

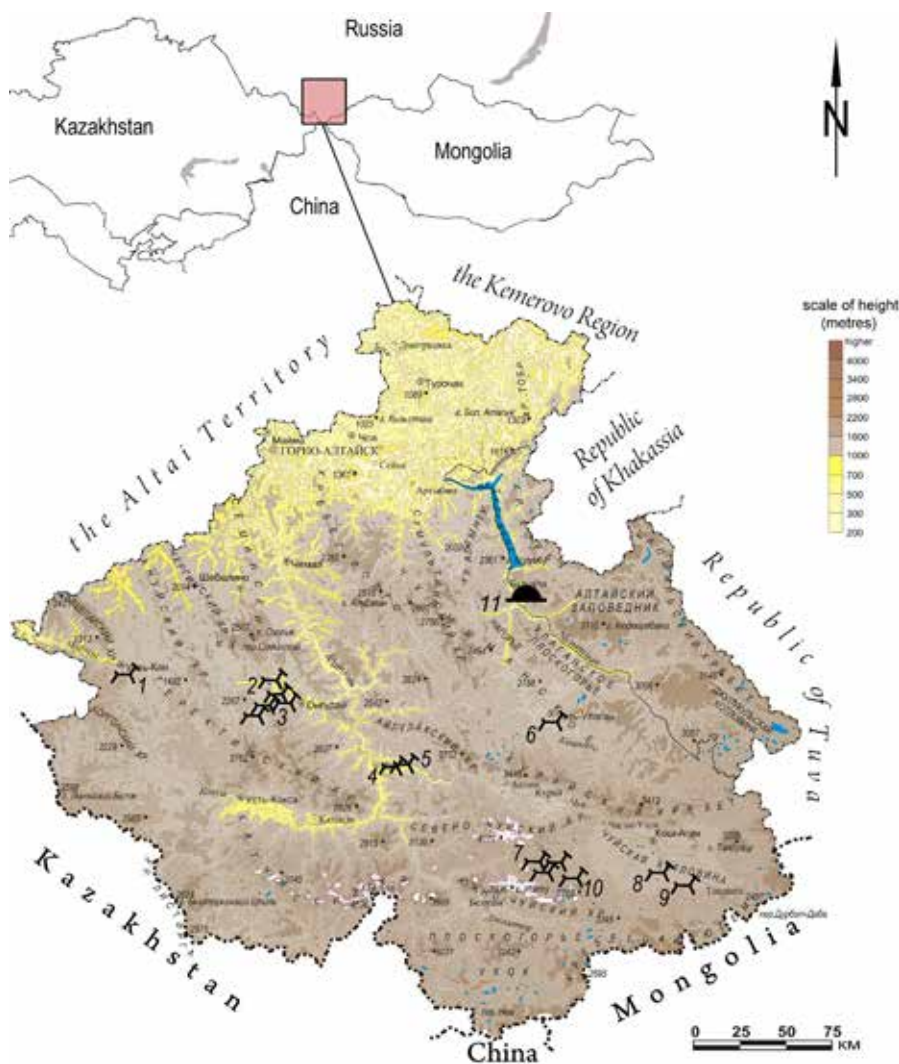


KEYWORDS: *Altai – Petroglyph – Turk – Hunting – Battle scene*

# BATTLE AND HUNTING SCENES IN TURKIC ROCK ART OF THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES IN ALTAI

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**Abstract.** Petroglyphs from the early Middle Ages particularly stand out among monuments of Altai rock art. Petroglyphs dated to this period were executed using the technique of engraving, with great attention being paid to fine details. These petroglyphs are an important source in cultural studies of the Altai population of the second half of the 1st millennium CE. Drawing on historical and archaeological contexts, it is suggested that the battle and hunting scenes depicted in petroglyphs are associated with memorial rites and that such scenes depict the military and hunting exploits of deceased noble warriors. Hence the semantic content of the battle and hunting scenes in Turkic rock art of this period can be described as resembling the genres of eulogy and panegyric.



## 1. Introduction

The Altai region is located at the junction of four modern states, Russia, Kazakhstan, China and Mongolia. The Altai region borders the dry steppes of Mongolia in the south and the west-Siberian taiga in the north. This part of southern Siberia is home to the region's highest mountains (Fig. 1). Their high altitude ridges are interspersed with river valleys and wide intermontane basins or flat-bottomed valleys, the so-called 'steppes' (Shahgedanova et al. 2002: 317–321). The research of geneticists and physical anthropologists has shown that the complicated Altai montane systems afforded the Altai region a level of isolation which resulted

**Figure 1.** Map of the Altai Republic with early medieval petroglyphs. 1. Ust-Kan; 2. Tuekta; 3. sites in Karakol valley; 4. Kalbak-Tash-2; 5. Kalbak-Tash-1; 6. Ullagan; 7. sites in Chagan valley (Chaganka); 8. Djalgys-Tobe; 9. Kurgak; 10. Elangash; 11. Kudyrg cemetery.

in the conservation of key population groups. In this regard, Altai is thought of as a kind of anthropological refugium (Chikisheva 2012: 152, 180). Nonetheless, this did not prevent population groups in the region from being significantly influenced by the historical and cultural processes taking place in neighbouring regions. Cultural development in the region was, naturally, most powerfully influenced by processes occurring in the belt of the Eurasian steppes or the Great Steppe. This territorial zone stretching from eastern Europe to the steppes of Manchuria was in a sense a gateway for migration flows in ancient and medieval times.

