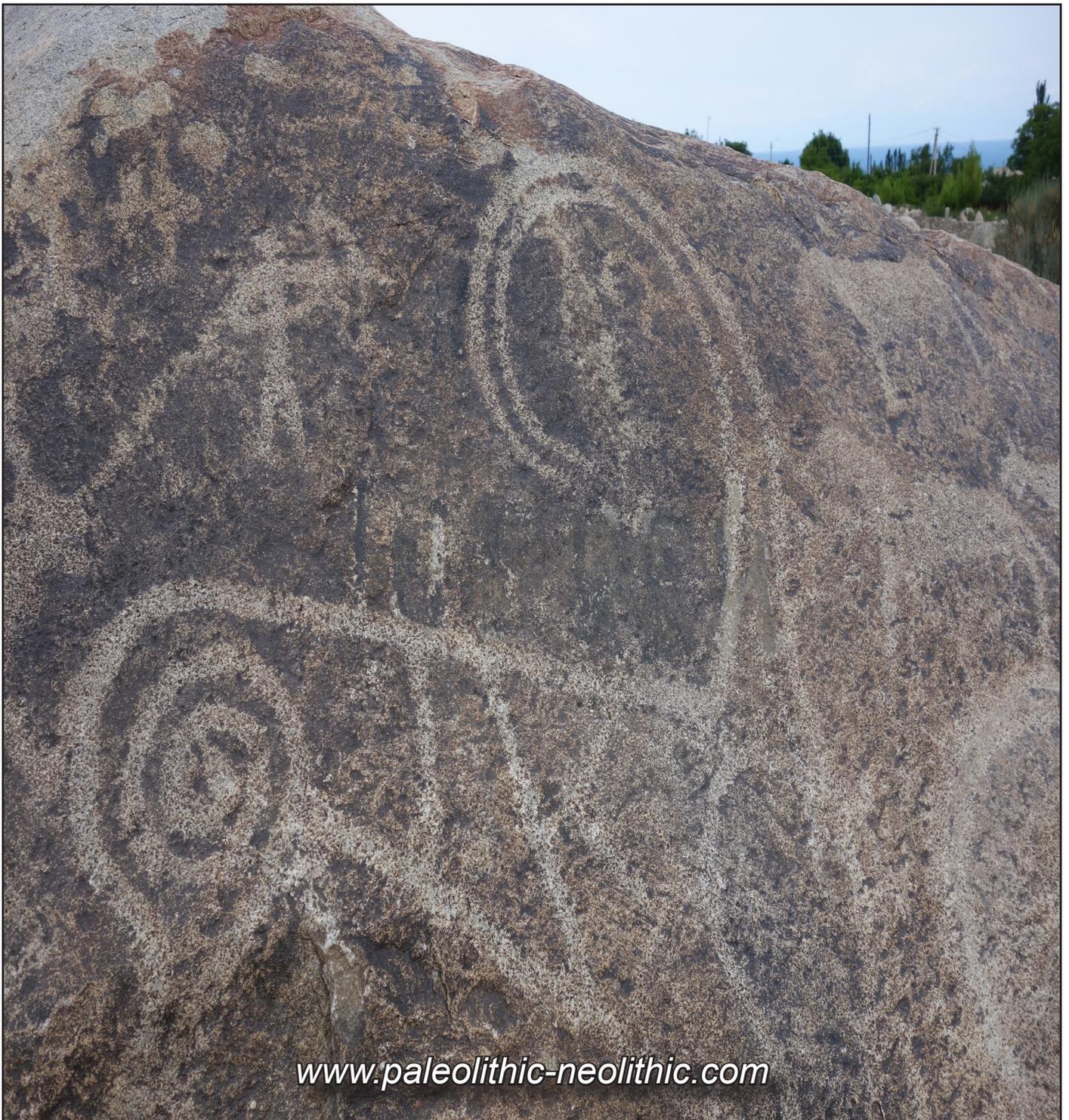


Cholpon-Ata

Kyrgyzstan Rock Art





Geography

Cholpon-Ata lies on the north bank of the Issyk-Kul Lake about 125 kilometers northwest of the Kyrgyzstan city of Almaty. Pre-historic rock engraving sites always are found close to water sources where men and animals had to pass at least once a day. Most sites are found along rivers and often in narrow canyons, so the cult sites were hidden from unwelcome visitors. But Cholpon-Ata is different, it lies fully in the open on flat land on the banks of the lake.

Rock Art Park

An archaeological park with an extension of 42 ha was created in 2004. Here the 4,000 year old rock art engravings can be seen, as well as seven areas with pre-historic stone circles erected about 1,000 BC plus six burial mound areas and one large area with multiple Balbal stone stelae. These have an interesting similarity in appearance, size and stone type chosen to those I have seen in Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

Human History

What surprises me is the fact, that Asia pre-historic rock art sites are younger in age in comparison to Arabian and European sites. There we have various sites, which are of Paleolithic origin.

