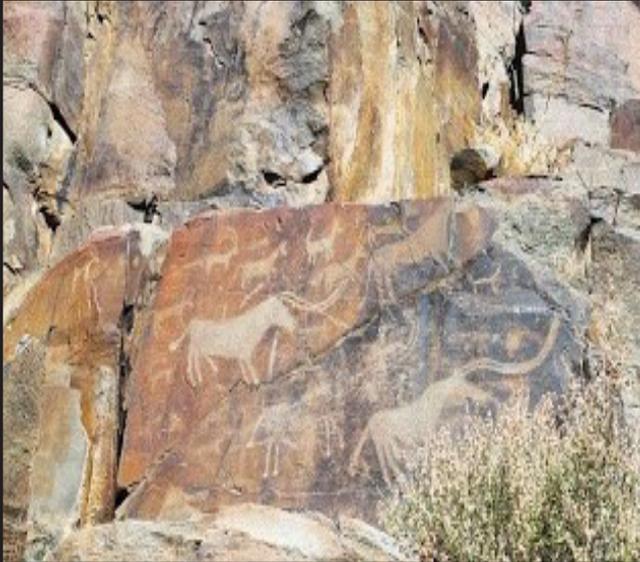


# Tamgaly

Kazakhstan Rock Art



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### General Information

The pre-historic rock art images in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have much in common and can be seen as one cultural area. They were created from the Chalcolithic or Eneolithic period through Early Bronze Age until the Iron Age. For comparison please see the article on Cholpon-Ata on this website.

### Geography

Tamgaly is situated 125 kilometers northwest of Almaty and lies in the Chu Ili mountain range at 900 meters altitude. It was discovered early in 1957 and became an UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2004.

At the time the region was home to pastoral herders who engraved the rock surfaces for ritual and cult practices. Unfortunately high temperature changes between day and night and icy winter conditions have damaged and broken up most rock art panels as can be seen in the picture left. In addition regular seismic activity destroyed some of the panels too.

### Site Details

The Tamgaly archaeological area comprises of five main cult sites with astonishing pre-historic engravings, some altar stones as well as a settlement and burial grounds. The settlement was founded during the Bronze Age and its six burial grounds too. Another six burial grounds are younger and were dated to

the Early Iron Age.

The Tamgaly canyon is about 1,200 meters long and between twenty to hundred meters wide. The engravings are rather concentrated. The central rock art area measures five hundred meters square and contains about 3,000 images created on both sides of the canyon.

The remainder 2,000 depictions are distributed in the surrounding fifteen square kilometers. There is also a second canyon called Sunkarsay which is situated about 700 meters northwest of the main canyon.

### Main Motifs

If we remember that the pre-historic rock art creators were pastoral herders, it is no surprise that they have engraved mainly animal images. These include naturally deer, goat or ibex, bull, horse, camel and onager which is a wild donkey species. All animals listed here are in their order of importance or number and frequencies of depictions. The goats were bred and used as food supply, the deer was hunted for their meat and their antlers used for tool making, oxen and horses were needed to draw their four wheeled carts.



Most of the motifs were engraved during the Bronze

Age and therefore nothing is further as to include their main means of transport a wheeled chariot. Tamgaly has only five of these images which is few compared to other sites in the area.

### **Animal Domestication**

In certain hunting scenes we see the use of trained dogs. That is no surprise as dogs were domesticated by capturing and breeding wolves as early as 15,000 years ago in the Middle East. And modern DNA technology can tell us today that four packs of wolves are the ancestors of all dogs. Dogs played a very important role in early times for the hunter-gatherer clans. In the amazingly sophisticated Natuf Culture men were buried together with their beloved dogs from about 12,000 BP.

Now imagine that pre-historic traces about 40,000 year old stunned experts when the Chauvet Cave was discovered twenty years ago in southern France. In this cave covered with outstanding artistic wall paintings they found this continuing trace in the soft mud of a wolf which trotted on the side of a young boy as if he was his master.

Consider this the boy was carrying a fire torch and wolves don't like fire. Secondly if the wolf would have followed the boy in a distance to attack him the wolf would have sniffed his trace and followed in his tracks and not at an arm's length next to it. There is still much for us to learn about the timing of animal domestication.

New finds in Saudi Arabia about five years ago for example indicate that the domestication of horses did not happen in Kazakhstan 5,000 BP but in Saudi Arabia four thousand years earlier when the deserts there were still green grassland.

### **Fertility Cult**

One of the most fascinating motives is that of a calf inside a cow's body. This can be interpreted as a fertility symbol or the "mother cow" myth and this image is unique to Tamgaly. A panel with dancing human anthropomorphic figures surrounding a woman giving birth has also much to do with fertility. And how do we interpret the seven sun headed deities above this astonishing composition? That the sun creates fertility is a fact well known at the time, but what more wanted their creators express to the world with this combination of images?