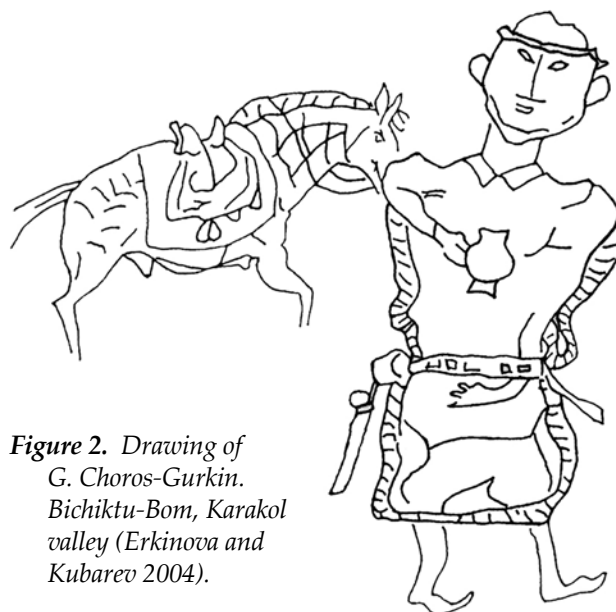
The combination of geographical factors described above has contributed to the unique richness and diversity of the development over history of the culture carried by the populations of Altai. Without doubt the region's most renowned archaeological monuments are the Pazyryk kurgans, frozen tombs dated from the fifth to the third centuries BCE. Yet the region is rich in other, equally important objects of historical and cultural heritage. Petroglyphs, for example, represent one of the largest categories of archaeological site in the Altai region.

Gregory Spassky, who published at the beginning of the 19th century in the St. Petersburg magazine *Siberian Bulletin*, was one of the first to draw attention to the petroglyphs of Altai. Spassky wrote that the study of petroglyphs was important to understanding the formation of the ancient art of the Siberian peoples. Gregory Spassky was also the first to discover early medieval runic inscriptions in Altai. Among Spassky's many merits it should be particularly noted that he was greatly concerned with the preservation of ancient rock art and in his papers condemned those who damaged petroglyphs in any way (Kubarev and Matochkin 1992).

More often, mention of rock art in the Altai appears in the writings of scholars and travellers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this period, the greatest contribution to the study of petroglyphs in Altai was made by artist Grigory Choros-Gurkin who devoted a special album of drawings to petroglyphs in the early twentieth century (Choros-Gurkin 2014) (Fig. 2).

The middle and second half of the twentieth century saw the discovery of many more petroglyphic sites in Altai. At this time, expeditions were organised to document and copy specific petroglyphs. However, from that time to the present day, only a small portion of rock art sites in Altai has actually been documented (see Okladnikov et al. 1979, 1980; Okladnikov and Okladnikova 1985; Kubarev and Jacobson 1996; Molodin and Cheremisin 1999; and others). Documenting petroglyphs is a complex and laborious process. In the absence of specific government programs in the Altai Republic dedicated to this field of research, few researchers devote their efforts to such activities, despite their relevance.

Altai rock art sites vary widely. An adequate



*Figure 2. Drawing of G. Choros-Gurkin. Bichiktu-Bom, Karakol valley (Erkinova and Kubarev 2004).*

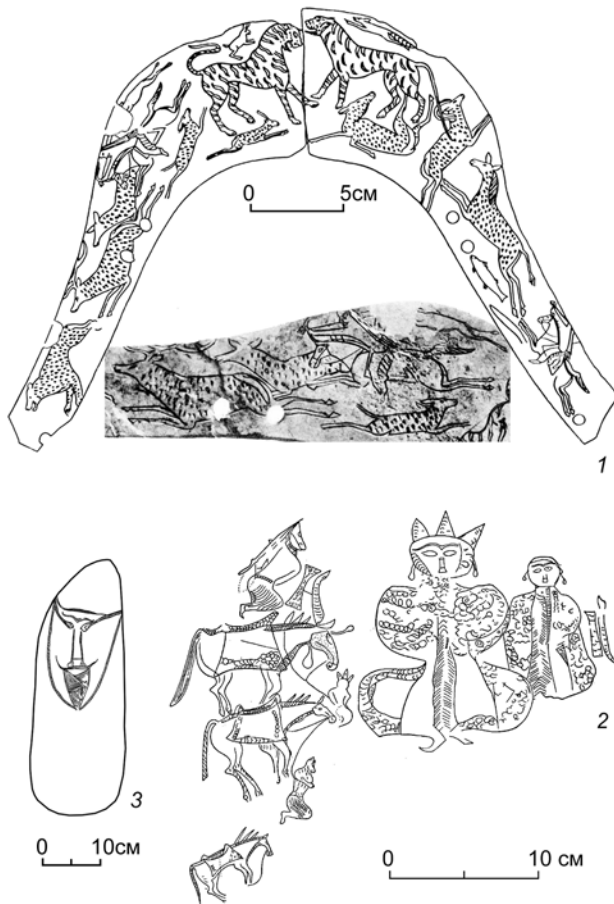
description of all the region's petroglyphic monuments would be far beyond the scope of one article. However, a very brief overview of petroglyphs in the region is given here for the sake of those who may be totally unfamiliar with the rock art of the region. According to some scientists, the earliest finds may be the petroglyphs located on the Ukok Plateau (Kalgutinsky rudnik site), dated to the Upper Paleolithic (Molodin and Cheremisin 1999). This date has not been corroborated by other researchers, however (Kubarev 1999: 188), and so clarification of the earliest appearance of Altai rock art remains an issue open for discussion.

Petroglyphs of the Bronze Age are represented by various mythological subjects including women giving birth, bulls and various mythical animals. The most famous petroglyphs belong to the Karakol culture and date to the second millennium BCE. Similar petroglyphs have been found on the walls of burial stone crypts (Kubarev 2009) and painted petroglyphs dated to the Bronze Age have been recorded in the northern part of Altai.

Petroglyphs of the early Iron Age are associated with the Scythian Siberian animal style. This style is typical of rock art and crafts of the same period. Items decorated with animal figures are common in the frozen Pazyryk burials from the fifth to the third century BCE.

Pazyryk art influenced the development of art in subsequent periods. However, in the first century CE, the petroglyphs of Altai and adjacent areas are representative of the 'Tashtyk' style. This artistic style may have its origins in the art of China during the time of the Han Dynasty. Due to the lack of representational sources in archaeological complexes, finding analogues of other petroglyphs of the post-Scythian period is extremely difficult.

