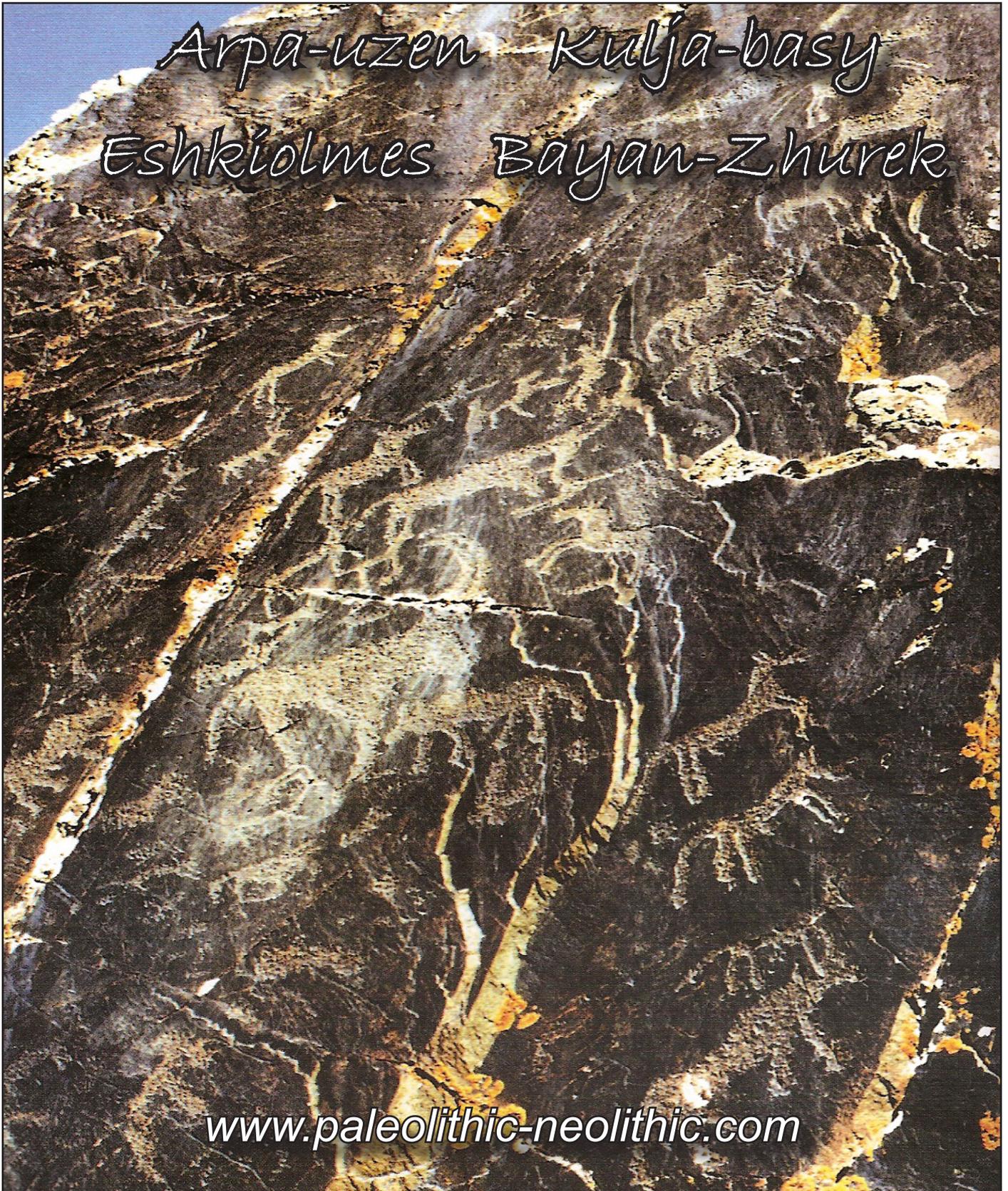


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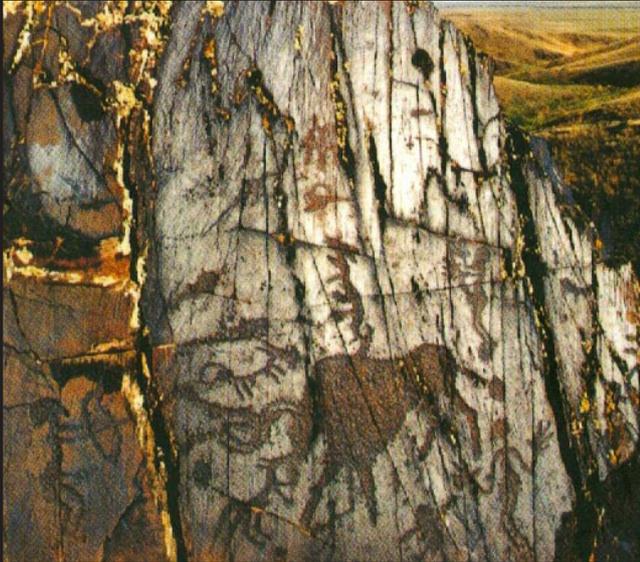
Best Rock Art Sites

