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CELESTIAL HORSES OF DUL-DUL AT: PETROGLYPHS AS THE SITE OF TRANSFORMATION AND INTERACTION IN THE KYRGYZ FERGANA VALLEY

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Abstract. This article presents an analysis of the research material collected at the site of Dul-dul at in Aravan, in the Fergana Valley, Kyrgyzstan. It is an archaeological site featuring petroglyphs representing equine and other figures with human and non-human characteristics. It is also a pilgrimage and ritual site for healing and fertility-related spiritual practices. Pilgrims, healers and local inhabitants conceptualise the rock covered by petroglyphs as the site inhabited by agentive beings. The paper demonstrates how the petroglyphs of Aravan are involved in a constant transformation of the rock through interaction and relationships formed with it by human and non-human beings.

Introduction

In the Fergana Valley in Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia is the place known as *Dul-dul at* within the town of Aravan. There is a small group of petroglyphs whose dominant motif is a pair of animals that may be interpreted as horses (Fig. 1). Even though the petroglyphs were most likely created in the Iron Age, for many people connected to Dul-dul at they are not only an archaeological artefact but an active participant in social interactions. Nowadays, the petroglyphs area is a religious pilgrimage site, where people perform rituals related to Islam and local beliefs.

In order to understand the phenomenon of the petroglyphs of Aravan, I decided to look at them not only from the perspective of archaeology or anthropology of art but to focus mainly on social aspects related to them, the relevant contemporary social action, i.e. that which was available for my investigation at the time of fieldwork. My ethnographic research has revealed numerous connections between rock images, historical memory and contemporary beliefs and practices. I first visited Dul-dul at in 2006, and a decade later (in 2016) I conducted a pilot study there, followed by the field research between 2017–2019. My field trips spanned five to eight weeks (25 weeks in total). All stories told by the *protagonists* and used in this article have been derived from long-term interactions or/and conversations. Where not stated otherwise, the events that are described have been recorded in my fieldnotes. I spent whole days at Dul-dul at, usually accompanying Ergashali (a self-appointed guardian of Dul-dul at) and the visiting pilgrims, participating in rituals, prayers and meals. I also met and got to know

people connected to the site and visited other relevant archaeological and religious sites.

In this article, I wish to demonstrate that the place known as Dul-dul at is a complex site undergoing constant transformation. The rock itself is an essential element of the process, and it is marked by petroglyphs, 'signs' and cupules. The rock is being personified (as the residence of various agentive beings) and transformed (through cutting, drilling, graffiti, painting, fire etc.). By focusing their actions (religious, ritual, customary) and thoughts around it, people enter a relationship with it. The first scholars who studied the petroglyphs in Aravan suggested that they may have been made in different periods (see Bernshtam 1951). Their execution or 'ongoing execution', possibly spanning many different historical moments, does not preclude their conceptual coherence — rather, it makes these particular petroglyphs even more interesting from the point of view of contemporary activities connected with Dul-dul at. Their 'performance' indicates an ongoing transformation process, occurring not only within the petroglyph and the nearby rocks but within the daily practices related to them. Tracing the web of interdependencies between these specific petroglyphs and their surroundings, including objects, landscape, artefacts, people and stories (which have become an important carrier of multi-layered meanings), I realised that my approach needed to depart from the usual way of studying rock art. Thus, in this article, I shall describe Dul-dul at in Aravan as if it were a play in a theatre: with stage, actors and the set design, and, finally, its performance. The following detailed presentation of the actors and their actions, although seemingly

unconnected with the petroglyphs, is to demonstrate that the communication between persons and the non-material world at Dul-dul at happens in the same way in which these actors enter interactions with the external world (material and non-material), away from the site. Such an approach results in realisation that the actors include the pilgrims or healers whom I describe and the rock, which mediates communication between the material and the non-material world of Dul-dul at. To grasp this nuance, we need to pay attention to the rock and the petroglyphs using different conceptual categories,



Figure 1. Rock with petroglyphs in Aravan, in the Fergana Valley, Dul-dul at complex, 2019 (all photographs by the author).

which I shall introduce using the example of perspectivism, the theory developed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2005). Theatre and its terminology have already been applied in research by Andrew Meirion Jones and Andrew Cochrane for their analyses of art. However, the approach attributed the key role to the material, its interaction with the artist and the creative act as an experiment and innovation (Jones and Cochrane 2018: 44–56). In my research, it was current events that were paramount, and thus my analysis focuses on the social situation within which petroglyphs were an actor — a constitutive element that cannot be considered within a setting other than all its other constituents. The performance at Dul-dul at had two dimensions, past and present. The past was the rock art — the image and the place itself and what we know about it. The present was what was happening at the foot of the rock art — social actions connected with the image, both in the sphere of the conscious and the subconscious.

In their book *The archaeology of art: materials, practices, affects*, Jones and Cochrane stressed the significance of a work of art as a process (Jones and Cochrane 2018), but in Dul-dul at the process turned out not to be completed once the petroglyphs were made. In Dul-dul at the process goes on. This paper aims to demonstrate that Dul-dul at is not only an archaeological site but a living, ever-changing space within which people focus their religious, ritual and mystical actions through direct contact with the rock. These actions link — both consciously and subconsciously — with the petroglyphs marking the cliff of one of the rocks.

Scene (Central Asia, Fergana Valley, Aravan)

Rock art in central Asia is a symbolic record of numerous cultural traditions that overlapped there over the centuries. Today they constitute a special palimpsest consisting of different intertwining eco-

nomie traditions (agriculture and nomadism), ethnic traditions (mainly Indo-European and Turkish) and religious traditions (from Indo-Iranian beliefs, through Persian Zarathustrianism, shamanic traditions of different ethnic groups and, finally, Islam) (Rozwadowski 2004). One of the most fertile periods for rock art in the region was the Bronze Age (2000 BCE), identified with the tradition of Indo-Iranian people (also called Indo-Iranic people) who were agropastoralists. Due to the most common depictions, the rock art of the period has been called 'the bullock-cart-and-wild-bull period'. Semantic interpretations of this rock art mostly use ancient texts of the Vedic tradition (the *Vedas*) and Zoroastrianism (the *Avesta*) and the historical and ethnographic data on Siberian shamanism. Shamanism is nowadays most intricately linked to the Siberian peoples, but researchers studying rock art proposed that, in the past, shamanism may also have been present in central Asia (Rozwadowski 1999, 2003). Petroglyphs of Central Asia thus accumulate different meanings, and through their visibility (they are not hidden deep inside caves but usually are visible on exposed rock surfaces), they yield to numerous interpretations. Today, and in the past, different peoples may have described them and related to them in diverse ways.

The Fergana Valley is one of the most densely populated areas in Central Asia and is inhabited by over 14 million people, spanning c. 22 000 km², 60% of which is in Uzbekistan, 25% in Tajikistan and 15% in Kyrgyzstan. The Great Silk Road used to cut through the region. In the 19th century, with Russia expanding its influence in the region, the area lost its economic significance and sovereignty. During Stalin's rule and the Soviet Union, Kyrgyz, Tadjik and Uzbek people were relocated in three different Soviet republics. Since ethnic identity had not been taken into account, significant



Figure 2. A petroglyph of an equine in Sulayman Mountain (Sulayman-Too), Osh in the Kyrgyz Valley of Fergana, 2017.



Figure 3. Two petroglyphs of equines in Ayrymach-Too (Surottuu-Tash) located 8 km to the northwest of Osh, in the Kyrgyz Valley of Fergana, 2016.

ethnic minorities now live in neighbouring countries. Even today, artificial borders and displacement from other Soviet republics is the source of tensions in the region (Wawrzyniuk 2004).