The unique style found in petroglyphs of the early Middle Ages was formed under the influence of various factors. In many ways this style represents a continuation of the artistic traditions of the previous



**Figure 3.** Early medieval scenes from the Kudyрге cemetery, Chulyshman valley. 1. Engraving on pommel from the burial 9; 2, 3. engraving on sculpture from burial 16 (Rudenko and Glukhov 1927; Gryaznov 1961; Gavrilova 1965).

period, but there were new elements appearing too. The issues of medieval rock art in Altai will be discussed in this article in more detail.

The study and conservation of rock art sites in Altai carries with it many unsolved problems (Plets et al. 2012: 139). In this article, we will focus on issues of interpretation in the context of Altai rock art, specifically in relation to rock art of the early medieval Turkic period. The Turks are a central Asian people who created an empire that stretched in the middle of the sixth century from the Far East of Eurasia to eastern Europe (Golden 1992: 127). As a region the Altai Mountains are central to the origins of the Turkic people and this is reflected in the abundance of Turkic archaeological monuments in the region. Petroglyphs, mostly engravings, dated by means of analogous representations recorded at burial sites are typical of the Turkic period (Fig. 3).

As a historical source, early medieval petroglyphs have great potential. Most are executed using a realistic engraving technique. In many cases the medieval artist has attempted to depict the tiniest details and has thereby recorded ethnographic peculiarities of the outward appearance of members of the Turkic population. Early medieval rock art in Altai includes

a variety of themes, the most popular of which are battle and hunting scenes. An explanation for why these scenes are so widely distributed among the rock art of the period lies in the traditional values of the Turkic people. Here the authors attempt to explain the meaning of battle and hunting scenes, considering early medieval rock art as an integral part of the Turkic culture as a whole. Therefore the authors interpret the scenes described, using an integrated approach, considering the relationship between different types of archaeological, epigraphic and visual sources.

## 2. Description of the scenes

In 1924–1925, Sergey Rudenko and Alexey Glukhov, from the ethnographic department of the Russian Museum (St. Petersburg), excavated a medieval burial ground in eastern Altai. The burial ground, Kudyрге, is located in the narrow, picturesque valley of the Chulyshman River (Rudenko and Glukhov 1927). Twenty-one burials were investigated and dated to the sixth and seventh centuries CE. This corresponds to the period of the formation of the First Turk Empire or Khanate. The burials contained warriors and their horses, as well as women and children.

In grave No. 9, a noble warrior was buried with a full complement of weapons and one horse. The horse was saddled and bridled. From the saddle only the girth buckle, iron stirrups and bone facing on the front pommel remained. In this study, we are concerned particularly with the pommel facing which was elaborately decorated with a composition consisting of two opposing tigers (at the centre of the composition) and a hunting scene depicting two Turkic hunters (Fig. 3-1). The hunters are shown carrying bows and riding galloping horses with a cropped mane decorated with a three-prong. The scene also depicts a variety of animals: a wild ass, mountain sheep, deer, fox, rabbit, male and female deer and bear. Next to the hunting scene the image of a fish has also been engraved.

At the Kudyрге burial ground a stone sculpture was discovered bearing engravings. The sculpture was found in grave 16 and is engraved on three facets (Figs 3-2, 3-3). On one facet a seated woman and child are depicted; on another facet three kneeling men with horses and on the front side, a man's face. This parallel find provided the opportunity to determine when many engraved petroglyphs from the early Middle Ages were created.

The fact that petroglyphs of the early Middle Ages were predominantly executed using the engraving technique makes them difficult to detect and study. Many of the engravings are poorly preserved due to the destruction of rock surfaces and weathering of surface planes. In total, the Altai region boasts several dozen early medieval scenes depicting battles or hunting. Most of the well-known early medieval petroglyphs are concentrated in the southern and central parts of Altai (Fig. 1).

Most often the Altai petroglyphs of the early Middle

Ages were created on the rock surface using very fine lines (Figs 4, 5, 7-2). On the one hand, using fine lines enabled the artist to depict the tiniest of details within a given scene which makes the petroglyphs considerably informative. On the other hand, fine and in some cases very shallow lines are not as visible as more deeply pecked petroglyphs. Fine engravings are extremely difficult to study. They are poorly visible to the naked eye, which explains why medieval scenes often go unnoticed even by researchers. There are also a small number of paintings and inscriptions dating to the early Middle Ages, which have been produced on the rock surface using paint (Tugusheva et al. 2014). It is likely that in the Middle Ages many drawings were made using paint, but relatively few have survived. A few pecked petroglyphs have been recorded which are also dated to this period (Fig. 5-3). However, these are not as detailed as the engraved petroglyphs. Moreover, they are relatively difficult to distinguish among the general array of pecked petroglyphs in Altai.

To date, no specific criteria have been determined which might have informed the choice of rock surface used for engraving these images. Turkic petroglyphs are found on both



Figure 4. Engraved early medieval scenes. 1. Hunting scene of Kalbak-Tash 2; 2. detail of fighting scene of Chaganka site.



Figure 5. Details of early medieval scenes. 1-2, 4. Chaganka; 3. Elangash.

