

Mongolian

Deer Stones





were even found in Ukraine and Bulgaria. But these were not so richly decorated.

These stelae were erected by horse breeding and herding steppe nomads and they took their tradition with them when they moved further west.

Some experts suggest that deer stones could be created by a predecessor nomad culture which might have started the famous Scythian Culture. They admit that the Scythian deer image is different but this would not declassify the connection.

Introduction

In the past the Mongolian Deer Stones or stelae had little acknowledgment in the international archeological community looking at neolithic and bronze age cultures. But recently things changed and international experts published new research and pictures. Even a book with pictures of 1,240 stelae across Mongolia was published but unfortunately only with russian text. Please see references at the end.

The so-called deer stones are predominantly found in Mongolia, Sibiria and China. This specific tradition to create and erect deer stones started 3500 to 3300 years ago during the Bronze Age in Mongolia and lasted only for 800 years until the tradition stopped around 700 BC.

There are no reasons known why it stopped but it might be a change of tradition or the great move of steppe nomads further west.

In total experts recorded about 2,000 deer stones in Mongolia, plus 30 in the Tuva region, about 50 in the Russian Altai area and 50 in Kazakhstan. Few

Deer Stones & Burials

Deer stelae are definitely connected with burial rituals and were therefore erected at typical Mongolian funeral places called khirigsuur. But there are less deer stelae at these places and about hundred times more khirigsuur monuments.

So the stelae were possibly reserved for special rituals or persons. It was established that deer stones symbolize specific individuals therefore each stone is so different from the rest. They represent important leaders and great warriors of a tribe.



But these stelae were not erected on top of graves. They served more as memorial columns. Clan chiefs and important warriors were buried in mounds close by and deceased often have deer and bird tattoos.

And it is not certain that deer stones were erected at the time of burial. Normally tribal chiefs and famous warriors died in battle and it took time to shape and engrave a stela. And let us assume

that not every tribe had a skilled stone mason in their community. So the deer stones had to be ordered after death and possibly transported some way.

Certainly chiefs did not order their deer stone when they took over from their fathers. Like pharaohs started to erect their pyramid as soon as they came into power. So it can be assumed that these stelae were erected with a memorial feast some time later.

The horse riding steppe nomads practiced a mortuary tradition with subsidiary horse burial mounds next to the chief's mound. Common were horse head burials possibly linked to a ritual feast with horse sacrifices. But it is not certain that they ate the horse meat.

Interestingly in western Mongolia no horse sacrifices and burials were practiced. Were horses here too important or rare to be slaughtered? Were horses consumed in other areas at feasts but not here? Could these tribes not afford to sacrifice horses or did the tradition change?

Still lots of answers to be investigated. But unfortunately there are few written sources as

steppe nomads did not keep any recordings.

Importance of Deer Images

Next to the most important transport animal horse the deer was possibly one of the key hunting targets.

Research shows that it was a crucial shaman or totem animal and linked to death and afterlife. We can assume the deer was the crucial connection to their gods therefore the flying deer image with birdlike snout was created.

The combination of deer and sun disc symbols support the sky/god connection of deer in the nomad cultures in this region. It was also an important spiritual animal in other cultures and wide spread in Asia. The images show the local red deer or Asian maral.

Details of Deer Stelae

For the stelae mostly granite and greenstone monolith were used. The average heights ranged from one to four meters with a width of 20 to 80 centimeters. Seldomly they had a square shape mostly they were hewn to rectangular slabs of slim stelae.

The tops were either flat hewn or left natural. But why are the top sec-





tions often missing? Were they perhaps deliberately destroyed by other clans in feuds?

The engravings were pecked in negative relief often with deep groove cuts. Artisan stone masons used mostly metal chisel tools and stone tools for fine surface finishing.

Deer stones were predominantly erected with their most decorated front face looking east towards the rising sun.

Development of Styles

Early stelae have very simple deer images. The famous flying deer motive with long neck and with long out stretched legs fore and aft giving the impression of more flying than running. This was introduced at a much later stage.

Also the deer antlers became more ornate showing spiral forms and a sun disc

symbol was added. Interesting is a detail showing faces with open mouth. This singing pose possibly is also related to burial rituals.

Let us look now at the three different main deer stela styles which are not surprising all different regional styles.

Classic Mongolian Style

It is the dominant style in Mongolia and Siberia. Most possibly it is the original form from which all other styles originated.

The engraved motifs are very detailed and result in elegant looking images. They include belted warriors and the most famous image of flying deer which gave these stones their name.

Weapons depicted are numerous such as: knives, swords, axes, quivers, bows, spears, shields, whetstones, fire strikers and chariot rein hooks.

West Asian European Style
We also can call it the Eurasian style. These stelae differ much as they were carved in three sections separated by two belt lines either formed as solid line or as dotted line.

These sections indicate from top to bottom, first the face section with sun, moon or earring symbols possibly representing ears, secondly the torso section with deer, horse or ibex images and finally the lower body with different weapon engravings.

The three sections also are interpreted to indicate heaven, earth and underworld. And it is assumed that sections intentionally have multiple meanings.

Sayan Altai Style

In this region we see free floating straight legged animals and next to deer other animals were engraved such as: tiger, pig, cow,





horse, frog and bird. In the lower part weapons appear such as: daggers, bows, chevrons and tools.

But experts also recognized two sub styles: the Gorno Altai style with simple warrior motifs and the Sayan-Tuva style which is similar to the Gorno Altai style but with fewer animals, no deer and only belts and earrings.

Mongolian Sites

The following sites are all on the UNESCO world heritage list for future recognition and listing.

Uushgiin Uvur

Uushgiin Uvur is situated near the town of Muron. It is a 400 hectare large site with 30 deer stelae and slab burials.

The complex site offers many skillful engravings and stelae with the best face motifs.



Khoid Tamir Valley

The valley is with 4,500 hectares the largest site of all with over 100 stelae. This valley is the main area of the deer stone culture created by steppe nomads. There are also numerous



burials and plenty of petroglyphs. Here you can see also rare depictions of fighting warriors with sling stone weapons.

Jargalantyn Am

This site is only one kilometer away from Khanui River. On 18 hectares you will find about 30 stelae plus various slab burials. All stelae were erected close to each other different to the other sites.

Reference

For further information on earlier Mongolian rock art with important deer images please see the article "Chuluut River" on www.paleolithic-neolithic.com

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