The first written account of the Fergana Valley comes from 1st century BCE Chinese chronicles and the travel reports by the famous diplomat Zhang Qian. The inhabitants of the area, then known as the Dayuan kingdom, had a settled lifestyle, cultivated rice, wheat and grapevine. Their horses were believed to sweat blood and descend from the race of the 'celestial horses' (Saidov et al. 2011; Golden 2011: 29–30; Uhlig 2007). Another expedition led by Zhang Qian ventured into Central Asia to obtain horses for the Han-dynasty China. Even though the venture was successful, almost all the army (sixty thousand soldiers) of Emperor Wu perished (Uhlig 2007: 40–41). The French historian

and scholar specialising in Turkey, Jean-Paul Roux, suggested that according to ancient beliefs, the first horse of this kind descended from the sky and was a gift to humans from the well-wishing God Urun Ay Toyon. According to the later Chinese chronicles, horse hoof traces were visible on the rock. There was also a mountain, towering at the centre of Asia, inhabited by horses that no one could catch or tame. People living in the vicinity were to bring their mares to crossbreed with those 'celestial' stallions (Roux 1966).

Several theories are explaining the blood sweating of the Fergana horses. Some scholars believe that the blood in the sweat was caused by a parasite that is still common in the surface waters of the central Asian steppes (Golden 2011: 29–30; Hendricks 1995: 7). The parasite damages blood vessels, which results in bloody exudates. Others think that it was caused by the breakage of small blood vessels under the horse's delicate skin after galloping. The mixture of blood and sweat on the horse's neck created a pink foam (Hendricks 1995: 7).

It should be added that Osh (the second-largest city in Kyrgyzstan), which in the past has been situated at the crossroads of major trade routes of ancient and medieval worlds, is close to the Sulayman Mountain (kirg. Сулайман-Тоо, *Sulayman-Too*). This is one of the holiest places in Kyrgyzstan, where – according to legends – Sulayman (the Muslim prophet) used to pray, and which is now a prime pilgrimage destination for the local Islam followers. It is an active place of worship, consisting of five peaks, numerous caves and two mosques, rebuilt in the 15th century. The pilgrimage to the Sulayman Mountain is related to the beliefs in the site's healing properties, including curing infertility. The rocks of the mountain are

also covered in numerous petroglyphs, representing mainly ibex-, equine-, bird-like figures and various geometric symbols. Contemporary pilgrims consider these petroglyphs to be sacred. Intriguingly, the mountain has a full-scale equine petroglyph resembling the one in Aravan (Fig. 2). The petroglyph is located on a small rock arcade that also resembles the rock formation at Dul-dul at. Other features similar to those at Dul-dul at is the visible Ayrymach-Too (Surottuu-Tash) located 8 km to the northwest of Osh. The mountain has c. 30 petroglyphs, some of which represent equine images in style closely resembling the one at Dul-dul at (Fig. 3), and a single motif in Nookat (Tashbayeva et al. 2001; Ākov et al. 1980).

Aravan lies by the river of the same name in the Osh district in south-western Kyrgyzstan, 5 km from the Uzbek border (Fig. 4). It is a big settlement, with over

26700 inhabitants, in the region inhabited by 106 134 people (National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic 2009). The inhabitants grow rice, cotton, potatoes, corn, carrots and other vegetables. Due to its warm continental climate, the settlement is famous for its very sweet fruit produce, especially grapes and figs. A paper published by the Central Asia Program describes life in Aravan as centred around the main bazaar. Each morning, the inhabitants of neighbouring villages Check-Abad, Tepe-Kurgan and Mangyt gather at the bazaar, selling fruit and vegetables from their cars. Many work in the bazaar as taxi drivers, restaurant owners or shopkeepers (CAP Paper 2018). However, a large proportion of people cannot find paid employment in the area and decide to leave and work in Russia or Turkey. Aravan has been transforming in terms of customary activities and habits of the local population. Its inhabitants are mainly Muslim, and a growing religious zeal and social pressure made buying alcohol or even cigarettes very difficult (Hamidov 2017), even though they are not hard to find in Kyrgyzstan in general. There is a progressing religious radicalisation manifesting in a growing number of mosques, in women increasingly covering parts of their bodies, in discontinuation of lavish wedding feasts, and a growing number of students wishing to study the Quran and the Arabic language. The inhabitants of Aravan are considered to be the most fervent religious followers in the region, and even though they account for less than 2% of the total number of people in Kyrgyzstan, according to official estimates, around one-third of all Kyrgyz fighters in Syria and Iraq come from the local population (CAP Paper 2018). This is visible even from the outside. However, as I will demonstrate, the distinctions and divisions are less clear-cut once we are inside.

Stage design and props

The Kyrgyz part of the Fergana Valley hosts a series of rock art sites. I have already mentioned Sulayman-Too, Aravan Rock (Dul-dul at), Saymaly-Tash, Ayrymach-Too (Surottuu-Tash), Surot-Say and other places. The exact number of such sites is unknown, with twenty of them having been identified so far. Apart from petroglyphs, there are also rock images in Chiot-Tash and Tash-Unkur (30 km from the city of Jalal-Abad) close to the Eshme village, near the southern slope of Katran-Too in the Batken district (Amanbaeva et al. 2011: 52–53).

Stage design and props

The petroglyphs in Aravan are located in the place



Figure 4. Aravan location on the map of Kyrgyzstan.

called Dul-dul at. 'At' in Turkic languages means 'horse', while 'Dul-dul' is the horse's proper name. Some sources (especially those relying on studies carried out by the Osh museum in Sulayman-Too) mention Duldul Ata's name (Amanbaeva et al. 2011: 52–53). The word *ata* as the second part of the names of holy places in the region is quite common (e.g. Kuptan-Ata, Kulundu-Ata, or Too-Moiun-Ata), where *ata* means father/ancestor and is a marker of seniority and respect, as well as an indicator that the place is connected to a holy man and dedicated to him. In this paper, I use the name Dul-dul at, following the usage adopted by the people connected with the site. At the entrance to the *mazār* (Arabic: a place to visit), there is an inscription: „Дуль-дуль ат ыйык жер' Dul'-dul' at ыйык жер. The soft signs „б' following the letter л ('l') are used solely in Russian spelling. The soft signs do not appear on the information board within the area of the *mazār*. Yudakhin, in the Kyrgyz dictionary, states that the word дулдаул – *duldul* metaphorically means 'unstoppable' [mount] (Yudakhin 1985: 200). If we were to translate the inscription literally, it would say: 'Holy place of the unstoppable horse', but if we recognise Dul-dul at as a proper name, a more fitting translation would be: 'Dul-dul at the holy place'. According to *Encyclopædia Iranica*, *Doldol* (or *Doldul lit. porcupine*) was a female mule that belonged to Muhammad. Just before his death, Muhammad offered the mule to his foster son and then his son-in-law, the last of the four Rashidun Caliphs (the Rightly Guided Caliphs), Ali. Shi'a Muslim consider this fact as the confirmation of Ali's special status. In the Muslim folk tradition, the mule has frequently been replaced by another mount, named *Borāq* (Gruber 2012: 40–46), on whose back Muhammad ascended to heaven and which is often depicted as having the body of a horse and a human head (*Encyclopædia Iranica* 2011). Similar meaning (but



Figure 5. Rock with 'horse hooves' in the Nookat region, in the Kyrgyz Valley of Fergana; view of the road with the rock wall, 2016.

under the entry 'Duldul') is given by Huart (1913), stating that the mule was white, while later described as grey (Huart 1965; Huart, Pellat, 1991: 624). The mule was said to have lost its teeth and needed to be fed by hand, but that, otherwise, it stayed strong and lively until its death. According to some legends (told in Aravan), God gave the horse to Hazrat Ali ibn Abi Talib. The mullah from the nearby mosque told me in 2016: 'Dul-dul at is a flying horse. It is not an ordinary horse but a gift from Allah. People come here for worship in a holy place. Those who have no children ask Allah to provide them with offspring ... Just as God created mountains, he also created this image – it is million-years-old, for sure'.