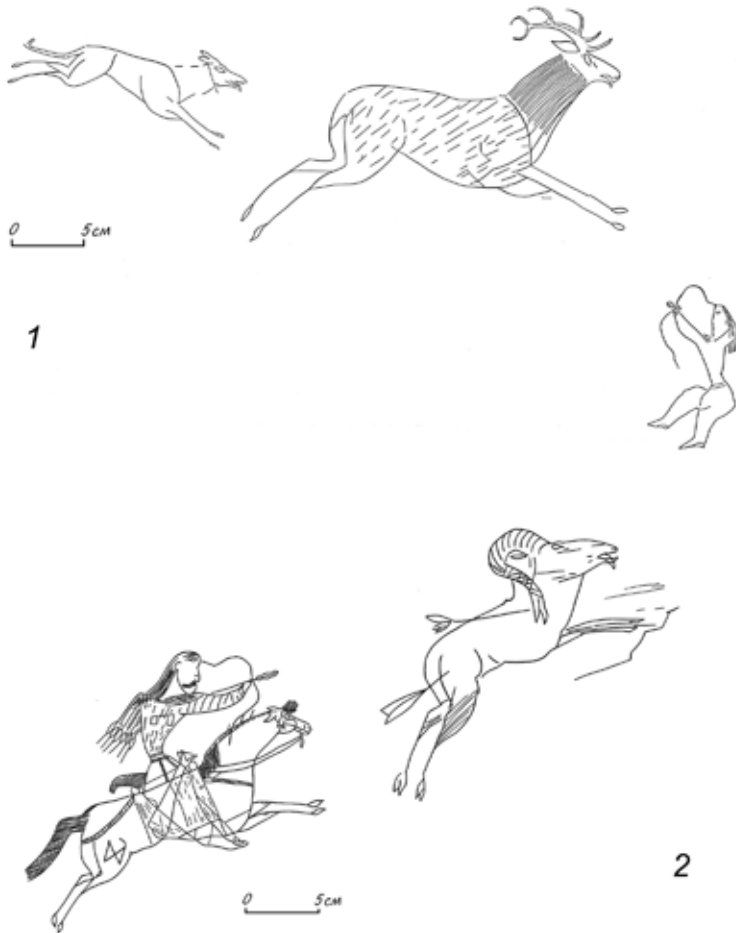


Figure 6. Hunting scenes of Chaganka.

vertical and horizontal planes. In addition, some petroglyphs are found on stelae and on the walls of memorial enclosures. The only characteristic that has been noted is that most early medieval petroglyphs are located in places where earlier figures are present. Medieval scenes do not usually overlay more ancient petroglyphs, but are located alongside them. In Altai isolated early medieval petroglyphs are extremely rare.

In the early medieval rock art of Altai, the most popular are hunting scenes. In the Russian Altai approximately thirty hunting scenes of the early Middle Ages have been recorded. All are dynamic scenes (Figs 6, 7), depicting animals running to escape their hunters. Men are often portrayed just as they are preparing to shoot from a bow and arrow. The scenes depict horsemen as well as hunters on foot. Almost all hunters portrayed are armed with bows and arrows. Thanks to the detailed engravings, one can see the finest elements of costume and hunting equipment; in some cases one may even see two belts depicted; an ordinary belt and another holding a quiver (Fig. 6-1). In one case (Ust-Kan site) falconry is depicted. Hunting dogs are also depicted chasing their prey or driving it towards their owner. Horses are shown in a detailed manner and some are shown bearing *tamgas* (family signs).

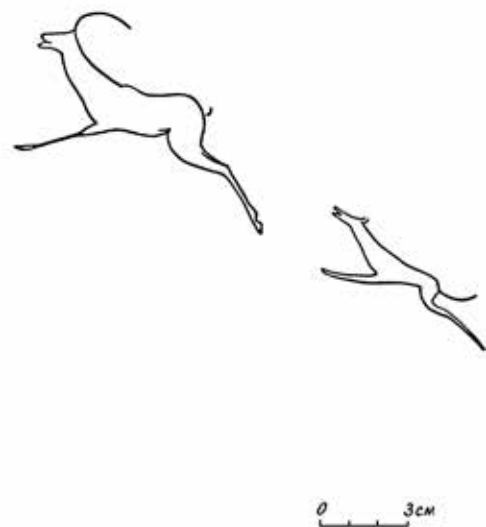


Figure 7. Hunting scene of Chaganka.

All images are supported by analogous materials from the archaeological excavations of early medieval monuments and written sources of the period. For example, a typical Turkic burial contains a man and his horse (Kubarev 2005). In some burials, skeletons of dogs have been found and falconry is mentioned in runic inscriptions in the valley of the Yenisei River (Kormushin 2008: 140).

The prey pursued by the hunters can be recognised as common species of wild animals that have their habitat in Altai. The most common animal representation is the deer (roe deer and red deer); images of mountain goat and argali also figure. Also portrayed, although less common, are images of bears, wild boars, wolves and birds. Some animals were depicted as having been killed or wounded by an arrow.

The Altai tiger depicted on the plates from Kudyrge presents us with a greater challenge (Fig. 3). Today, the wild cat species with habitat closest to Altai is the Siberian tiger in the comparatively distant Russian Far East. Nonetheless, there is reason to believe that the distribution area of the Siberian tiger may have included the Altai previously with its habitat significantly shrinking over the past two hundred years. Records report hunters encountering a tiger in the foothills of Altai as late as the nineteenth century. It cannot be excluded, therefore, that in the early Middle Ages Turkic hunters may well have encountered tigers in the mountains. Yet despite this, the composition from Kudyrge lacks analogies in medieval Altai art, and so was most likely borrowed from Iranian art of the period of the Sassanid Empire (224–651 CE).

The Turks are renowned for their military power, a reputation gained after their military successes in the vast spaces of Eurasia. It is no surprise then that battle scenes, along with hunting scenes, should be one of the most popular narratives encountered in early medieval rock art of the Altai region.

A figure frequently depicted in the battle scenes of Turkic petroglyphs is the heavily armed cavalry soldier — a cataphract armed with a spear. Other figures include archers, both mounted and on foot (Figs 4-2, 5-1). Judging from recorded rock art sites, petroglyphs do not portray mass battles. Most often the engravings depict just two opposing warriors. These representational sources also allow one to ascertain techniques for using certain weapons. For example, in the petroglyphs of the Chagan River valley (southern Altai) one of the mounted warriors engraved is holding a spear in the 'top position', holding it above his head with both hands (Fig. 8).

