



KEYWORDS: *Petroglyph – Altai – Indigenous – Renovation – Visitor*

## RENOVATION OF ANCIENT COMPOSITIONS BY MODERN INDIGENOUS VISITORS IN ALTAI, SOUTHERN SIBERIA: VANDALISM OR CREATION?

D. V. Cheremisin

**Abstract.** The Altai Mountains, southern Siberia, is an area very rich in rock art. Although there are no actively managed sites, there is increasing visitation, and among the visitors are indigenous inhabitants (the Altaians). The sites were engraved over millennia, and mountain ranges marked with petroglyphs are regarded as sacred places. Each generation of visitors appropriated the rock art heritage, converting the ‘alien’ into the ‘own’ by adding new elements and images, superimposing old compositions and transforming original motifs. Rock art sites can therefore be regarded as a form of ‘visitor book’. The ‘modern’ additions are divided into ‘ethnographic’ (authentic) and ‘tourist’ (non-authentic) ones. The authentic renovations of the Altaians are not considered acts of vandalism but an extension/continuation of a centuries-old tradition.

Most of the rock art sites in central Asia are diachronic complexes, which were created over millennia. From the distant past, rock art sites have marked mountain hunting routes and passes, caravan routes, short-term nomadic camps and river crossings. Mountain ranges marked with rock pictures are regarded as sacred places. Rock art sites evidence the continuation of a tradition, which has lasted for centuries.

One such diachronic rock art site has been recorded in the Argut River basin in the south of the Altai. Over several field seasons, the author has been studying the Argut rock art locality and has attempted to elucidate the attitudes of the indigenous Altai inhabitants, hunters and pastoralists to the rock art sites.

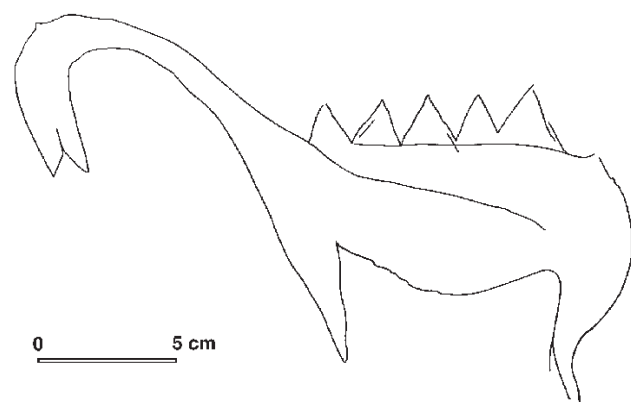
The local people used to hunt mountain goats in the high hills on the right bank of the Karagem River, a tributary of the Argut. A hunting route passes by a large rock art gallery containing motifs pecked into the rocks, thought to date from the Bronze Age (the 2nd millennium B.C.) to the present.

New elements and images superimpose old motifs forming amazing compositions: ‘portraits’ occur next to animal figures several thousand years old; very often, modern artists reproduce landscape elements, including mountain summits with animals and inscriptions of the word ‘Altai’. New generations of artists, in an attempt to imagine the times of the patinated motifs, added images such as a dinosaur (Figure 1), which was recently reproduced among other images in an ancient rock art gallery, probably under the impression of, and misinterpreting talks by, archaeologists.

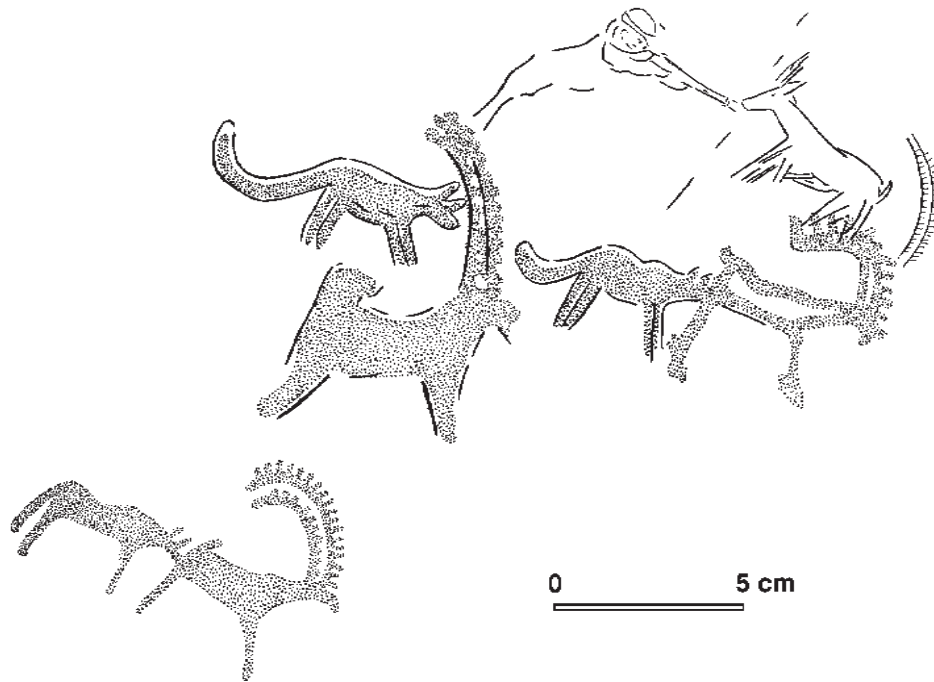
Old compositions were renewed at Karagem by pecking or scratching through the outlines of the images. The rock