In Arabic, *duldul* denotes an animal with long, sharp feathers on its back. A non-literal translation (as in the case of porcupine) could mean an animal with wings, especially since the *Borāq* that I mentioned above was frequently represented with wings and a great peacock tail. A white horse representing the white mule *Duldul* is usually part of the *Muharram* procession in Pakistan and India (Schimmel 1982: 13, 31). The extraordinary capabilities of the horse were to assist Hazrat Ali in fights with his enemies. In the Nookat region (south of Aravan, and 40 km away from Osh) there are large concave marks of horse hooves on a vertical rock surface that have been attributed to Ali's mount, left while they were escaping from enemies (Figs 5 and 6).

Dul-dul at is a *mazār*. *Mazār* is conceptualised as a place of pilgrimage or, more informally, as a tomb of a Muslim saint, and as such, it is a place where people visit, *ziyarat*. In Central Asia, *ziyarat* (or *ziydra*) means both a pilgrimage and an act of surrendering to the saint's care and is the term used to denote holy places



Figure 6. Rock with 'horse hooves' in the Nookat region, a close-up, 2016.

(Jessa 2006a; Jessa 2006b; 2011; Schimmel 1974: 239). The results of visiting vary; some people suffering from an illness feel better after visiting a *mazār*. However, it is believed that to benefit from such a visit, you need to have faith in the power of the particular site (Aitpaeva et al. 2004: 197). Dul-dul at is thus not only the rock images, but also a place: the mountain, rocks and the *mazār*, along with the area where rituals are performed. Hence, Dul-dul at should be understood as a complex whole made of many constituent elements. Because of how the area is used, we can divide Dul-dul at into the 'public space', i.e. available to all visitors and tourists, and the 'private space' delimited by a stone wall and the residence of the grandson of a woman who had settled there in the 1930s, and whom I came to call 'the First Healer'. Within the private space, there is an open-air kitchen and a resting area, where visitors can stay for a fee charged by the plot owner. That is where most rituals take place.

Dul-dul at is located at the eastern outskirts of the Aravan village, at the altitude of 772 m a.s.l. In the academic literature, it is known as the Aravan rock. The first scholarly investigation of the petroglyphs had been carried out in 1939–1961 by Soviet archaeologists, who dated the petroglyphs to the first half of the 1st century BCE (Frumkin 1970; Tashbayeva et al. 2001; Amanbaeva et al. 2011). In 1946 the Russian archaeologist Bernshtam described two groups of petroglyphs located on different levels. The upper group is found 15 m above the rock bottom and consists of big (0.5–1.1 m) equine images (Fig. 7). The figures are visible from afar because they were refreshed by the local enthusiasts in the early 1990s, when an international UNESCO expedition visited the area. According to some scholars, ten years ago, the images were covered in ochre, although



Figure 7. Sketch of petroglyphs on the Aravan rock (after Bernshtam 1948: 156).



Figure 9. A woman participating in a healing session (her head is placed in a hole of the rock) in Dul-dul at complex, 2016. The spring is in the background.

we have no scientific evidence to confirm that. There are few rock paintings or coloured engraved motifs in the region, so their occurrence there would be very intriguing, especially since some scholars have been making the

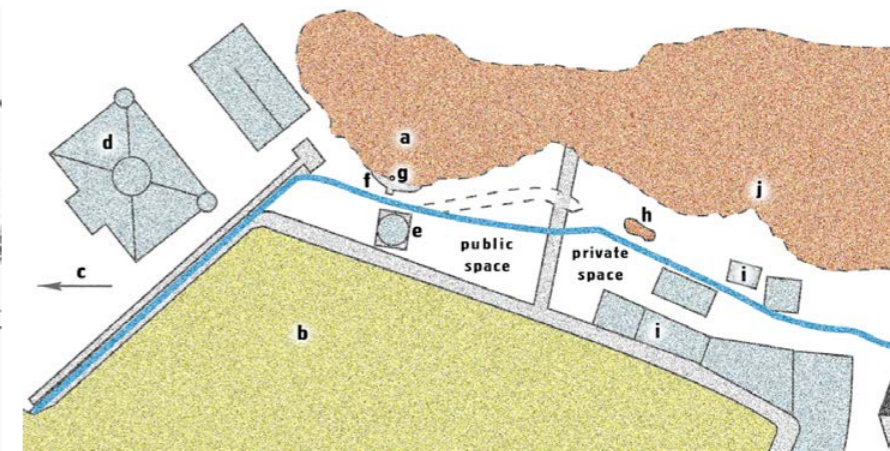


Figure 8. Plan of the Dul-dul at complex. The 'public space' a) the rock with petroglyphs, b) the enclosed cemetery, c) the hospital complex, d) the mosque, e) the mazār (gumbaz), f) the spring, g) the hole in the rock. The 'private space': h) tash namaz, i) the place to rest and perform rituals, j) the childehana.

connection between the images in Aravan and the legendary blood-sweating horses which were bred in that area (Tashbayeva et al. 2001).

Moreover, Bernshtam recorded the petroglyphs of three sheep-like figures facing left (16–17 cm) and human-like and two unidentified figures on the same surface. Below, to the left, there is another 'human' figure, two symbols and a 'dog'. On the right is an image of a 'deer' with branching antlers and a 'dog', as well as three small 'human' figures, one above another. Three metres below, there was said to be another similar pair of 'horses'. Bernshtam thought the petroglyphs were made in different periods, judging by the technique and style: the 'horses' and 'deer' in the first millennium, when the Saka inhabited Central Asia. He assumed that the place had already been sacred then, with the tradition continuing throughout the end of the first millennium BCE, taking as evidence the Dayuan's horses (Bernshtam 1948; Amanbaeva et al. 2011). Nowadays, the early petroglyphs are barely visible, and the bottom picture of the two 'horses' cannot be seen. However, all the details Bernshtam described were also included in the sketch (probably by S. S. Sorokin) made during the Tien-Shan-Alai archaeological expedition led by Bernshtam in 1946 (Bernshtam 1948: 155–156). Bernshtam used it in his 1948 publication, and since then, although it does not seem to be its exact representation (Amanbaeva et al. 2011: 58), the sketch has been reproduced in most studies of this particular petroglyph.

Right under the main rock formation that carries the petroglyph, there is a spring, and under the petroglyphs, there is a hole in the rock into which pilgrims can place their heads and hands (Figs 8f, 8g, 9). Washing oneself in the spring and activities involving touching the opening in the rock are considered to be healing. Opposite the hole, there is a symbolic tomb of the saint, the *mazār* (locally known as *gumbaz*). To the east, in the place once occupied by a small Sufi sanctuary, there is a mosque built in 2015 (funded by Saudi benefactors). There is an old graveyard in the southeast and a hospital to the north. The above parts of the complex (the petroglyphs, the aperture in the rock, the *mazār*, the graveyard, the mosque and the water source) are located within the public space.

West of the *mazār*, within the private space, is a flat rock with many cupules of different diameter (2–19 cm), up to 14 cm deep (Figs 8h, 10). The rock is known as *tash namaz* (Uzb. тош намаз, kirg. таш намаз), a prayer stone. *Tosh/tash* means stone, while *namaz* denotes the ritual prayer which the Muslims perform five times a day. According to one of the legends, it was here that Hazrat Ali stopped and tied his horse while preparing for the battle with White Daiva, a demon who lived in the Chil-Ustun cave in



Figure 10. The tash namaz (flat rock with cupules) at Dul-dul at complex, 2018.



Figure 11. The childehana – a closed space between rocks in Dul-dul at complex, 2016.



Figure 12. The stones bala tash in childehana in Dul-dul at, 2006.