Arpa-uzen Kulja-basy

Eshkiolmes Bayan-Zhurek



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The pre-historic rock art engravings in Kazakhstan and neighboring countries have much in common and can be seen as one post-neolithic cultural area. They were created from the Chalcolithic or Aeneolithic Period about 5,000 years ago through the Archaic Period and various stages of Bronze Age and Saka and Hunnic Iron Age including the Wusum Period.

Important Rock Art Articles

For comparison please see the articles "Tamgaly" about rock art in Kazakhstan, "Cholpon-Ata" on pre-historic engravings in Kyrgyzstan and "Chuluut River" about petroglyphs in Mongolia all available on this website.

Southern Kazakhstan

If we look further back in time the oldest human made stone tools were found in the Karatau mountains in Southern Kazakhstan and were dated one million years ago. This tells us how long this area was already populated by human species.

It is interesting to note that elaborated skillfully engraved most natural images are the oldest and simple stick figures are the youngest. This is true throughout the world. When you are first confronted with ancient rock art you might assume it is the other way round.



Highly Developed Ancestors

Recent research shows us that our ancestors were far more developed than we have imagined so far. With regards to rock art over time interests and engraving talent was lost because changing lifestyles and climatic conditions as well as tribal conflict with immigrating civilizations.

Three important rock art regions exist in South Kazakhstan which is the most important area for pre-historic rock art in the country.

Karatau Region

Arpa-uzen is here the most important site. But there are 20 more significant sites in this region. It is a pre-mountain desert and semi desert area with an important trading route connecting Iran and Bactria with Asia.

But it is also a hunting and animal rearing area. Therefore wild camel and wild donkey images can be found here. The first rock art creations were engraved here during the Mid Bronze Age about 3,500 year ago.

Chu-Ili Region

The most important sites here are impressive Kulja-basy where the first archaic engravings were found and famous Tamgaly plus 20 more relevant sites.

It is a low hill semi desert area also lying on an important trade route. Again hunting and animal rearing was the living basis for inhabitants in this area.

Djungarian Region

Also rich in interesting sites full of pre-historic rock art such as: Eshkiolmes and Bayanzhurek plus two dozen more sites. Here semi desert and mid mountain steppe prevail. The local population survived not only on hunting and animal rearing but also from agricultural activities bases on the rich soil in the area.

Important Arpa-uzen Site

Situated in the Karatau mountain range at an altitude of 800 meters the name means “barley stream”. The site was first documented in 1970’s and again in more detail during a survey in 2004. It lies on an important ancient trading route linking Turanian and Bactrian civilizations and going further on to the Ural area.

It is one of the biggest sites with over 3,500 images in seventeen groups across an area of three square kilometers. First engravings were dated during the Mid Bronze Age 3,800 years ago. These were created by direct pecking with stone tools.