surfaces containing the old pictures are patinated, and the freshly-cut lines appear distinct against the dark shale background.

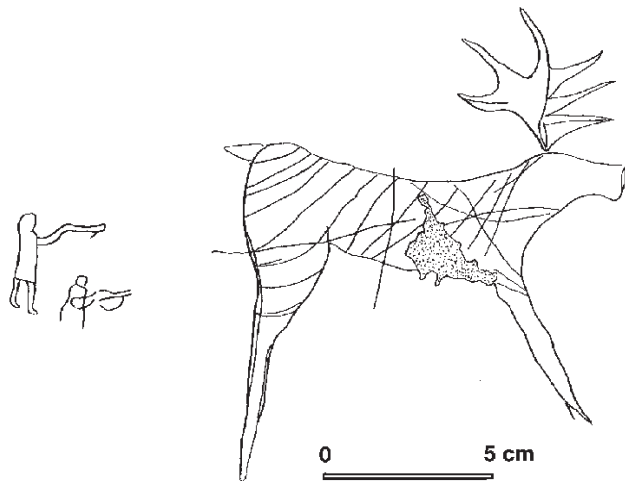
Hundreds of generations of hunters made ‘autographs’ (inscriptions) on the rocky banks of the Karagem. For centuries hunting has been a major theme in the rock art, with ‘archers’ being the principal human figures represented. Since the Neolithic, bow and arrow motifs have been recorded in the rock art of central Asia. In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, fire-arms were widely distributed in the Altai, as well as in central Asia as a whole, and this is reflected in the rock art of those centuries. Images of hunters on foot and on horseback armed with guns occur on rocks alongside the ancient motifs (Figure 2). Pictures illustrating an



**Figure 1.** Image of a ‘dinosaur’, amongst other, more ancient images at Djuramal, Karagem River, southern Altai.



**Figure 2.** This composition depicts 'wolves' chasing 'mountain goats', attributed to the first millennium B.C., as a component in a new arrangement by a modern hunter-artist, whereby a hunter armed with a gun shoots prey, while the 'wolves' chasing the 'goats' were converted into 'hunting dogs'. Djuramal, Karagem River.



**Figure 3.** Hunters armed with 'guns' chase a 'deer' engraved in Scythian times at Djuramal, Karagem River.

archer shooting 'goats' received multiple later additions demonstrating a continuation of the hunting tradition.

Old compositions at Karagem enter a new context. Each generation of visitors appropriated the rock art heritage, converting the 'alien' into the 'own' by adding new elements and images, superimposing old compositions and transforming original motifs. For instance, a composition depicting 'wolves' chasing 'mountain goat's attributed to the first millennium B.C. was included as a component in a new motif arranged by a modern hunter-artist: a hunter armed with a gun shoots prey, while the 'wolves' chasing the 'goats' were converted into 'hunting dogs' (Figure 2). The Altaians, in attempts to appropriate the rock art heritage, add new details, which alter old images