In Asia the majority of

engravings start with the Early Bronze Age 3,000 to 2,000 BC. This is surprising as the continent was populated by various types of hominins at very early times about 400,000 years ago. The first being homo erectus from whom a rare species developed in South Siberia and the Altai mountain range called "denisova hominin".

Homo sapiens was first attested in East Asia around 80,000 BP. And homo neanderthalensis arrived from Europe about 45,000 BP in Central Asia, but he died out around 15,000 years later. So the question remains, why are there no earlier engravings dated around 20,000 BP like in Europe and Arabia for example. New evaluations in Iran for example suggest an age of up to 40,000 BP.

Numerous Engravings

It's over 2,000 pre-historic engravings are found on many boulders covering the slopes of the picturesque Tian Shan mountain range north of the lake. Cholpon-Ata means "venus father" and is a mythological protecting spirit.



The rock art images in Kyrgyzstan and neighboring Kazakhstan have much in common and can be seen as one pre-historic cultural area being created by pastoral

herders. The Cholpon-Ata rock art images were engraved from the Chalcolithic or Eneolithic period to Early Bronze Age into Iron Age.

Bronze Age Period

The Bronze Age period here lasted from 2,500 to 500 BC and is the period when engravings were created. It was a period of change of lifestyle, spiritual culture and economic life. The steppe nomadic breeders started to learn bronze smelting from migrants and they also produced first metal weapons and using horse or oxen drawn wheeled carts.

The necessary ore was mined at Cho, Talas, Ketmen Tube and Issyk Kul. Four types of bronze was produced: tin bronze, tin lead bronze, arsenic bronze and copper. From 500 BC onwards even mountain hunters became familiar with these techniques. So more sophisticated social structures were introduced with priesthood and military gaining importance in society.

Engraved Images

At Cholpon-Ata there are no rock paintings only engravings. Neither are there any caves nor rock shelters. All pre-historic rock art was created on boulders lying in the open and being submitted to the destroying influences of weathering. There are no rock panels covered with composition if images like in Tamgaly in neighboring Kazakhstan.

Most boulders show dark surfaces with patina also called desert varnish. Black surfaces are created over hundreds of years by manganese particles in the rock and red surfaces by iron contents in the rock. Here it is mainly black patina.

Main Motifs

Early Bronze Age rock art images here show anthropomorphic figures. As Cholpon-Ata was a pastoral herder area the main motif here is the ibex or goat ram in multiple forms and sizes. Most interesting is also the spiral and linear motifs on the ibex.

An interesting theory assumes that these are tribal or clan ownership signs. Similar markings I have come across in Saudi Arabia, see picture below. Have a look also at the impressive hunting scene above it on this boulder with two hunters armed with bow and arrows trying to defend their herd against three wolves.

The hunters also have a dog on a leash as can be seen in the below picture on the upper left corner. Next to the ibex the deer plays an important role.





The assumption is based on the mother deer cow myth called olun-goa, but which in the time line is of more recent date. The deer image in rock art engravings plays a mythical role in various Asian regions for example in Altai, Tuva, South Siberia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia.

The deer was regarded as an important totem animal, but often only its' antlers were depicted. And deer stelae were found in Central Asia, West Mongolia, Trans Baikal and Tuva. Here the deer are depicted with huge antlers some with fir tree like antlers as can be seen in the two pictures above. Not to forget the Bactrian double hump camel images.

Cult Sites

Rock art sites normally were cult and ritual sites where sacrifices and devotions were practiced. This is not evident at Cholpon-Ata except for the later Balbal stelae. These stelae are also called kurgan stelae. Kurgans are burial mounds and bring them in connection with burial rituals. Therefore Balbal Stelae represent ancestors and were erected close to the burial grounds at Cholpon-Ata.

Saimaluu-Tash

This is another important pre-historic engraving site in Kyrgyzstan. It is situated about 30 kilometers south of Kazarman in the Ferghana mountain range. The cult site lies at 3,200 meters altitude and offers over 10,000

images engraved on the shining basalt stones pecking away the light greyish surface and thus making the black stone visible. For this reason they look like black on white images.

Shamans came to this altitude to hold certain rituals. This high altitude was assumed to be closer to the sun and their gods and spirits. There are few high altitude rock art sites and therefore this site can be compared in its use and possibly rituals as well, to another high altitude cult site in Europe. This is called Vallee des Merveilles situated in southern France north of the mediterranean coastal town of Nice - see separate article on this website for further details.