Thanks to the engraving of fine details, one can imagine the ethnographical external appearance of

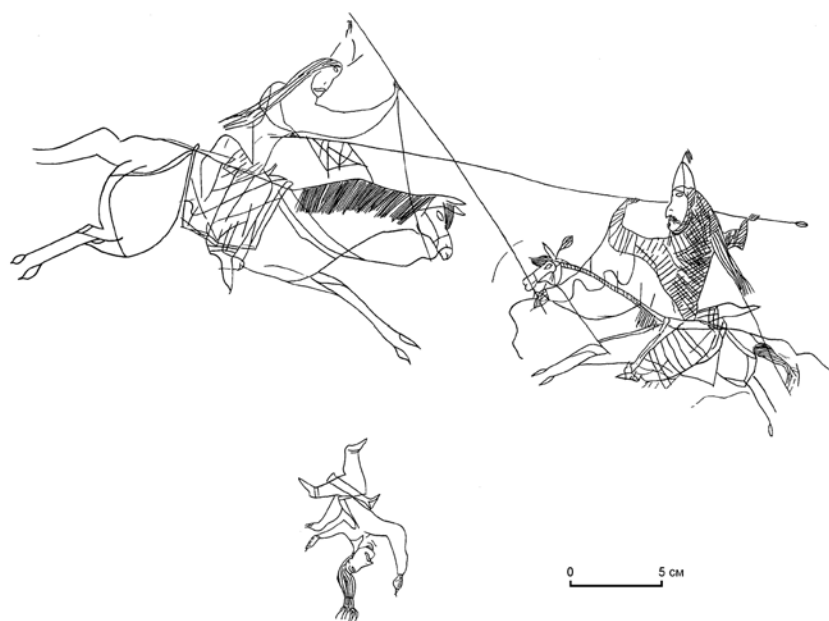


Figure 8. Fighting scene of Chaganka.

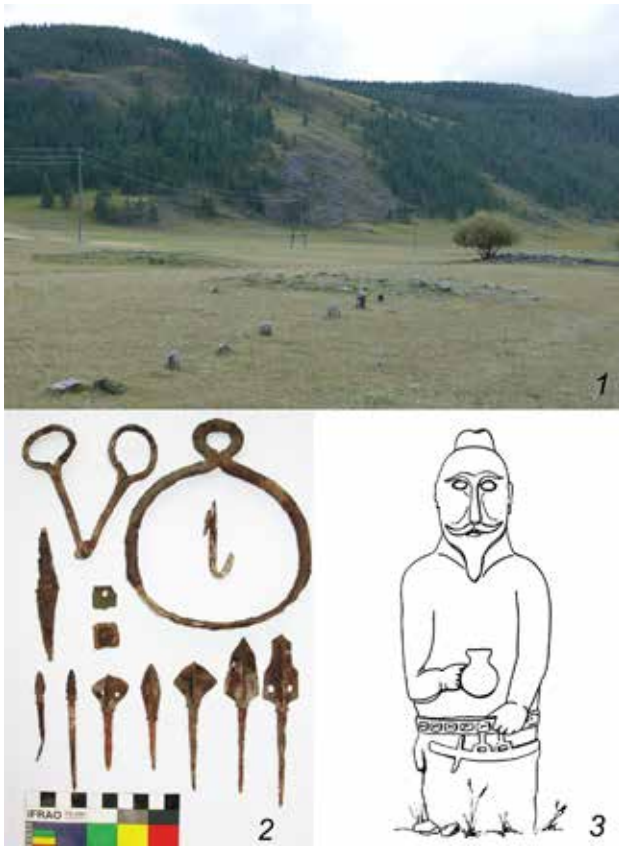
Turkic warriors and hunters. The Turks wore belted caftans. Sometimes belt buckles and items hung from the belt are depicted, such as bow cases and quivers. The Turks evidently wore their hair loose and long, or braided in several plaits which were gathered at the bottom. Woven elongated ornaments were hung from the end of the plaits. Sometimes petroglyphs portray a kind of fur cap (a *malakhai*) with earflaps or another kind of headgear resembling a hat. Sometimes small caps, perhaps a kind of skull-cap, were depicted.

Heavily armed soldiers wore helmets with hackles and the armour of warrior and horse is depicted via a mesh of fine lines. Thanks to discoveries made in burials, we know that the Turks used lamellar armour made of iron plates and leather bands. The soldiers were armed with spears, bows and arrows. Small flags were depicted at the end of the spears. Riders held their weapons over the head or in the lower position. All hunters were depicted with bows.

From their early years the Turk's greatest companion was their horse. The horse was even thought to accompany a Turk in death, being buried alongside its master. It is no surprise, therefore, that the majority of battle and war scenes involve riders. The horse's mane is often shown cropped with three protruding tufts. In some scenes *tamgas* are depicted on the horse's hindquarters (Figs 6-2, 11).

### 3. Historical and archaeological context of early medieval rock art in Altai

In coming to an understanding of Turkic rock art it is useful to characterise the historical and archaeological context of the time. In Altai there are many different archaeological sites belonging to the Khaganate period: burial mounds (*kurgans*), enclosures with memorial statues (*ogradka*), runic inscriptions and petroglyphs. Research into early medieval monuments has a histo-



**Figure 9.** Early medieval memorial Turkic complex. 1. Memorial complex near the Ulagan village (eastern Altai); 2. the findings from the excavations of Turkic memorial enclosure at Bike-3 site (Middle Katun, Northern Altai); 3. stone Turkic sculpture of the early Middle Ages (Kurai Steppe, southern Altai) (Evt'yukhova 1952).

ry of almost two hundred years; the first scientific excavation of Turkic *kurgans* was conducted in the Charysh valley by botanist Carl Friedrich Ledebur in 1826 (Ledebur 1929: 228–234).