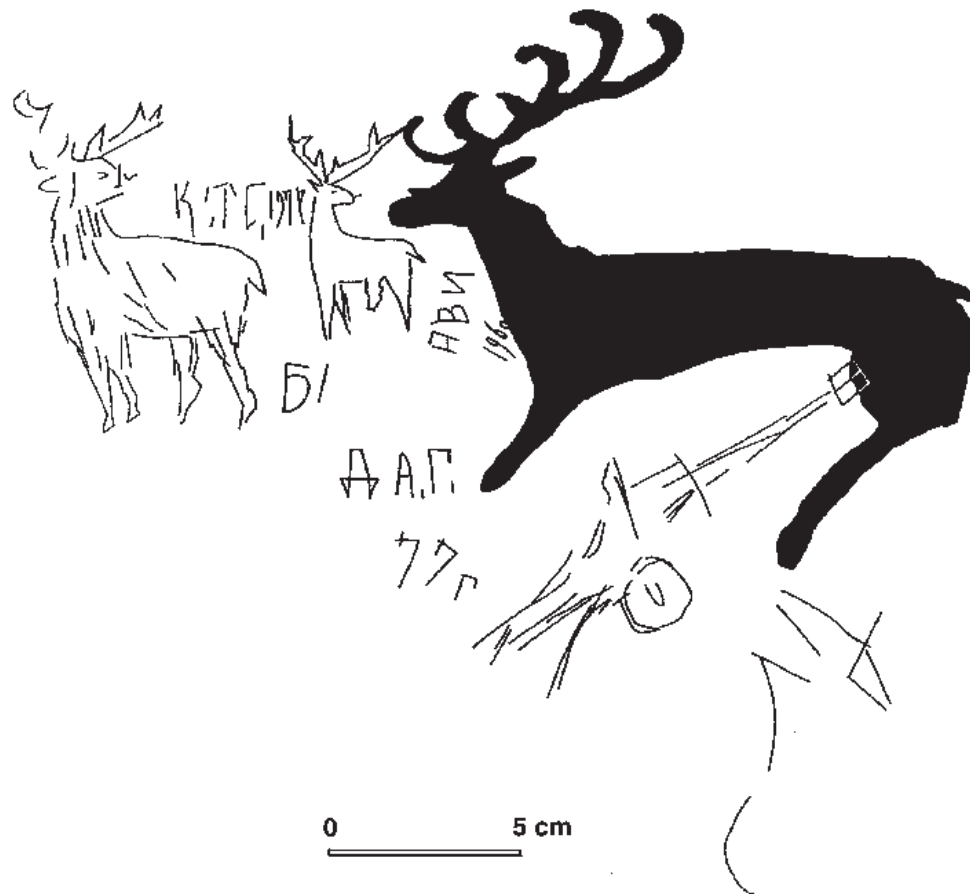
and transform them into 'new people' in eternal hunting scenes. For example, a horseman mounts a horse that was pecked out in the Bronze Age; or hunters armed with guns chase a deer engraved in Scythian times (Figure 3).

The attributes of hunters, including old-fashioned guns and waistband kits, are also popular in modern graffiti. An unusual example is a cannon which has been depicted near the ancient images of animals. Again and again, new motifs were added to the rock art gallery on the banks of the Karagem, presumably to ensure successful hunting.

This place is named 'Djuramal' ('drawn livestock'). The local people believed that the ghosts-hosts of the mountains inhabited the site and owned game-animals as their livestock. Numerous autographs include dates from recent decades (Figure 4). These can be regarded as signs of visitation to the Karagem gallery.

Local people explain new additions in terms of relationships with the invisible hosts of nature. Rock art images, both new and renewed ancient compositions, are believed to become a part of the 'other world'. Individuals' names inscribed on rocks are considered a form of 'identification card' in the world of ghosts and establish the hunters' rights to the territory and resources. This is why it is not prohibited to superimpose or transform old motifs, in contrast to their destruction. Local people have said that once a hunter hacked out a rock surface containing an image and was punished by having his arm broken.

Traditionally, it is believed that both livestock and animal images on rock are protected by the ghosts-hosts of the mountains. The peoples of central Asia worshipped the mountains featuring rock art. This cult reflects a whole range of ideas of sacred places and ghosts-hosts of Nature. The indigenous people of Altai perceive rock



**Figure 4.** A date from 1969 amongst these engravings of game animals indicates the local belief that the ghosts-hosts of the mountains inhabited this site at the Karagem River and owned game-animals as their livestock.

art compositions, both new and partially destroyed old ones, as sacred things. Today, as for hundreds of years, rock art expresses the delight and admiration of human beings for their surrounding world.

Numerous contemporary images and inscriptions in the south of the Gornyi Altai in the Chaganka River basin (a tributary to the Chuya River) evidence continuous visitation of the locals to the rock art sites. Here, over the territory of several dozen kilometres, thousands of petroglyph masterpieces are pecked and engraved on rocky outcrop-pings and boulders. Frequently, we can see apparent Iron Age, Middle Ages and Modern Age (i.e. ethnographic time) images together on the same rock portion chosen by Bronze Age artists more than four thousand years ago. Eventually, therefore, rock art sites became a form of ‘visitor book’.