Charbak, 3.5 km from Dul-dul at. *Diva* is an ancient Iranian term for gods. However, the divinity to which it refers has, over time, become more and more demonic (Herrenschmidt and Kellens 1993). Next to the rock, there is a place devoted to women's fertility rituals. It is an enclosed space between rocks, with no ceiling and a very narrow passage that leads into it. The rock formation extends to the west, where the petroglyphs are located. The place has been called *childehana* or *chillyahana* (Amanbaeva et al. 2011). The term *chillakhdna* comes from the Persian word *chilla* ('forty') and means a 40-

day retreat (for meditation or ritual purification), with the retreat place itself being called *chillakhdna* (Schimmel 1974: 103–105; Rakhimov 2007: 185), the spot where a saint used to live for some time in solitude (Zarcone 2013: 80). In the past, the *childehana* in Dul-dul at had stones, sometimes described as *linga*, the term derived from the Hindu metaphysics. The local inhabitants, however, called the stones *bala tash* (uzb. бола тош, kirg. бала таш), i.e. child stones (Figs 8j, 11, 12).

The site at Aravan is included in the National Register of Monuments and Cultural Facilities of National Importance in the Kyrgyz Republic, though the borders delineating the site have not yet been established, and the local inhabitants have ensured its safeguarding. The place encompassing the *childehana* and the flat rock with cupules (*tash namaz*) is part of a private plot (Amanbaeva et al. 2011).

There are many legends, stories and beliefs related to Dul-dul at. The most widely known relates to Hazrat Ali, who is said to have got involved in a fight with his own son there – neither knew they were kin. When the son realised that he had been fighting his father, he became so ashamed that he entered the rock and never emerged from it. The flat rock with cupules (*tash namaz*), mentioned above, was the arena of their fighting, with the marks left by Ali's knees as he prayed or by *Dul-dul's* hooves. The story incorporates different, changing details. Sometimes the protagonists are different people, but the plot remains the same. There is also another well-known story about a father who, after his son disappeared into the rock, entered the *chillyahana* and stayed there in solitude for forty days, which amounted to forty years in the outside world. When he finally emerged, he was lame.

The actors

The groups inhabiting the region have changed over the centuries. As I mentioned, some scholars claim that the petroglyphs in question were made before the Turkic peoples reached the Fergana Valley. Nowadays in Aravan, even though it is part of Kyrgyzstan, most people are Uzbeks and speak Uzbek. However, they are not the only visitors to the ritual site, so I prefer not to identify people connected with Dul-dul at as one ethnic group. I will now describe several people who, in different ways, were connected with Dul-dul at.

The guardian

Ergashali is the guardian of the site. His presence in Dul-dul at is linked with the spring water collected at the bottom of the rock. The spring appears

in June, is plentiful throughout the summer and disappears towards the end of October. During this period, Ergashali is there – I could say that the more water there is, the stronger Ergashali's presence becomes. Some people call him the guardian, others, the wise man or the elder, and still others consider him to be a fraud and a thief. Ergashali welcomes the guests, prays with the pilgrims, shows the petroglyphs to the tourists. 'It was God who put me here' – he repeated every time he told me the story of his life, which happened quite often. Ergashali was born and grew up in Aravan. He had some family troubles, became sick, and after his treatment proved unsuccessful, he left his place and went on a pilgrimage to holy places. He travelled for six years, visiting 273 holy places in five former Soviet republics, getting to know the patrons of shrines and spending many days at different sites. He returned to Aravan one night, went to Dul-dul at and, while he was sitting there until morning, he realised that his pilgrimage had come to an end. He suddenly felt a lightness in his heart and was cured. It was 25 years ago, and since then, his everyday life has been focusing on this space, for which he feels responsible. Over the years, he has planted and tended many trees around the site and watered flowers and herbs that he plants every year. He keeps the place tidy. He started constructing a wall around the graveyard (which is no longer used), reconstructing the *mazār*-tomb, made a paved walkway and a concrete dam for the water that collects under the rock. The votive pieces of textile tied to the tree branches disappeared from Dul-dul at due to his intervention – he took them all down and burned them, made notice boards forbidding the pilgrims to tie them to the branches. He reminds the pilgrims to address Allah through their prayers. Ergashali is active in the 'public' space, i.e. the part with the petroglyphs, the spring, the hole in the rock and the *mazār*. He spends many hours there, sitting on a colourful mattress, waiting for pilgrims to arrive.

The 'First Healer'

She was the first person connected with Dul-dul at that the inhabitants remember. When she was a young girl, she ran away from Nookat because of the fighting that accompanied the Basmachi movement (the national and religious uprising against the tsarist and then Soviet rule at the beginning of the 20th century). She found shelter in *childehana*, at the time when a desert surrounded it. As her right hand was crippled, the local elders decided to take care of her. They built a small house for her at the foothill of the mountain and found her a husband. The spouses lived there their entire life and local people used to come to the woman for healing (in case of and illness or sterility). She helped them, but she herself, even though she gave birth nine times, had only one son. After her husband passed away, she continued to live alone and died in 1994. Her son has not been keen to revisit the period when his mother was healing people. For over two years, Ergashali had

lived in Dul-dul at, in the house of the First Healer within the private space. For the past nine years, the house has been the residence of the Healer's grandson and his family. It is on his land that the pilgrims stay when they visit the site.

Azamat, Moldo

Azamat's job is to drive away *djinns*, i.e. demons, and the devil. Driving away *djinns* in Kyrgyzstan involves a kind of exorcism, called *jin chygaruu* (Кырг. жин чыгаруу: freeing from the *djinn*). According to Muslim beliefs, *djinns* are intelligent entities that are invisible to humans. They were created out of a smokeless flame, while people and angels, i.e. the other two categories of intelligent beings, were made out of clay and light (MacDonald and Massé 1991: 546–547). *Djinns* can subdue a body of their choice, which usually results in an illness that cannot be cured using conventional methods. With appropriate prayers (*surahs* and verses) from Quran, the *djin* can be driven away. Azamat says that he kills them. *Moldo* (Кырг. Молдо) is the term used for a mullah and usually denotes a person who studied in a Muslim school before the Revolution and who speaks fluent Arabic; however, in Central Asia, this term now generally denotes people who deal with *djinns*. I met Azamat in Dul-dul at, when he arrived with his family (women) to pray and have a meal. His wife's family used to come to this place, and it is at his wife's request that they continue to come. Sometimes, he comes here alone for a short prayer. Ergashali claimed that Azamat used to be his student, which Azamat denied, but when they met at Dul-dul at, they always talked as if they were friends. Azamat is a fascinating person; ever since he was a child, he was able to tell the future, and as a mature man, after many years of illness, he accepted the gift and started to heal people. Some beings assist him in this job, whom he calls 'my people' (Rus. мои люди – *moi lyudi*; Uzb. *odamlar*). Other healers use the same term. In the relevant literature, scholars tend to use the term 'guardian spirits' (e.g. Basilov and Kubakov 1983; Jessa 2001; Penkala-Gawęcka 2001). Sometimes, when local proper names were used for such 'spirits', they referred to e.g. ancestors (К. Тайжанов and X. Исмаилов 1986: 111). Here, I shall use the term 'people', as I consider it meaningful and indicative of how the community I describe perceives such beings. In the conclusions, I will demonstrate that this is also relevant for how the protagonists of this paper experienced and imagined the world. To facilitate comprehension of the narrative, I shall henceforth indicate the term in italics. Such beings are, in my view, not only 'protective' but also 'personally agentic' and subjective. They select the person with whom they wish to collaborate, often manipulating the person's life in such a way as to reach their goal. One of the signs of such an action is sudden illness suffered by the potential healer who does 'accept the gift' (see more in Basilov 1970; Jessa 2001, 2006b; Penkala-Gawęcka 2001). The person may

also become ill if *people's* demands are not met or the ritual they demanded, for some reason, has not been performed (Tayzhanov and Ismailov 1986: 110–138).

