto rock outcrops and hilltops of the various valleys is given due consideration, the additional *archaeological context*, whether for rock art found on stones within burials or the comparable elements of material culture and ritual practice evident in the archaeological record, is not fully addressed with the same degree of attention. Jacobson-Tepfer implicitly relies on, rather than explicitly draws upon, the complete array of ritual monuments – their complex features or their patterns in the landscape – and the archaeological remains unearthed from them. The three analytical components of the book title – *image*, *monument* and *landscape* – seem at first to echo Jacobson-Tepfer’s three aspects of signifying structures, but in this case a consideration of the pictorial palate appears to have replaced empirical considerations of the array of corresponding monuments that occur in an array of carved stone stele, stone mounds, and accompanying ritual features (Allard and Erdenebaatar 2005; Wright 2007; 2012; Pan 2008; Baiarsaikhan 2009; Houle 2009; Fitzhugh and Bayarsaikhan 2011).

This may be due to the majority of contexts for known rock art occurring not on human constructs but on natural outcrops. Jacobson-Tepfer is correct to call out the overwhelming bias among researchers of Bronze Age etched art toward stone stelae (e.g. Volkov 2002). But just as the monumental stelae should not “steal the show” from the more numerous depictions of stags and other animals on rock outcrops (pp. 232-33), so should the magnificent images carved (or sometimes painted) on stone palates not

detract us from a consideration of the equally important and robust archaeological record of ritual constructions (with or without rock art), faunal remains, human remains, tools and weaponry (sometimes with corollary artistic renderings), and mortuary structures, all of which constitute data and contexts that must be considered if we are to fully address the beliefs and social practices of peoples in ancient North Asia.

What remains then is a further and equally thorough comparison of the rock art components of the ritual landscape with the monumental components, as well as contents, that pertain to ritual practices and beliefs. These include many features mentioned in the chapters such as the depictions of so-called masks carved on stone stelae or painted on stone slabs (Figs. 2.9, 2.11). What are researchers to make of the purported correlations of these masks to actual masks elsewhere, like those found in the Taklamakan desert at the site of Xiaohe (Guo 2012)? What are the relationships between artistic renditions of masks and liminal beings and the sizes, structures, features, and animal and human remains found in some of their monumental contexts? How might we compare the patterns of rock art placement in the landscape, addressed in this book, with patterns of contemporaneous monument placement in the landscape, a topic opened for discussion by the data compilations on local compendiums (e.g. Törbat et al. 2009) as well as Jacobson-Tepfer’s own work (Jacobson-Tepfer et al. 2010)? Virtually all known rock art and monument sites for the Bayan-Ölgii region of northern Mongolian Altai have been comprehensively documented and are even available on-line from Jacobson-Tepfer’s project webpage (<<https://mongolianaltai.uoregon.edu/theproject.php>>). Any reader of this book who knows of these extensive mapping efforts certainly eagerly awaits Jacobson-Tepfer’s next study that will hopefully combine these etched/painted *pictorial* signifying structures of the ritual landscape with the analyses of the built *monumental* signifying structures into a master study of ancient beliefs and ritual practices – a call for multi-variate studies echoed even within the opening and closing pages of this book (pp. 12, 359-60).

In addition to the novel “structured” analyses presented in this book, the accompanying appendix – “The Dating of Rock Art” (pp. 371-84) – bestows a methodology, which echoes throughout the text, that further benefits the study of prehistoric art. Jacobson-Tepfer likens her approach to an “archaeology” of art that delves into layers of composition, even within a singular panel of rock art. This emphasis on chronology further highlights dynamic phases of imagery with distinct changes. Jacobson-Tepfer skilfully argues that variables of *patina* and *overlay/juxtaposition* present the most concrete approaches via physical versus conceptual analyses. Considerations of the reuse of rock planes with overlapping images and the reuse of stones, both re-illustrating their surfaces and replacing them within new appropriative contexts, give a temporal and spatial depth to the pecked and painted images. Yet the art found on rock outcrops across the landscape, save for the occasional overlapping engravings, is less like an excavation pit with stratigraphic layers and more often like a collection of archaeological artifacts recovered from a surface scatter survey devoid of layered deposition. Across the landscape

are spread elements clearly from different periods but without the benefit of separate depositional layers and often devoid of firmly datable materials, thus making it harder to devise a clear chronology. What could be distinct phases blend together into uncertainties, and only a consideration of the full corpus of art in every context can bring us closer to a periodization of rock art.

This book synthesizes just such a comprehensive corpus, rendered through the aid of ample photographs (Gary Tepfer) and rich drawings (Lynn-Marie Kara), that may be employed as a useful reference guide to the art of the prehistoric Eurasian steppe. The utility of the beautifully drawn renderings by Kara of actual stelae, artifacts, and etched art is especially apparent when photography, no matter how high the quality, is unable to fully present the details of the art as it is seen with the naked eye by a viewer in person. Compare, for example the photo of Fig. 4.29 with the corresponding drawings of Figs. 6.1 and 6.2. Herein lies the admirable nature of Jacobson-Tepfer's integration of photos and drawings with detailed descriptions and often in-person analyses of the rock art within its natural setting.

The last of several major contributions of this book is Jacobson-Tepfer's call to engage in an archaeology of *belief* rather than pursue an archaeology of *religion* for the study of prehistoric societies such as those in North Asia. Her stated goal is "to identify significant signs and symbolic structures that might guide an exploration" into, rather than a codified *explanation* of, past rituals and symbolic art (p. 314). This outlook underscores the pitfalls not only of letting modern ethnographies of contemporary shamanic practices frame our understanding of archaic beliefs and their artistic renderings, but also of the frequent pursuit by archaeologists to reconstruct whole belief systems, or even impress an "articulated theological system" when none may have existed, and to determine the exact meanings of motifs and practices (p. 353). Nevertheless, Jacobson-Tepfer's caution purports neither a lack of any manner of belief systems among prehistoric groups nor a futility in exploring signifying images and monuments. Instead, she maintains a positive outlook on the possibilities for artistic analyses to reveal "persistent understandings regarding orientation and significant space" (p. 355).

Recent archaeological approaches to similar art and structures have placed equivalent emphases on ritual practices and experiences, rather than exact symbolisms or meanings, arguing that comparable ritual expressions may exist without a conformed set of practices (Fogelin 2007; Kyriakidis 2007; Insoll 2011). And although reaching "beyond belief" into an archaeology of religion may in many instances be a plausible and valid pursuit (cf. Rowan 2011), Jacobson-Tepfer clearly demonstrates that the case of prehistoric North Asia, by the availability and nature of its remaining record, is best suited to a more accommodating archaeology of belief.

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