The most popular modern motifs are horsemen and horsewomen wearing traditional Altaian clothes, shamans and shaman attributes (most often, the shaman tambourine). As a rule, these images are cut with an iron awl-like tool, or scratched over old pecked images, often overlapping them. There are motifs closely connected with the traditional pastoral livestock, such as scenes of grazing cattle or images of hunters armed with old-fashioned guns; one can also often see ‘erotic scenes’ on these rocks. Sometimes alongside the images, modern artists left their ‘autographs’ and included a date. Even whole texts dedicated to the Altai or home villages are written on the rocks. On the Dzhalgyz-Tobe mountain, a curious globe is depicted on



**Figure 5.** Engraving of a globe on the Dzhalgyz-Tobe mountain, Chuga Steppe, with the Altai, the artist’s residence place, clearly indicated. This composition also includes the artist’s ‘autograph’ and a date.

the rock. The territory of Altai, presumably the artist’s place of residence, is indicated on this globe (Figure 5). Some inscriptions tell us about love stories or love pangs;

in others there is a reference to a forthcoming army draft (something like '730 days and nights I will be away from my beloved Altai'; two years was the term of service in the Soviet Army). I have also seen a rock 'portrait' of Vladimir Mayakovskii, a famous Soviet poet, and inscribed verses from his poems devoted to the Soviet Communist Party.

Some logotypes of popular NBA teams and famous trademarks can be seen on the rocks, often misspelled (for example, the inscription 'MANTANA'). This is explained by the popularity of clothes (tee-shirts, baseball caps etc.) with imprinted logotypes imported from neighbouring China. Very often, modern artists depict landscape elements with mountains, birds (an eagle), inscriptions of the word 'Altai', male and female silhouettes and portraits with the corresponding legends. Some modern realities, such as cars and airplanes, can also be seen on the rocks.

The most original motifs scratched over ancient pecked animal images are the undines. These fantastic characters probably appeared on the Altai rocks under the influence of modern tattoo images popular among those who have served in the naval forces.

Thus, we may distinguish at least two patterns of up-to-date interaction with ancient rock art sites. One can be

regarded as a continuation (in some sense) of ancient traditions, especially those connected with hunting and other traditional activities, for instance, pastoralism. Another pattern reflects the desire of visitors to autograph ancient rocks, thereby marking their own personal visits. However, the rock art sites have not yet contributed to the education of young generations of Altaians because we often see examples of vandalistic behaviour and a lack of understanding, such as paintings with oil on ancient images, autographs that hide original pictures, etc. Unfortunately, the continued visitation of the rock art sites conflicts with their protection into the future.

#### Acknowledgment

The initial version of this paper was presented in Symposium E of the Third AURA Congress, on 12 July 2000 in Alice Springs, Australia. This paper has benefited from the comments of congress participants and has been edited by the Australian Co-Chair of the Symposium, Dr Natalie Franklin.

Dr Dmitry V. Cheremisin  
Institute of Archaeology, Ethnography and Anthropology  
Novosibirsk  
Russia

RAR 19-608

## IFRAO-Brepols Rock Art Series

This publishing venture is a partnership between IFRAO and the major Belgian publishing house Brepols Publishers. It has recently commenced production of high-quality academic books about palaeoart studies. Volume 1, *Rock art science: the scientific study of palaeoart*, has already appeared, and volumes 2 and 3 are now in press. Volume 2 is the *Glossary of rock art research: a multilingual dictionary*, Volume 3 will be *Rock art and epistemology: courting sophistication*. Ordering details for Volumes 2 and 3 will be available shortly, and standing orders are invited. A special offer of a 40% introductory discount applies to members of the organisations affiliated with IFRAO (which include AURA). Please mention that you are a member of an IFRAO organisation and send your order directly to Chris VandenBorre, Publishing Manager, Brepols Publishers NV, Begijnhof 67, 2300 Turnhout, Belgium.

E-mail: [chris.vandenborre@brepols.com](mailto:chris.vandenborre@brepols.com) — or: [cvandenborre@hotmail.com](mailto:cvandenborre@hotmail.com)

Tel.: +32-14-44 80 27 — Fax: +32-3-611 79 77 — Mobile Phone: +32-478 55 69 82

<http://www.brepols.net/>

Volume 1 of the series is now available:

*Rock art science: the scientific study of palaeoart*, ISBN 2-503-99124-6

List price excluding VAT and shipping EURO 74.00, reduction for IFRAO to EURO 44.40 plus shipping. The contents of this academic textbook are: 1. Rock art science: an introduction; 2. The study of rock art in a historical perspective; 3. The discrimination of natural and artificial rock markings; 4. The technology of rock art; 5. The recording of rock art; 6. The conservation of rock art; 7. The dating of rock art; 8. The interpretation of rock art; 9. Some methods of rock art science; 10. Portable palaeoart; 11. Resources in rock art research; 12.

Rock art glossary