Azamat has a whole army of *people*, over forty thousand. They assume different forms (animals, women, men or dragons), fight against *djinns* and, according to him, are beautiful. In order to control such several *people*, he has two assistants, one on the left and one on the right side of his shoulder.

Mariam hola, bakshi

Mariam hola is called a *bakshi* in Uzbek, and a *koldun'ya* (колдунья) in Russian, which means a sorceress. In Turkic-Mongolian languages, this term, in its different forms, denotes a shaman and people involved in healing and in singing or playing an instrument. The Kazakhs have a *baksha*, a sorcerer and a foreteller who heals with spells. Among the Uzbeks the term means both a village healer and a storyteller of grand epic tales. In Central Asian traditions, during rituals, shamans used a special instrument, *kobyz*. We may thus conclude that, in the past, these functions were performed jointly. According to one theory, the word *bakshy/i* may derive from the old Turkic word *bak* — meaning 'seeing', which may be what shamans did when they saw diseases, future or non-material inhabitants of both upper and lower realm (Tursunov 1999: 61–69). Mariam hola lives with her son, and, just like Azamat, since she was a child, she has seen things that were to happen in the future. Just like Azamat, she has her *people*, but they are different (they are hidden). Mariam sees more than most people, and she can change the course of things in the future. For some time, she used to come to Dul-dul at quite often and there, every day she saw the First Healer stepping out to pray on the rock, and when she did, a white snake was appearing from the nearby *aryk*, which then slid over the Healer's knees to be petted. When the prayer was over, the snake would go back into the water.

Bübü Mariam

Bübü (Kyrg. Бүбү:) is a term denoting a woman healer who uses shamanic techniques (Aitpaeva et al. 2014: 336). Bübü Mariam is a shepherd's daughter. She got married when she was 17 and then lived an ordinary life as a housewife, a wife and a mother. Since childhood, however, she suffered from episodes of violent shaking, rheumatism and heart disease. She had nine surgeries (Bübü Mariam 2014a: 27). During one of her hospital stays, she met a man who told her about meditation. Since then, she has been meditating, helping the sick, and during healing sessions, she has been meeting a spirit who told her about, among others, the legendary Kyrgyz hero Manas. Based on these meetings, she wrote ten volumes of a new version of the *Epos of Manas*, diverging from the official version, titled *Ailul Manas* (Beneficent Manas). The spirit Jaysan authored the *work*, and Bübü Mariam was the medium — the person who *received the text from a living spirit and*

transferred it onto paper (Bübü Mariam 2014). In 2016, the court of justice decided that the text was extremist and misrepresented the facts of the *Epos of Manas*, banning its distribution (Asanov 2016). However, the paths of Bübü Mariam and Dul-dul at have since been crossing one time a year.

The pilgrims

Pilgrims come to Dul-dul at, and they are mostly (but not exclusively) women coming in larger groups. In the private part of the site, there is a makeshift kitchen and a place where they can eat in an open-air space. Sometimes, the pilgrims kill an animal as part of a ritual (usually a chicken, a turkey or, less often, a ram). Sometimes, people bring meat with them. Time spent at the site is considered a rest, but resting pilgrims may kill an animal, prepare a meal, and pray. An intention guides all this (e.g. to ensure the health of a specific person who is sick, a safe birth for a pregnant woman, getting pregnant or a more general purpose, such as plentiful crops, health or the solution to family problems). The pilgrims say that they pray to Allah in the public part of the site (with Ergashali) and the private part (on the land owned by the First Healer's grandson).

The performance

When we listen to the local legends without studying the daily practices of local people, we may have the impression that the petroglyphs had their own independent life of an unprotected archaeological artefact. The inhabitants mentioned the petroglyphs in the context of Ali's horse, and all stories related to Dul-dul at and relating the spread of Islam in the region. I presumed that the petroglyphs, which, according to Russian archaeologists, were probably related to the horse cult, nowadays were only linked to Hazrat Ali's mount. I thought that the 'show' that was put up on this 'scene' was not related to the ochre-covered horses. It turned out, however, not to be the case.

People coming to the *mazār* arrive in smaller or larger groups, in twos, or sometimes alone. They are usually women, and their requests mainly concern their families. Most often, they are childless women who wish to have children and who, for different reasons, cannot have them. The place is also visited by people suffering from various conditions. They often ask Ergashali for help, and he then asks his *people* for assistance. First, during prayer, he pronounces the name of the holy place Dul-dul at, Dul dul azyl, and then enumerates the names of his predecessors. Following the initial prayers, he initiates conversation, asking questions about the problem that brought the pilgrims there, and then he goes to the side and 'communicates' with his *people*. At the end, he instructs the visitors on how long and in which position they should keep their head or limbs in the round opening in the rock and how they should wash with water collected at the bottom. Ergashali is not keen to talk about his *people* and does so infrequently. He revealed that, just like Azamat's

people, they are beautiful, live in the rocks, in a specific location, but do not like it when you speak about them and that if he were to say too much, he would fall ill. But Ergashali has something else. For years now, he has been seeing horses accompanying him; he claims to see them all the time. It is precisely the horses that have been engraved on the rocks, the bigger and the smaller one. Regardless of where he goes, the horses can call him or can assist him in the place where he happens to be. However, he does not speak about it either.

The pilgrims give Ergashali small sums of money, small gifts and food (flour, sugar, oil), a chicken or a turkey so that he makes the sacrifice for them. Ergashali must not ask for anything. God gave him this task, and that is why Ergashali should never ask for any compensation.

The time visitors spend in the private part of the site is devoted to conversation, meal preparation and prayers. People mostly prepare *pilow* (a dish made of rice, carrot and meat) or a soup and a special deep-fried bread called *chalpak* (uzb. чалпак), made of flour, salt and water. Preparing meals is a ritual called *is* — which means 'the smell'. People say 'we are making the smell for them'. The point is to 'feed' the smell of the food prepared over a fire to different beings, people, spirits of ancestors or the host of Dul-dul at. Before each stage of bread preparation, visitors should say a prayer. There is also time for separate prayers. The pilgrims go to pray to *childehana*, where they burn 3, 7 or 40 (sometimes 41) sticks wrapped in cotton infused with oil. They pronounce their requests, touch the rock, and then their bodies (heads and chest) (Fig. 13). While praying on the flat rock marked with cupules (*tash namaz*), they touch the cupules and then their feet. The soil around *childehana* is also thought to have healing properties and is rubbed on affected parts of the body. Sometimes visitors come with women-healers so that they — experts in prayers and rituals — can act on their behalf.

Azamat (who can drive away the *djins*) said that there was a substantial number of *people* at Dul-dul at. Some are Ergashali's *people*; others are connected to *childehana*, and also, the graveyard has its own host. Azamat's big army of *people* who assist him are autonomous beings, but they always come at his bidding. It was not always the case. One day, when he had just started practising, his *people* followed his wife to Dul-dul at. When she returned, *people* did not come back with her. Azamat went to Dul-dul at. He entered *childehana* and had the following conversation: 'Did you



Figure 13. Praying pilgrims in *childehana* in the Dul-dul at, 2018.

take my *people*?', 'Yes, I did.' 'Then return them, I need them.' 'They are no longer here; they are in the White Mazār'. Azamat finally got his *people* back, but for me it was more important to learn who was his interlocutor at Dul-dul at, the host (i.e. the person who could, just like Azamat, 'take care' of the *people*).