The Turkic period is named after the Turks, an early medieval people or, more specifically, a confederation of peoples, who played an important role in the history of Eurasia (Golden 1992: 127). The word 'Türk' is also the name given to a family of related languages — the Turkic languages. The intense concentration of Turkic monuments in Altai is connected with the important role the region played in the history of the Turkic peoples. Chinese sources (*Book of Zhou*, *Book of Sui* and *The history of the northern dynasties*) contain two genealogical legends concerning the origin of the Turks. Sergei Klyashtorny has explored these legends and elicited their historical foundations. Klyashtorny believed that the legends related to two different periods in the history of 'the Ashina tribe' (Klyashtorny 1965). The historian referred to the first as the Gansu-Gaochang period, and the second as the Altaian period (meaning the time subsequent to the settlement of the Turks in Altai in 460 CE). Both legends have it that the name 'Türk' was adopted by the Ashina group after

they had settled in Altai. As the study of written and archaeological sources shows, the foundations of the Turkic ethnic group were formed on the territory of Altai. Here the Turks became a powerful force defeating the dominant state in central Asia, the Juan-Juain Khaganate, in 552. After that time, the Turks became one of the most powerful empires in the vast expanse that represented Eurasia in the early Middle Ages.

Of course, the 'golden age' of the Ashina dynasty was short-lived. Like any other empire, the First and Second Turkic Khaganates were no lasting formations. After a series of conflicts over the Khagan throne among the Turkic nobility in the first half of the eighth century, the Ashina dynasty ceased to exist. The remaining Turks settled in Altai and Dzungaria (Klyashtorny and Savinov 2005: 110).

After their fall, the Turkic Khaganate was replaced by the Uighur Khaganate (745–840). The new state was made up of the Uighurs, one of the ethnic groups of the Tele people (Toguz Oguz). After the Uighur Khaganate started a military campaign to the north, on the Yenisei River, they met with the Kyrgyz State, which finally suppressed the Uighurs and seized their territory in Mongolia. For a short time the Kyrgyz Khaganate became the hegemon of the central Asian steppes. The Turks played no significant part in these events. All of these peoples, the Uighurs, the Kyrgyz and the Turks were closely related, speaking similar languages and sharing cultural affinities.

As specialised studies have shown, these events occurred in relatively favourable climatic conditions (Schlütz and Lehmkuhl 2006: Fig. 6). At the beginning of the early Middle Ages, roughly up to the seventh century, the climate in central Asia was wet and cold. During this time the region experienced several years in which there was extreme loss of cattle due to disease (Klyashtorny and Savinov 2005: 91, 92). The seventh century was marked by the onset of a period characterised by a warm, mild climate. A variety of data, including historical sources, indicate that the period from the seventh to the tenth centuries in Asia was relatively warm. The seventh and eighth centuries saw a minimum number of harsh winters in China (Monin and Shishkov 1979: 354–355). Of course, the favourable climate had a positive effect on the economic and cultural development of the region's population.

Archaeological monuments dated to the Turkic period in Altai relate to a variety of categories: burials, enclosure complexes with statues and *balbals* (vertically placed stones), petroglyphs, epigraphic monuments and iron smelting furnaces. Burials represented joint burials of man and horse covered with a stone mound. In Russian and Soviet scholarly literature, enclosures (*ogradka*) with statues and *balbals* were considered to be memorial complexes. This type of complex took the following form: the central object was a sculpture depicting a warrior, facing east (Fig. 9). Behind the sculpture a square enclosure of stone slabs was constructed. To the east of the sculpture lay

a line of *balbals*. Turkic inscriptions were written in runic alphabet on rock surfaces and on items included in the burial inventory.

The complex enclosure with statue and *balbals* represents a memorial site. The sculpture depicts the deceased; the number of stone *balbals* represents his defeated opponents; the enclosure served as a symbolic memorial temple or dwelling. This interpretation is derived from a reading of Turkic runic texts left on stelae in the memorial complexes of the highest Turkic nobility — Khagans and military leaders, as well as from descriptions of Turkic funeral rites found in the Chinese sources (Kyzlasov 1966).

According to V. D. Kubarev (1984), numerous Turkic enclosures with statues recorded in the areas related to the Turks are miniature replicas of the magnificent memorial complexes of the Turkic Khagans and warlords. Apparently, memorial complexes were not directly related to the burial structures, and could be separately

located. The deceased was buried with his horse (sometimes with several horses) in a pit, which was covered with a stone mound. After the funeral was arranged the memorial complex was erected and rituals were held elsewhere, in a location not necessarily in the immediate vicinity of the tomb.

Most Turkic epigraphic monuments are also associated with commemorative rites. At memorial complexes dedicated to the highest representatives of the Turkic nobility in Mongolia, stelae were erected that were inscribed with text. These texts contain a fairly detailed biography of the man, his deeds and merits to the Turkic state. After the death of less noble Turks, brief sayings were executed on the rock surface or carved into stelae, sometimes reduced simply to the name of the deceased (Fig. 10-2). Longer inscriptions contained words written on behalf of the deceased, expressing sentiments such as regret felt at parting with the Khagan, his wife, children and friends.

Several runic inscriptions of this kind have been found in the vicinity of petroglyphic hunting scenes (Fig. 10-1). Evidently, the inscription and the images complement each other and relate to one and the same individual. It seems clear that Turkic petroglyphs in the Altai are portrayals of several real events in the life of the Turkic warrior, his hunting and military feats.

#### 4. Hunting and battle in the everyday life of the Turks

In 1961, Mikhail P. Gryaznov proposed an approach for the reading of ancient monuments of visual art based on seeking analogies in central Asian folklore

