

Characteristics of the Rock Paintings of Paaluu and Ikh Durulj

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Abstract: The region of Central Asia, especially the lands of Mongolia today, is rich with parietal art including rock paintings. Research regarding these rock paintings has been carried out to a certain extent from the second half of the 20th century, mainly from the point of view of archeology. In the study of rock paintings in Mongolia, Altai, Baga Oigor, and Tsagaan Gol rock paintings have been widely studied and exhibited on the international stage by international archaeological research teams, which can be considered to be a major contribution to the study of rock paintings of the western region. Additionally, a considerable number of studies were carried out on the rock paintings of the Gobi region of Mongolia, in Gobi-Altai, Bayankhongor, and Umnugobi provinces and a certain number of books and publications have been published. At the intersection of the northern end of the Gobi region and the southern edge of the Khangai mountains, Guchin Us [Lit.Tr: Thirty Waters] soum or subprovince of Ovorkhangai Province is located. The rock paintings sites by the name of Paaluu and Ikh Durulj are located 25 kilometers northwest of the Guchin Us soum center (sub-province seat). They are the main targets of our current research.

Keywords: Rock Paintings; Paaluu and Ikh Durulj; Characteristics of Rock Paintings.

1. Introduction

In 1995, a research team led by D. Tseveendorj from the Mongolian Institute of History with cooperation from the Korean Petroglyphs Research Association conducted research for the first time in the regions of Paaluu and Ikh Durulj in Guchin-Us sub-province of Uverkhangai province. As a result of the research, a book titled "Mongolian Rock Paintings" was published in Korean in 1998 (based on research materials from Ikh Durulj and Paaluu historical sites).

In 2018, the Archeology-Ethnography research team of the University of Science and Technology began conducting research in the region again. Efforts to register and document the rock paintings were conducted in Ikh Durulj in 2019 and Paaluu in 2020. In the same year, a 324-page book titled "Rock Paintings of Ikh Durulj, Paaluu, and Hetsuu Tee" containing brief descriptions of the rock paintings was published. This book provides an excellent and efficient

opportunity to be introduced to the geographical and geological formations of the region[1].

The Ikh Durulj and Paaluu rock painting sites are situated generally in the desert lands south of the steppes, spanning throughout the mountains of Ikh and Baga [Great and Small] Takhilgat, Ikh and Baga Durulj, Hetsuu Teeg, Ikh and Baga Argalant, and Ikh and Baga Unegt. It is a land of low rocky hills with sandy soil, predominant with wild leeks, ramsons, various shrubs and saltwort.

The Ikh Durulj Mountains are the remnants of an ancient extinct volcano with a flat peak, formed by igneous rocks stretching about 1 km from west to east. The rock paintings are located on the hills that extend along the southern part of the mountain. In addition, there are several barrows and square tombs on the flats of rock formations as well as valleys and ravines of the hills. The Paaluu rock painting site is situated 3 to 4 km from Ikh Durulj, at the top left part of the low valley with a large trench formed by a fault at the eastern edge of the plain. (Figure 1, 2).



Figure 1. General structure



Figure 2. General structure

2. Literature Review

Many experts and scholars have attempted to date them through visual features, symbols, and religious connotations, mainly by approximation rather than by a fixed method. Among the many methods to date the rock paintings, the ethnographic method (Iconography), the modeling method (Style), the technical method (Technique), the rock erosion and oxidation method (Patination and weathering), the direct observation method (Estimating the Age of Rock Art Directly), the radiocarbon dating method (C-14), etc. are predominant (Bednarik, 2002, pg.3)[2].

Regarding the issue of the dating of the rock paintings of Paaluu and Ikh Durulj, it can be noted the designs appearing in the depictions provide reasons for considering them to be of the Bronze Age or the Neolithic period. A common expression of rock paintings in Mongolia considered to be dated to the Bronze age is the depiction of animals. However, this expression is hardly evident in the paintings of the research area. It should be noted that this could suggest that the rock paintings in the region may date further back than the Bronze age and the ancient kingdoms. There are two depictions of carts that could be chronologically linked to Bronze age rock paintings. However, there are no depictions of horses being used to ride. There is only a single image of an animal similar to a horse or a deer being ridden[3].