Bübü Mariam first saw Dul-dul at during meditation. She comes to this place, which she calls *Duldul bulak* (Kyrg. булак — water spring), every year. She described her first visit in Dul-dul at, and the mystic experience she had, in the tenth volume of *Aikul Manas* (Bübü Mariam 2014). She comes into *childehana* and talks to the spirit. Who is it? She claims that it is a human being who received a gift from God, *Duldul* horse, a stallion, one of a kind, who descended from the mountain to drink holy water and fertilise the mares that were brought to him there. The mares then gave birth to the *argamak* horses, very sought after in the ancient times, and now and then, though very infrequently, there was also a *Duldul*. *Argamak* is an old term (used in Russia) for Akhal-Teke horses, bred in Turkmenistan, said to be the descendants of the 'celestial horses'. The characteristic features of the breed were identified on the petroglyphs in the Fergana Valley: long neck, graceful head, long withers, wiry body, slightly slanting croup, lack of mane and a short tail, elongated body and slim legs. According to Bübü Mariam, the opening in the rock below the petroglyphs that the pilgrims now touch and where they put their heads and hands, was once a water source. Bübü Mariam claims that water stopped pouring out because of human greed for the mysterious heavenly horses. She is now looking for this water in various places in Kyrgyzstan. If she finds the source, she will also find the Dul-dul horse, and *argamak* will start to breed once again.



Figure 14. Close-up of the bigger horse, 2017 (author's photograph processed by Bolesław Zych in the DStretch software).

Open eyes

The protagonists: Ergashali, Azamat, Mariam Hola or Mariam Bübü, possess some characteristics of a Central Asian shaman, especially when it comes to shaman's initiation and the illness that might precede it. However, it needs to be stressed that within the local worldview, it is Allah who bestows special power on places and people. The spirits of Muslim saints may mediate this unique ability. They are only visible to a select few, i.e. the people 'with open eyes' (Kirg. көзү ачык, *közü achyk*) (Aitpaeva et al. 2004: 339; Somfai Kara 2017: 51; Zarccone 2017: XXVIII). Opening your eyes is a process and usually happens following a 40-day retreat and/or after receiving a 'blessing' from another person having such abilities. Aitpaeva, Egemberdieva and Toktogulova distinguished *közü achyk* as a separate group of people capable of clairvoyance (Aitpaeva et al. 2004: 262–263). Opening your eyes grants access to the spiritual world. Such figures and the *mazars* — pilgrimage sites and religious sites related to Muslim saints and ancestors — are not exceptional within the Central Asian ontology.

Switching roles: the rock as the main protagonist

One after another, different aspects of Dul-dul at lead to different plots that may be analysed and interpreted in many different ways. That, however, has already been done by Bernshtam. He claimed that typical vestiges of shamanic cults could be found in the Dayan kingdom, which he thought was proved by the images on the Aravan rock. Then, in the Kushan Empire (78–240 CE), came Zoroastrianism, leaving an ancient structure in Fergana, attributed to the fire-worshippers (Bernshtam 1948; Bernshtam 1951: 20). The vestiges of both these cults can, of course, be identified in the practices and beliefs related to Dul-dul at. What comes to mind is also interpretations of other petroglyph

sites in Central Asia or Siberia, where we also have the motif of disappearance into the rock (Rozwadowski 2003, 2017). Even though shamanism in the region has been linked mainly to the Siberian peoples, the studies of rock art suggest that in pre-Historic times it may also have been present in central Asia (Rozwadowski 1999, 2003). The Arab-led expansion of Islam in the 8th-century central Asia changed the religious character of these areas, with shamanism undergoing re-interpretation through Sufism and Muslim mysticism (Zarccone 2017: XXI–XXIV). The way Central Asian healers hailing from various traditions operate and are perceived today is a function of shamanism and Islam, and more precisely, of Sufism (Zarccone and Hobart 2017; Sultanova 2015).

Nowadays, some of the sites where ritual practices occur, both those related to the cult of persons and places deemed to be sacred in Central Asia, are marked by particular features of the landscape: lakes, mountains or caves (Jessa 2009: 21–22). Scholars of Central Asia and Siberia point out the sacred significance of mountains and rocks according to local beliefs (Rozwadowski 2017). The 'cult' motifs connected with mountains, and so inextricably linked with caves, rocks and stones, can be observed in different periods, not only in Central Asia but in many other regions of the world (Tokarev 1982: 107–113; Toporov 1980: 257–260). Tokarev emphasised the variety and complexity of the phenomena that constitute the 'mountain cult', which in itself is necessarily just a generalisation. There is, nonetheless, a partial connection between different attributes of such cult, resulting from different historical periods and different life conditions (Tokarev 1982). In rock art studies as well, scholars have noted the meaningful character of the rock surface. The entrances to the caves might have constituted the passage to the spirit world, and contact with the rock enabled close encounters with another reality (e.g. Rozwadowski 1999, 2017; Lewis-Williams 2002: 208–210). Andrzej Rozwadowski, analysing the petroglyphs of Ilinskaya Pisanitsa in the area of Minusinsk, Siberia (Rozwadowski 2017), pointed out many examples of rock penetration in the shamanic context (i.e. the indigenous ritual and belief system). Entering into a rock during a shamanic journey was done through a narrow passage, a narrow hole in the rock or a cave. Caves often constituted the sites of shamanic transformation, while drums (an attribute of Siberian shamans) penetrated into the rock and emerged from it. It was also common among people to believe that ancestors inhabit mountains and engage in non-iconic forms of contact with the rock, e.g., by pushing objects into cracks in the rock (such as animal hair or small fragments of animal bones) or drilling and cutting rock surfaces. Rozwadowski proposed that there was indeed a reason for which the most spectac-

ular petroglyph in Ilinskaya Pisanitsa, which represents a shaman with a drum, is located in a large fissure in the rock.

The rock in Aravan, first described by Bernshtam, was mainly analysed through the lens of the equine images, and Bernshtam's successors followed this approach. The specificity of the style and technique used to make these images allowed scholars to separate the representations of 'horses' from the images that surrounded them and to link them to the celestial horses legend described in Chinese chronicles (Sher 1980: 93–94; Tashbayeva 2001: 61–66). As I mentioned above, the image of the Aravan petroglyph published by Bernshtam was not an exact representation to the petroglyph, but only a sketch, with was recreated in academic and popular literature. The sketch indicates the sex of the stallion — the bigger of the two horses (Fig. 7), which is not clearly visible on the photographs I took and those available on the Internet. The penis on the sketch cannot be seen even after the photographs were processed using DStretch software, which can reveal barely visible and invisible elements of rock art (Figs 14, 15). Processed images, however, revealed several other features that had already attracted my attention before. From my perspective, the equine motifs in Aravan should not be separated from other petroglyphs at the same site, even though they were made at different times. If we stand at the bottom of the rock, we cannot see small details, but they are visible from up close, and there is a link between them and what is happening at the bottom of the rock.

Some fragments of the petroglyph are especially interesting. One of them consists of two small human figures with raised arms of 'S' shape, located next to the front leg of the smaller horse. In the sketch, there are (now invisible) similar figures, also located above the back and behind the tail of the larger horse. Bernshtam interpreted them as follows: cult-related, magical scenes from the 5th – 6th centuries, caused by the human desire to promote animal reproduction and hunting success, are represented on the rock in Aravan, where people engaging in a religious dance are depicted close to mountain goats and sheep. He also noted that on the same cliff and the same image, but later (in 3rd – 1st century BCE), someone made depictions of horses of the famous Fergana breed (Bernshtam 1951: 6).

Even though the petroglyphs are not clearly visible at present, if we look closely at the small images next to the smaller horse's leg, we can see that what might look like arms from a distance seems to resemble snakes (Fig. 16). The engravings of those snake-like shapes



Figure 15. Close-up of the smaller horse, 2017 (author's photograph processed by Bolesław Zych in the DStretch software).