In total there are four rare scenes with women giving birth at this site. Only one of these scenes is found at Kulzhabasy about fifty kilometers east of Tamgaly. But there are also two sexual intercourse scenes



here, which are also part of the motifs at Bayan-Zhurek and Eshkiolmes both north of Almaty close to the Chinese border and at Saimaluu-Tash in Kyrgyzstan.



indicates that as one sun headed deity is standing on a bull which you see in the pictures on the right. Also in other pre-historic rock art sites the bull is linked to fertility and sun cults.

### **Horned Horse Images**

When you see the images of horned horses you know immediately this must be a

Dancing human figures are always impressive, they are important cult scenes. And most definitely a sun deity standing on a bull is clearly pointing to an important sun cult.

Fertility and sun often coincide in pre-historic depictions. In total at Tamgaly there are over two dozen sun gods depicted. So it was certainly an important sun cult site.

### **Sun Gods or Sun Cult?**

Of the two dozen sun god depictions only four have sexual attributes. We also see heads with two or more circles with dots and rays in and outside the head circles. So if Tamgaly was a sun god cult site, where the other sites close where moon gods are depicted perhaps moon ritual sites?

Experts think so as the moon god figures clearly have a crescent sign above their heads. Sun god depictions were also found at other sites like: Kulzhabasy, Eshkiolmes, Baikonur and Saimaluu-Tash.

### **Moon Gods**

These figures are clearly distinct from sun god figures as they have crescents above their heads. Seven moon headed figures were found at Karakyr only seven kilometers northwest of Tamgaly. Another five moon gods plus two sun gods were identified at Gorny twenty five kilometers south of Tamgaly.

Only one other site is known to have both sun and moon headed figures. These can be seen further away at Kaishi in the Usek valley 350 kilometers northeast of Tamgaly.

### **Bull Images**

Bull images are always interesting to interpret. And even if the Tamgaly pastoral herders main breeding animal was the goat. So we can imagine the special or mystical role the bull played for them. Was it one of their main totem animals? We can see many bull depictions here and bull images are unique to Tamgaly.

Yes bulls are associated with sun gods and their rituals and cults. One example clearly



special depiction of ritual or cultural meaning. Eleven of those images were found at Tamgaly and one even has antlers.

This is another proof of its assumed totem animal value. No doubt these images are horses with horns, because of their body shape, typical horse tail, position of its sex and the horse ears.

At Tamgaly all bull images have no ears as a clear distinction. Three times these horned horses are associated with humans including a female rider and a man with ax in front of a horse.

The concrete meaning of these depictions is not known only that it is ritual or as totem. It must have been a special local cult as horned horses are unique to Kazakhstan rock art.

### **Anthropomorphic Figures**

Most human figures are depicted in cult scenes. Often they were engraved wearing animal skins and tails and possibly intend to show a shaman in cult and ritual practice. We also see here twinned figures identified as worshippers in adorant pose. Tamgaly offers two panels with images of a group of dancers, which are also found at Arpauzen in the Karatau mountain range and Sholak north of Almaty.



### Sunkarsay Site

Only seven hundred meters away from the Tamgaly canyon this site offers 150 panels with approximately 500 engraved depictions. These include hunting scenes, camel, deer and goat. And much later in medieval times horse riders were added here.

### Engraving Techniques

The rock surfaces at Tamgaly are dark and covered with patina also called "desert varnish". A blackish patina indicates manganese content in the rock, whereby a reddish patina is created by iron traces. The engravings were either directly pecked or indirectly using metal chisels.

### Dating of Engravings

Here at Tamgaly experts have established four to five periods of creation of pre-historic rock art. The main canyon engravings were created mostly during the Bronze Age and in the surroundings areas later during the Iron Age.

The Mid Bronze Age lasted here from 1,500 to 1,200 BC. These depictions have a three dimensional realistic style with dynamic figures, such as sun gods, shamans, worshippers or adorants and animals such as bull, camel, horse, deer, wolf, goat and chariots. The images size is in comparison to other rock art sites with twenty centimeters average.

The Late Bronze Age spanned

from 1,200 to 900 BC and can be identified by smaller figures, linear or bi-dimensional style, new motifs are horned horses, in general lesser choice of animals, but still include sun god depictions.

The Early Iron Age from 900 to 300 BC has new larger panels with repetition of motifs, further limitation in image choice, hunting scenes with deer with simplified fir tree like antlers, goat and human stick figures. A novice will always think human stick figures are the oldest, but they are the youngest in age.

The best dating yardstick is the more realistic human figures are the older they are. There is a convincing table experts put together indicating that human stick figures were pictograms and part of the evolution of our first letters.