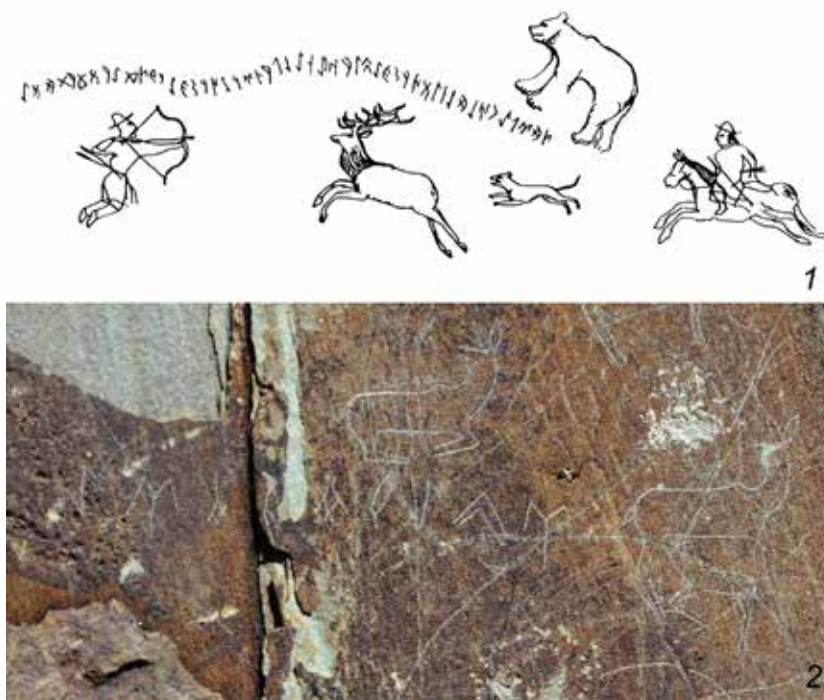


Figure 10. 1. Hunting scene with runic epitaph of Kurgak (Klyashtorny and Kubarev 2002); 2. runic epitaph of Adyr-Khan.

(Gryaznov 1961). Since that time, many researchers have begun to link rock art scenes with heroic epic tales. It is the authors' opinion that despite the fact that epic traditions would quite naturally have exerted some influence on the development of medieval art, the medieval petroglyphic scene is not a direct illustration of the epic tale. The epic tales expressed the ideals of the time and described the exploits most respected by that society. Turkic soldiers, educated in the ideals of the epic tales, would have no doubt wished to present themselves in the image of the folk hero. The warriors were proud of their actions, which were similar to the exploits sung of in epic tales. These associations may be sufficient to explain the similarity between epic tales and certain visual sources of the early Middle Ages.

According to the written sources, the most respected occupation for a Turkic male during a time of war was to be a warrior and engage in battle; in times of peace it was to be a hunter. Personal heroism in battle was a matter of great import and honour. For example, a memorial text in honour of Kül-Tegin describes his exploits in combat:

Kül tegin attacked at a run, riding on Bayir-ku's white stallion. One man he shot with an arrow, two men he pierced through, one after the other (Ross and Thomsen 1930a: 868).

Kül tegin attacked at a run, riding on his white Azman. Six men he transfixes with his lance, a seventh man he cut down in the hand-to-hand fight of the armies. ... While Kül tegin attacked at a gallop, riding on his brown Az, he transfixes one man, nine men he hewed down in the turmoil of the fight (?). The Adiz people was destroyed there (Ross and Thomsen 1930a: 869).



Some battle scenes engraved in rock seem to echo Turkic runic inscriptions which are in honour of the Khagan. Written sources claim that in the construction of Kül-Tegin's memorial temple, Chinese artists painted the walls with 'pictures of battle' in which he had participated. Their compositions appeared 'so vivid and natural that [the Turks] unanimously decided that never before had the kingdom witnessed anything like it' (Klyashtorny 1964: 57).

Hunting represented an important regular occupation of the early medieval Turks. During the hunt, the warriors not only practised their direct fighting skills but also perfected methods of interaction between military units, as a large hunt could involve several thousand Turkic soldiers. Thus, hunting played an important role as a military exercise. It is no accident that feats of the hunt can be observed in commemorative runic inscriptions. According to S. G. Klyashtorny, it was thanks to a hunting feat that a youth could take a 'man's name', which meant to acquire the social status of an adult man (Klyashtorny and Savinov 2005: 153). One of the most prestigious forms of hunting among the Turkic nobility was falconry. Although not the most common, falconry is a typical theme in Turkic petroglyphs in various regions.

Judging from the runic texts found in the Yenisei River valley, the Kyrgyz nobility was also extremely fond of hunting (the Kyrgyz people display close affinity to the Turks in terms of language and culture). The main indicator of a man's military merit was the number of enemies he had slain (Kormushin 2008: 307, 310). In runic texts, hunting achievements were detailed after the number of enemy slain had been specified:

I killed twenty-two enemy warriors. I killed blue (grey) wolves, black sables, deer ... (Kormushin 2008: 308).

Evidently, hunting and military exploits were perceived as being almost equally exemplary. According to Arab sources, such as Al-Jahiz's *Exploits of the Turks and the army of the Khalifate*, even during military campaigns the Turks continued to hunt (Walker 1915; Asadov 1993). It should be noted that the Arabs were quite familiar with the Western Turks after the Turkic Empire had collapsed. However, their way of life was more similar to that of the Eastern Turks. The Western Turks were more inclined to adopt a settled way of life than their eastern counterparts.

Naturally, hunting was neither simply a form of military exercise nor a type of entertainment for the Turkic nobility. The Turks had very strict hunting rules that had to be observed. For example, a Chinese chronicler tells a story in which the Turkic Khagan Shabolio died after a hunt in which he broke the traditional hunting rules. He killed a deer but took only some parts of the carcass, including the most delicious parts of the meat which he sent to the Chinese emperor. After returning to headquarters there was a fire and shortly afterwards the Khagan died. Evidently, in the mind of the contemporaries of the time, the cause of these unfortunate incidents was associated with the violation of hunting practices (Potapov 2001).

In some cases, hunting was the Turks' only food source. The text on Tonyukuk's stele ('advisor of three Turkic Khagans') described a complex military situation, in which the Turks found themselves completely surrounded by the enemy:

We lived there, nourishing ourselves on big game and hares, and the people's mouth was filled. Our foes were all around like birds of prey. This was our situation (Ross and Thomsen 1930b: 38).

The text describes how in difficult situations the Turks lived on meat from hunting, which was sufficient for them to survive.