Figure 16. Close-up of the front leg of the smaller horse and petroglyphs of figures/snakes, 2017 (author's photograph processed by Bolesław Zych in the DStretch software).

are deeper than the horizontal and shallower motifs that might represent the 'torsos' of the two figures. Thus, we cannot be sure if the author of the engraving intended to depict snakes or people having snakes instead of arms. The motif of snakes was also present in the stories told by Mariam hola. She remarked that she often saw snakes in Dul-dul at:

They are not snakes at all; they are 'people'. They are 'people' in snakes' bodies ... I've never been afraid of them. The first time I saw a snake, I saw how luminous it was. It was yellow, but it was like the sun was shining from that snake. These snakes have big heads, you can see their eyes. Several snakes appeared in front of me in the shape of the sun. I looked and looked at them. Then the snakes drank some water and went back to their place ... towards *childehana*.



Figure 17. Petroglyphs in Aravan. A close-up view of the front leg of the smaller horse and petroglyphs of figures/snakes, 2017.



Figure 18. The stone from Dul-dul at. Currently at the National Historical and Archaeological Museum Complex Sulayman in Osh, 2017.

Mariam hola, as I mentioned, also saw the first healer, who was visited by a snake every day as she prayed. Although the visions of Mariam hola are not inspired by the petroglyphs (she just saw horses in them), but by local beliefs, they are nonetheless connected with them at the level of subconscious associations and cultural continuity. Therefore, I dare to say that the petroglyph reflects the world in which Mariam hola lives. Stories referring to snakes are common in the region and are usually related to places having healing properties, saints' tombs and graveyards. On the outskirts of Aravan, there is a special place between rocks where people come to 'get rid of illnesses'. Apart from praying for health, one should circumambulate the rocks three

times, remove old clothes, burn them and put on new clothes. The guardian of the site is a snake who lives in the nearby graveyard. Archaeological sites in the region where we find representations of snakes have been dated as far back as the Bronze Age (Belenitskiy and Meshkeris 1986).

Another detail, even more intriguing, is one of the front legs of the smaller horse, which seems to end with something resembling a human foot (Figs 16, 17) The shape of the leg closely resembles the stones that used to be part of Dul-dul at. One of these stones was called *bala tash* (stone-child), but it was shaped like a human foot. Actually, it was two stones: the bigger one had the shape of a foot, and the smaller one, placed on the bigger one, was, according to the pilgrims, a child's face. I saw the stones at Dul-dul at, in *childehana* during my first visit to Aravan in 2006. The stones were blackened by fire, and there were banknotes in between them. A similar, but single green stone, also in the shape of a foot, is kept at the museum in Osh, as one of the artefacts coming from Aravan. Unfortunately, the museum records lack data on the stone, and it is not known in what circumstances it was gifted to the museum (Fig. 18). Older people remember that there were more such stones and that some of them had holes in them that made it possible to put a foot inside them as if they were shoes. When somebody suffered from leg-related illness, that is what they did. The stones are no longer there, but the memory of them survived. What exactly these stones meant is unclear, but the smaller horse's limb may have been given the foot shape on purpose. The foot that is damaged also appears in the story of a father who was lame when, after forty days of solitary retreat, he left the *chillachana*.

This is how Mariam hola described the prophet who fought with his son in Aravan: '(...) the prophet was (...) quite short in posture, but his feet were that long' [demonstrating an above-average length of the foot]. Mariam Bübü interpreted the petroglyph from the point of view of her visions, suggesting that the creator of the petroglyph wished to indicate that a horse is not just an animal. She described one of her visions as follows: 'At nights like this a roan comes to this place on its own. How come there is a roan here? It is a foal of a mare, it was born here. The being that was born out of the luminosity of this place, neither a human nor an angel, the external face of this being was always presented by Bölökbaj'. The motif of animals with human external features, including feet, has also been addressed in studies of rock art, including the motif of a bighorn sheep with human legs in Cusco mountains in California (Whitley 2000: 13), or a buck at one site in Tuva, with hoofs resembling human feet (Devlet 1998 after Rozwadowski 2017: 10–11). Both motifs have been interpreted as representing animal death, a graphic metaphor of the shamanic experience, where the shaman appropriated the spirit-power of the killed animal. Rozwadowski reached a similar conclusion concerning Ilinskaya Pitanitsa, where the figure of

a 'shaman' has been juxtaposed with a depiction of a 'buck' hit by an arrow, and although the animal does not have human feet, two feet have been engraved separately, below the 'shaman' figure, facing the depth of the rock fissure. Rozwadowski proposed that they indicate the direction that the shaman will take inside the rock (Rozwadowski 2017).

In Dul-dul at the rock seems to play the key role. The whole complex of Dul-dul at: rocks, stones, *childehana*, pilgrims, rituals and stories constitute an extension of the petroglyph, different forms of its transformation. The mountain-rock, the pilgrims believe, has its guardian, who sometimes personifies as a horse, manifesting in pilgrims' visions and dreams. Like Azamat, the guardian has its *people*, who inhabit the rock's interior and with whom the pilgrims wish to communicate. Azamat described these beings as follows:

they look like our people; they are similar to them. There are women, there are men, there is one with a long beard ... there are little girls ... Now, during the day, they do not show themselves much ... they appear to pure people, especially in the morning, in the evening there will be a lot of them, they come, walk about, play ... Those who come here and tell their wish, they ('people') will hear all ... even if you say it in your soul, they will hear. They read minds, they know right away why you came here... If there is an illness, you do like this (Azamat touches his face and the rock) and it goes there (the illness). There is the host ... he protects them ('people') ... You cannot grab them, greet them, that is why to get hold of this (Azamat touches the rock) and they know, they will come. And they can hear us now ... They are looking at us, they hear us ... I see, and you cannot see.

Therefore, the pilgrims, to get in touch with the *people*, need to touch the rock.

Our conversation took place in a *childehana*, which is located in a large crack in the rock, where the pilgrims come to pray and light fires. It is not an ordinary space; it is located 'inside' the rock and is treated as sacred: some people perform purification before entering the *childehana*, and menstruating women should not enter it at all (just like they should not enter a mosque). As they come in, people lower their voices; they say that they feel the presence of the ancestors or the host. It was in the *childehana* that the legendary hero spent forty days following his fight with his own son. It was also in the *childehana* that the *bala tash* stone was located. Some women took it in their arms or placed it under their clothes, on their bellies (the site of the desired pregnancy). It all may be indicative of the belief that the interior of the rock is a different reality.

The flat rock (*tash namaz*) with cupules, located several metres away from the *childehana* may have served many different functions in the past, e.g. to crush grains or may have been used for rituals. According to some theories, the cupules were to retain blood during an animal sacrifice. We cannot exclude that, just like Rozwadowski proposed for Ilinskaya Pisanitsa — where one of the rocks has been covered with cupules — these constitute a graphic trace of the

interactions with the world located on its other side (Rozwadowski 2017: 12). *Tash namaz* is now used for prayers (in a way similar to a prayer rug) and a form of physical contact. The pilgrims touch the cupules, place and light pieces of cotton imbued in vegetable oil or roll their body over the stone. A similar form of contact occurs through the round hole located beneath the petroglyph. The pilgrims place their hands or head in it for healing and push coins into the cracks. This form of contact thus means crossing a certain border (just like the *childehana*), and the contact with the interior of the rock enables closer contact with another reality.