3. Characteristics of Bronze Age Rock Paintings

Although there are no immediately recognizable figures of animals, there are quite a few depictions of the ibex and the twisted spiral of its horns. This characteristic is also found in Bronze Age rock paintings. There are two reasons for the rock paintings of the region to be considered pre-Bronze age with regards to their color and wear. The first is that the colors of the rock paintings are very faint, with some pictures barely visible and the second is that the black granite on which the rock painting was painted was cracked and broken in places due to some natural factor. Bayanlig's rock paintings with depictions of animals, which were dated to the Bronze Age in Mongolia, are bright yellow or brownish yellow in color, yet

the rock paintings of Paaluu have shifted to a color similar to that of the main surface of the rock.

Depictions of cattle, ibex, deer, and some predators, which are usually associated with the Bronze and Neolithic periods, are predominant. Although there are no ethnographically identifiable depictions associated with this period for depicting the human form, there are a few common depictions of naked men and women giving birth[4].

Regarding the techniques used in the depictions, the use of non-metallic tools to indent the edges on the surface and scraping the inner part of the surrounding indentation, or only using the scraping method is observed to be predominant. However, in a few cases, some images have been made with sharp edges with little cracks and chips using a bronze or even possibly an iron tool. Based on all this, it can be assumed that the rock paintings of Paaluu and Ikh Durulj date back to the Bronze age and earlier.

There is a basis to examine the characteristics of the depictions of Paaluu and Ikh Durulj rock paintings in relation to the religious rites and rituals of the tribes that lived in the region during the Bronze Age and earlier. It can be said that shamanism, which has long been practiced in Central Asia, and images related to some of its concepts are quite common.

4. Meaning of Bronze Age Rock Paintings

In traditional nomadic shamanism, it is believed that shamans communicate with the hidden world by transforming themselves as they perform rites and rituals (Dewlet 2019, pg.71; Rozwadowski 2014, pg.86). Although they can transform into any type of animal depending on the shamans, some studies mention animals such as birds, deer, and wolves. The depiction of the ibex with human feet in the study is a symbolic representation of the religious content that is important for many events of great significance such as hunting, curing diseases, and funeral or celebratory rituals, as a vehicle of the shaman to connect with the heavens and spirits. Paaluu's rock paintings show zoomorphological content with human legs. Although most ibex depictions focus on the movement and the shape of the animal, this particular image clearly shows an ibex head and body with

human feet. In this image, the two front legs were depicted to be walking, while the back legs are standing and the two horns were depicted representing space and distance with one behind the other and majestically curving to its back. The tail is risen up, and the neck and chest are shown in a straight line with the same width. The edges are irregular, which indicates

that it was created by striking and scraping with stone on stone. The surrounding area of the ibex was filled with irregular dots. Likely, the dots do not symbolize fertility, but the sky. (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Illustration of a human-legged ibex (photo by Andrey Klyuev, Russia)

The next depiction of a human-legged ibex is more spatially expressive, moving away from the common composition of cave paintings that depict from the side, and the ibex is depicted in an unusual pose. The important expression of the composition of the image is that the ibex is shown from the left back side when representing three-dimensional space, which highlights the artist's ability to express distance on a plane with a single color. Although the ibex is depicted with only three legs, the placement of the two hind legs and the position of the front legs were precisely designed, so that it seems all four legs are present in people's

minds. One horn of the ibex is created with dashed lines and dots to clearly show each branch, while the right horn is depicted optimally depending on the viewing angle. Similar to the previous image, this image was also created by scraping with a stone, and light tapping on the horns (Figure 4). In the image, all parts of the body were created by using the scraping method uniformly, but the left horn was created using the narrowing method, which could indicate that this depiction was a carefully planned rock painting with religious tones, showcasing the artist's expression of space and distance, composition and techniques.



Figure 4. Illustration of a human-legged ibex (photo by Andrey Klyuev, Russia)

5. Conclusion

As Paaluu and Durulj rock paintings are rich with many depictions and imagery, there is a need to study them in connection with the traditional nomadic culture and religious practices. Furthermore, there is a need to study the artists who created the rock paintings and took their first steps in discovering certain methods and designs of visual arts and establishing religious rituals and art forms.

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