The Turkic cavalry was the main strength of the army, consisting of noble warriors. It is to these warriors that the main memorial buildings, inscriptions and petroglyphs depicting hunting and battle scenes are dedicated. It is not surprising that rock art influenced the early medieval heraldry of the central Asian peoples. In the early Middle Ages, heraldry served as an important symbolic system for the Turkic elite. The heraldic animals and birds that adorned their horse gear, and other elements, are a reflection of the Scythian component of Turkic applied art (Savinov 1998: 138). Such is the image of the two tigers which decorate the sixth to seventh century plate from Kudyrge. Stylistically, the tiger image is undoubtedly linked to examples of art from Sassanian Iran. However, the tradition of decorating horse trappings with zoomorphic figures had persisted in southern Siberia and central Asia from the middle of the 1st millennium BCE (Azbelev 2010: 78).

Findings similar in content have been recorded in another part of southern Siberia, Khakassia. During the excavation of Kopen Chaatas (Kyrgyz cremated burial site dated to between the eighth and ninth centuries CE), bronze bas-reliefs were found originally representing the decorations of a saddle pommel (Evtukhova and Kiselev 1940). However, the two compositions mentioned here from Kudyrge and Kopen Chaatas bear significant differences. In the earlier Kudyrge composition there is a clearly visible boundary between the two subjects: the petroglyphic hunting scene and the heraldic image of two tigers. It would appear that later the petroglyphic tradition of depicting hunting scenes and the heraldic tradition merged. The result of the synthesis of these two trends can be witnessed in the emergence of the bas-relief composition from Kopen Chaatas, which features both a well-traced petroglyphic tradition (a dynamic scene of horse hunting) and the heraldic style (an image of feline predators and symmetry). The presence of hunting scenes in heraldry demonstrates the importance of hunting in the everyday life of the Turkic aristocracy. Moreover, in some hunting scenes *tamgas* — personal or family heraldic symbols — are depicted on the horse's hindquarters.

## 5. Conclusion

Turkic visual art focused on the individual. This can be seen in the well-known Turkic stone sculptures.

Of course, the sculptures were made in accordance with a single stylistic canon, but each sculpture reveals accentuated traits that appear to be the characteristics of a specific individual. It is the authors' opinion the same principle applies to Turkic rock art dominated by the same themes of war, hunting and heroism. The artist identified details that would portray a specific person, such as family signs depicted on horses (*tamgas*) (Fig. 11), the face (sometimes) and inscriptions made beneath the scene. Rock art, as well as Turkic stone sculptures were meant to depict specific individuals.

The memorial rite of deceased family members occupies an important place in the ritual practices of the early medieval Turks. Enclosures including sculptures and runic inscriptions made on rock surfaces were linked to the memorial practice. The authors believe that scenes depicting the hunting activities and military exploits of Turkic warriors are also associated with memorial rites and that this type of petroglyphic composition represented a method of ancestor worship. In support of this interpretation it should be emphasised that the semantic value of memorial inscriptions echoes the content of representational hunting scenes.

Until now, literature devoted to the subject of the Turkic petroglyphs of southern Siberia and central Asia has more widely presented the idea that hunting and battle scenes represent illustrations of heroic epic tales, 'epos'. Today, however, a significant volume of information has been accumulated on the details of Turkic memorial traditions which allow us to interpret a significant portion of these scenes as relating to the ritual sphere. Hunting and battle scenes are, in our opinion, a type of panegyric, praise to the exploits of the deceased soldier. The similarity between rock art scenes and tales from heroic epics can perhaps be explained by the fact that the artist may have deliberately portrayed Turkic aristocrats in the likeness of epic heroes.

The authors of this article are not alone in their interpretation of rock art in the Sayan-Altai region dating to the early Middle Ages. Similar interpretations have been put forward by other researchers (Kyzlasov 2008: 459). The authors are also of the opinion that, far from being a mundane pastime, for the medieval population of Altai making engravings on rock surfaces was an activity related to the ritual sphere. Although the issue of the reconstruction of such rituals and ceremonies today is problematic, it is probable that the petroglyphic scenes in question were executed within a ritual context, as part of a ritual, and by a special category of individuals.

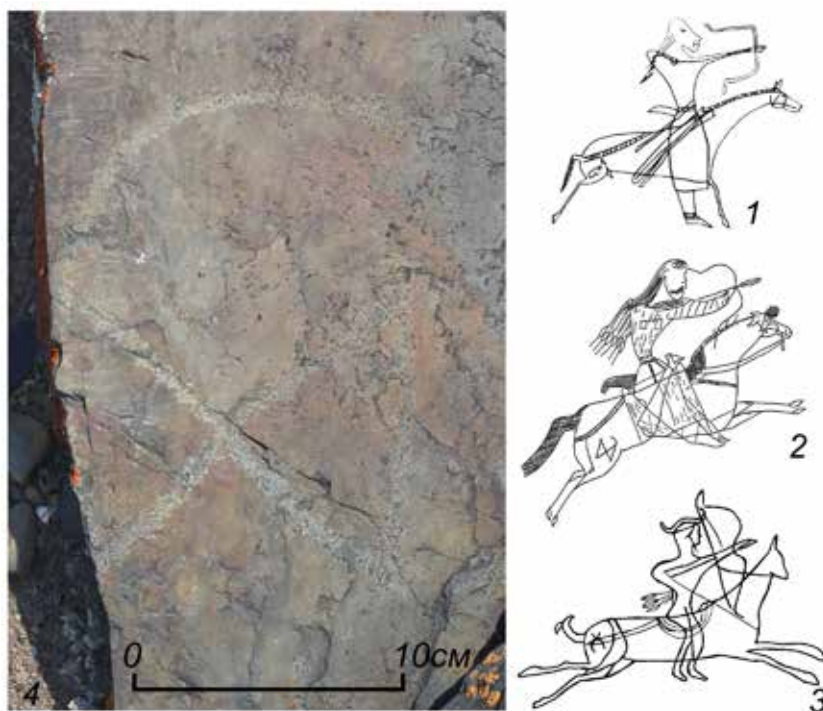


Figure 11. Horses with tamgas in the early medieval hunting scenes. 1. Ustyū-Airy (Miklashevich 2003); 2. Chaganka. 3. Kalbak Tash-2; 4. tamga on stele of Turu-Altı.

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