People: human, non-human

If people need to touch the rock to get in touch with the beings that inhabit it, what is the nature of the rock itself? The first idea that comes to mind is that it is a *body*, and since it is embodied, it is a *person*. Here, it is perhaps useful to refer to the so-called ontological turn in social and cultural anthropology, propelled by perspectivism. Perspectivism is an anthropological construct describing an indigenous way of living, experiencing and imagining the world (Viveiros de Castro 1998). As a concept, it is common among many South American indigenous groups. It states that the world is inhabited by different beings or persons (human and non-human), who may perceive reality from different perspectives. Perspectivism led to the redefinition of many conceptual tools used by anthropologists to grasp indigenous ideas, including *personhood*. It assumes the unity of spirit and a multiplicity of bodies (Viveiros de Castro 2005). Different beings may assume different bodies (human, animal, spirit, or natural phenomena), and personhood is determined through activities in which the being is involved. As a concept, perspectivism offers new theoretical avenues, not only for the description of indigenous Amazonian ontologies — scholars focusing on other areas in the world also find it useful. Rane Willerslev, who spent six months with a group of Yukaghir hunters in an Arctic Siberian forest (Willerslev 2007), described the Yukaghir world of relationships involving human and non-human beings, including sacrifice animals and spirits. The intrinsic characteristic of such beings is their personhood, a potentiality of being in the world (Willerslev 2007).

The beings at Dul-dul at are also marked by this potentiality, due to which, as non-humans, they can enter into relationships with humans. Significantly, some of them are referred to as *people*. The indistinguishability encapsulated in the term seems to be crucial. The *people* manifest human characteristics, and that is what enables relationships with them. Above, I wrote that the *people* appear to be agentive beings having their own goals, habits (e.g. Azamat's *people* only work before noon) and features. They react to touch (through the rock) and smell (the ritual performed for their benefit means smell). How the community that I describe perceives the *people* may be elucidated through one

event. I once asked Azamat whether the *people* used to live just like we do. I asked him this question because I had conceptualised these beings in western European categories, i.e. as ghosts. Azamat's response was immediate: *They live now*. Persons who are in contact with *people* realise that these beings are different and extraordinary. The *people* possess extraordinary characteristics: they are often luminous (Ergashali's and Azamat's *people* are beautiful and luminous), they can live in animal bodies or bodies of mythical creatures, and they live very long. When they appear as animals, they also look extraordinary, e.g. the *snake people* that Mariam hola sometimes sees in Dul-dul at emit light, have big heads and visible eyes.

Likewise, a petroglyph may represent such extraordinary beings: an animal having human characteristics — a horse with a human foot instead of a hoof, and human figures with animal attributes, or humans with snakes instead of arms. The whole petroglyph may, of course, have a very complex origin. There is a small human figure with an object resembling a rope with a loop on the back of the smaller horse. Thus, it may represent the ritual killing of a horse using rope and taking over its spirit by the officiating priest during the *aswamedha* ceremony (Indo-Iranian period) or by the shaman during a shamanic ritual. However, such representations are more characteristic of petroglyphs of the Bronze Age (Rozwadowski 2003). Or, perhaps it is a representation of celestial blood-sweating horses. Moreover, it can represent each of these, as they are non-exclusive. The meaning of the petroglyphs is different for different people. What remains crucial is the non-animal characteristics of the horse or the animal characteristics of the humans. This 'extraordinary' character of the site and the beings connected with it persists at the cliff's foot and seems to be embedded in the social consciousness of successive generations.

Conclusions: the performance goes on

Dul-dul at is not only an archaeological site but is also a living place, i.e. a place that is affected by a continuous process. Detailed descriptions of persons that I called actors or protagonists have been provided as case studies. Their way of perceiving the world and operating within the space of Dul-dul at (and beyond it) has served me as the way to describe the site that undergoes constant transformation through material and non-material interactions. The rock is a significant object in these two spheres and constitutes a communication space both for pilgrims and healers. The transformation process — of the space and the beliefs — occurs through practices, historical memory and the microhistories of protagonists (on the significance of microhistories, see e.g. Toren 1999).

Dul-dul at is a tool to engage in practices, a reflection of beliefs and stories. As a place that is 'ancient' — historically, for pilgrims it is a space 'sanctified by time', which over generations has been 'inhabited' by many beings (spirits of ancestors, the host and other

non-material beings), who are perceived by the local community as agents that can shape people's lives. The central point within this space is petroglyphs, whose specific elements are reflected (consciously and sub-consciously) in the material and non-material space of Dul-dul at. Horses, as the 'guardian spirits' have been accompanying Ergashali at all times; they also appear in the pilgrims' dreams. Snakes manifest in Mariam holi's visions, stones shaped like foot constituted (just like the rock) the space of communication between people and the beings (non-human *people*). The motif of a lame prophet leaving the *childehana* or the crippled hand of the First Healer seem related to the atypical front leg of the smaller horse.

The whole Dul-dul at complex can be perceived in multiple ways. Bübü Mariam, looking at photographs of the petroglyphs, saw the history connected with the site. In the crack of the rock, she pointed out characters she had known from visions and legends. The mufti at the nearby mosque considers the petroglyphs a mere signpost of the ancient Silk Road and does not want rituals to be performed by the rock. This does not change the fact that it was the site where the faithful built first the Sufi sanctuary and then a mosque (dedicated to Dul-dul at). Bübü Mariam claimed that the mufti's opposition affected the 'beings' behaviour', making it more difficult to interact with them.

The Aravan petroglyphs are thus not only a trace of the past, but they also constitute the present and, it needs to be said a very active present. The mountain itself and the petroglyphs engraved onto it also undergo transformation. There is plenty of graffiti around them; someone even engraved an inscription on the croup of the bigger horse. Several people refreshed the paint; others covered the inscription and the surrounding area with concrete. Many interventions that altered the petroglyphs can be seen in the photographs processed using DStretch (Fig. 14–16). Such acts of vandalism are, however, part and parcel of the mountain's history. They are the sign that the local community is not indifferent to the place.

We still do not have complete knowledge about the petroglyphs on the rock in Aravan. In my view, we may know very little indeed. However, it is clear that for the past over two thousand years, people have been interacting with the rock (executing continuous modifications) and that the performance goes on. Dul-dul at is not only an archaeological site but also a living place in the process of transformation, where pilgrims contact the beings that inhabit it through the rock surface. The petroglyphs — even though they seem to be just illustrations for legends about blood-sweating horses or Hazrat Ali's mount — are part of this ongoing process, a performance that is linked not only to the past and the present but which also provides an insight into the predispositions of the human nature.

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RAR 38-1358

The following articles will appear in the next issues of RAR:

- 'Embodiment and fashionable colours in the rock paintings from the Atacama Desert, northern Chile', by Gloria Cabello, Marcela Sepúlveda and Bernardita Brancoli
- 'Flute playing in the rock art of the Klein Karoo and Cederberg, South Africa — a potential link to ancient sound', by Renee Rust, Joshua Kumbani, Neil Rusch and Sarah Wurz
- 'The Bronze and Iron Age rock art of Altay Prefecture, Xinjiang: a synthesis', by Rebecca O'Sullivan and Huiqiu Shao
- 'The newly discovered Indigenous rock art from the Kinta Valley, west Malaysia', by Chaw Yeh Saw and Hsiao Mei Goh
- 'The 2019 microerosion dating of petroglyphs in Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, north-western China', by Li Man, Lari Jiayangnima, Li Yongxian, Tang Huisheng and Robert G. Bednarik
- 'Image analysis and treatment for the detection of petroglyphs and their superimposition: rediscovering rock art in the Balos ravine, Gran Canaria', by Pedro Javier Sosa-Alonso
- 'Dating pre-Historic painted figures from the Serra da Capivara National Park, Piauí, Brazil', by Pierluigi Rosina, Sara Garces, Hugo Gomes, George H. Nash, Niède Guidon, Thalison dos Santos, Cristiane Buco, Qinfeng Shao and Carmela Vaccaro
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- 'The Western influence on the study of Chinese rock art', by Xu Feng
- 'Dating mud-wasp nests associated with rock art: facts and assumptions', by Alan L. Watchman
- 'Boorpeck: its significance in Gariwerd rock art', by R. G. Gunn, J. R. Goodes, L. C. Douglas, D. Griffin. B. Briggs and L. Walker