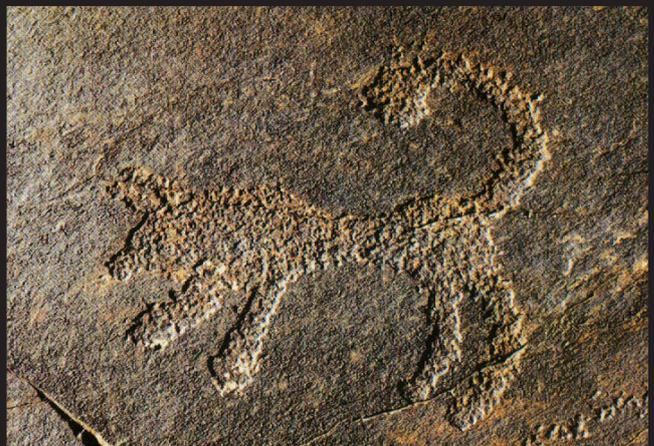
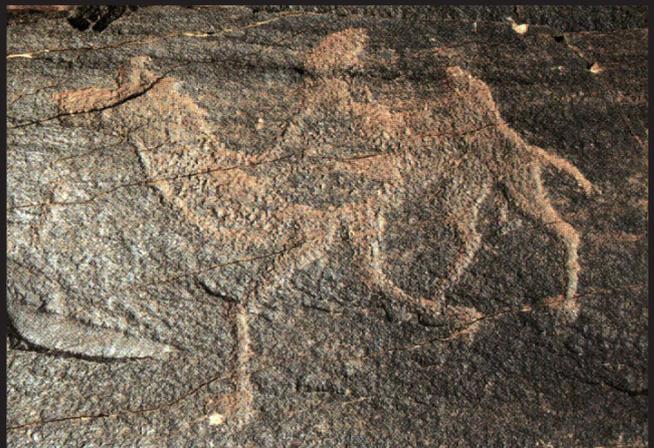
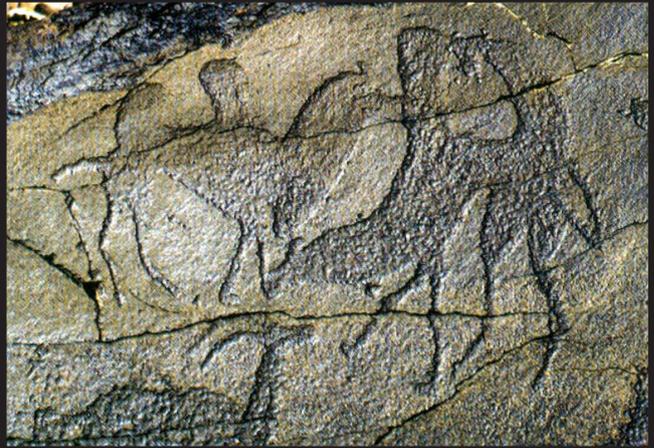
Interesting motives can be seen here such as: human groups with weapons and ritual batons, archers with phallus and loving couples. But also animals were created such as: camels some as large as life size, as well as wild donkey, few bulls, deer, wild boar including also chariots and geometric signs.

In the east experts discovered Mid Bronze Age settlements and cemetery and a spring. Ancient burial monuments include various Bronze Age tombs and about 100 stone earth kurgans and kurgans with two tails.

Most Ancient Kulja-basy Site

This is really the most important site next to Tamgaly. It is situated in the central Chulli mountain area about 50 kilometers east of Tamgaly. The name means “vertebrae ridge”. The rock art engravings are wide spread over an area of about 30 square kilometers.

They are found in fourteen short side valleys running down the escarpment. Why did their creators choose these valleys? In winter they are snow free and therefore perfect sheltered winter



camps with good water resources.

Another important reason for their creation here is the important south-north trading route passing through this plateau connecting Tianshan with Kyrgyzstan.



and footprints. But also procession of animals with or without men can be seen.

Other interesting images involve solar signs, horns, squares, labyrinths, undefined symbols, wheels, chariots and snake depictions.

Rock Art Details

It is the oldest rock art site in Kazakhstan with over 4,000 images on 600 rock panels distributed in 40 groups of which eighteen are sites with important images. It all started during the Early Bronze Age 3,800 years ago. Active rock art creation took place here for 2,000 years and is the longest active rock art site in Kazakhstan.

Engraving Styles

Starting with the Archaic Period inhabitants were engraving their images through Bronze Age and Iron Age until the Wusum Period. No similar archaic images were found elsewhere in the region. Also cup-marks were created in this early period.

Three styles developed step by step such as: contour, contour and stripes, silhouette styles. But we can also identify three outline styles with figures being engraved first in schematic and thereafter more plastic and finally in geometric style.

We noticed a high artistic quality and archeological complexity plus dimension of depictions.

Images & Motifs

The Mid Bronze Age repertoire includes 25 different images

including carnivores such as: lion, cheetah, bear, wolf and dog, as well as herbivores such as: camel, horse, sheep, goat, deer, hare, stork plus other birds.

Special images include horned horses possibly as totem animal, as well as deer being shamanic or sacred animals.

Noteworthy and very impressive are the sixty large wild bull or aurochs images both with long and short horns measuring one to two meters in size pecked with stone tools on horizontal rock surfaces.

Human figures include men, women, archers hunting prey and humans with raised arms in worshipping pose



Rare motifs are a depiction of a man with wolf mask, or a man hunting a hare, the domestication of leopard scene, as well as the bull sacrifice and worship engravings.

Rock Art Periods

The Mid and Late Bronze Age was the highest rock art creation period with over 50% of all engravings most densely concentrated on rock panels with images showing high quality of depictions.

During the Late Bronze Age about 3200 to 2900 years ago figures become smaller in size and simpler. Depictions now include domesticated animals and horse riders created with metal tools in a medium size of about 20 centimeters.

Iron Age depictions change because of different lifestyle, now goat, ram, wolf, hunters and horse riders dominate the rock panel creations. Deer are now playing an important role.

But this period only represents 20% of rock art creations. Thereafter simple wusum signs are left by nomadic clans until thousand years ago.

Settlements & Burials

Close by six Bronze Age settlements on average with



20 stone houses later up to 50 houses and various water management structures such as dams were discovered.

Plus five Bronze Age cemeteries of which one cemetery counts 25 tombs from the Alakol Culture dated 3,400 years ago. These tombs were erected with stone henges and cist tombs.

The discoveries included also obas, cairns and fourteen Early Iron Age settlements dated between 2900 to 2300 BP with a total of 110 stone earth kurgans. One kurgan group counted 20 mounds.

The so-called oba is a piles of stones on top of hills and mountain heights between one to three meters high, normally single oba were erected. But also groups of two to four were found.

Later during nomad civilizations engraved steles were erected, which have a burial memorial reason. For more information please see the article “Mongolian Deer Stones” on this website.

Significant Eshkiolmes Site
Now we move to a different area northwest of the Djungarian range near the Koksus river, about north of Almaty near the Chinese border. The name means “the goat does not die”.

Like in Kulja-basy over twenty short valleys running down the escarpment. In winter they are perfect because snow free and therefore sheltered winter camps.

The Koksus river left fertile soil perfect for agricultural activities which is special to Eshkiolmes and important for first farming and herding communities from the Bronze Age on.

Over 10,000 rock art engravings from small to very small only measuring two centimeters cover many rocks. Rock art depictions started here also during Mid Bronze Age with the main period of creations during the Late Bronze Age.

During the Iron Age Saka tribe period we see skillfully created animal engravings but later ending in poorly pecked wusums.

Pecking & Scratching
Only at Eshkiolmes pecking and scratching techniques were used in co-existence and often next to each other which is unique to this site. Scratching was used on rock surfaces





covered with so-called desert varnish. This dark patina was naturally created over hundreds of years on rocks with manganese or iron content, black patina resulted from manganese and red from iron rich rocks.

Here we can see pecking of herbivore animals plus human figures both with square bodies. Later images become more naturalistic but smaller to very small. Scratched images involve archers in conflict and chariots.

These might result from south Siberian immigration into the region. And these tribes imported agricultural and mining skills starting a totally new economic base for the local population next to herding. Later on new figures were added to old images.

The typical Bronze Age tombs and Iron Age kurgans can be found here as well, including seven Bronze Age settlements. The site was first documented in 1980's and again during a detailed survey in 2003.

Amazing Bayan-zhurek Site

Situated in the Djungarian range about 80 kilometers east of Eshkiolmes and north of Almaty near the Chinese border. The site is located on the escarpment at the western end of the short mountain range with 2,000 meters high peaks. Its name means "communication heart".

Over 2,500 engravings in six groups are spread over an area of two kilometers at an altitude of up to 1,800 meters. The oldest rock art include early cup-marks. Residents started during the Early and Mid Bronze Age with amazing pecked

figures of shamans holding for example two mirrors representing the sun plus small sized human figures.

During the Late Bronze Age figures became smaller and more linear. During the Iron Age there was less rock art activity only some Saka tribal creations with skillfully pecked small human and animal images appear. Thereafter scratched horse riders in hunting and fighting scenes were done.

Fourteen Bronze Age settlements with on average twenty stone houses and metallurgical workshops in three villages, plus five Bronze Age cemeteries were documented. As well as hundreds of Iron Age earth and stone kurgans. Very close by the archeological sites of Muzbulak, Tasbas and Kalakai are located.

Summery

All important Kazakhstan rock art sites are situated along early long distance trade routes. Here engravings compared to other parts in the world started quite late during the Bronze Age. Nevertheless the impressive repertoire of images and their good quality are comparable.

But it will be difficult to visit these sites and therefore we hope that we can give you some insight about what was created here about four to two thousand years ago.

Picture Credits

We thank the Laboratory of Geoarchaeology for using some of their pictures

References

Petroglyphs of South Kazakhstan, Laboratory of Geoarchaeology, Almaty, ISBN 9965-27-645-5

