

VISUALISING DEER IMAGERY IN THE LATER BRONZE AGE OF MONGOLIA

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SUMMARY

During the Late Bronze Age in Mongolia (circa. 1300–700 BC) there emerged a monumental tradition involving the production of deer stones. These standing stones were decorated with stylised representations of cervids that were also depicted at rock art sites located in natural rocky outcrops spread throughout the region. The deer stones and rock art are undoubtedly striking examples of prehistoric art, but visualising is a much more complex phenomenon than simply observing elegant depictions of deer. An alternative perspective is explored that examines sensual experiences of vision and the dynamic relationships between the viewed and its viewers. The investigation of these perceptions also importantly highlights the multi-faceted nature of deer imagery in the art, beliefs and worldviews of Late Bronze Age societies in Mongolia.

RIASSUNTO

Durante la tarda età del Bronzo (circa 1300-700 a.C.) in Mongolia si è affermata una tradizione monumentale caratterizzata dalla presenza di stele decorate con incisioni di cervo. Queste pietre erette sono state decorate con rappresentazioni stilizzate di cervidi assimilabili a quelli incise su roccia e sporgenze naturali diffuse in tutta la regione. Le “pietre dei cervi” e le incisioni rupetris sono senza dubbio begli esempi di arte preistorica, ma l’analisi di questo fenomeno richiede un approccio molto più complesso della semplice descrizione. Questo articolo esplora una prospettiva alternativa che considera le esperienze sensoriali della visione e le relazioni dinamiche tra i visitatori e gli spettatori. L’indagine di queste percezioni mette in evidenza anche la natura multiforme delle immagini dei cervi nell’arte, le credenze e le visioni del mondo delle società della tarda età del Bronzo in Mongolia.

INTRODUCTION

During the Late Bronze Age of Mongolia (circa 1300–700 BC) there emerged a tradition of decorating plinths and standing stones with stylised images of cervids which have been archaeologically designated as ‘deer stones’. These distinct representations have also been pecked and carved into natural outcrops at rock art sites across Mongolia. The deer stones, in particular, are evocative monuments and their elegantly carved stone surfaces are beautiful to behold, masterfully produced works of art. Modernist ideas of art history, however, involving authenticity, vitality and artistic merit are problematic when applied to discussions about these monuments, as well as the rock art, as they involve subjective value judgements based on Western notions of aesthetics and taste. Significantly, many non-Western cultures do not have a word for ‘art’ and do not engage in a detached contemplation that is crucial to the notion of aesthetics utilised by Western art critics (HOWES, CLASSEN 1991).

We clearly see images of deer adorning prehistoric stone surfaces but visual experiences are part and parcel of complex phenomena involving much more

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Fig. 1 - Deer stone from Uushikiin Övör, Khövsgöl province (photo by C. Hinds)

than a simple lingering gaze. Sight along with our other senses are essential to our perceptual awareness of the world around us and their study is crucial to our understandings of the way individuals and communities interact with themselves and their surroundings. Thus, the following article explores deer stones and rock art imagery in relation to the sensual experience of vision and the dynamic relationships between the viewed and its viewers. The investigation of these perceptions also importantly draws our attention to the multi-faceted nature of deer imagery in the art, beliefs and worldviews of Late Bronze Age societies in Mongolia.

MONGOLIAN DEER STONES

Deer stones have been documented in Mongolia and adjacent geographical regions by researchers since at least the 19th century. The famous Turkologist Vasily Vasilievich Radlov, for example, published in 1892 a drawing of the Turan stone (table LXXII) featuring two stags that was found in the Orkhon River valley, northern Mongolia. By the late 20th century it has been recognised that the majority of these stones were not only concentrated in central and northern Mongolia but also extended north into the Lake Baikal region of Buryatia (Sibe-

ria) as well as west into western Mongolia and the Altai Republic (e.g., OKLADNIKOV 1954; KUBAREV 1979; SAVINOV 1994; FITZHUGH 2009a; BAYARSAIKHAN 2011). A small number have also been reported in the Altai mountains of Xinjiang province, China (MU *et al.* 1994, p. 131).

During the later half of the 20th century various typologies were developed that recognised regional differences in the imagery of deer stones. Notably, the Soviet archaeologist V.V. Volkov (2002) developed the broadly accepted category that recognises a ‘Mongolian-Transbaikal’ or ‘Mongolian’ type, which extends from Mongolia to Lake Baikal, with the most famous examples found clustered in northern and central Mongolia.

The Mongolian type deer stone is physically characterised by either a rectangular plinth deliberately shaped from granite or a monolithic menhir derived from a natural plate of slate-like greywacke rock (Figure 1). In general, its height can range from approximately 1 to 2 metres tall, though larger stones can reach 3 to 4 metres in height, such as deer stone no. 2 at Ulaan Tolgoi (FITZHUGH 2009b, p. 395) and deer stone no. 14 at Uushikiin Övör (VOLKOV, NOVGORDOVA 1975, fig. 3), both from Khövsgöl province, Mongolia. The other distinguishing feature of these stones is that all sides are usually carved with images of a stylised deer and can be accompanied by other iconic elements, such as weapons, shields, animals and geometric designs.

Recently the Mongolian type has been scientifically dated by the radiocarbon technique, so we now know it flourished between *circa* 1200 and 700 cal BC (FITZHUGH 2009c, table 1). Moreover, some deer stones are directly linked to Late Bronze Age monuments referred to as *khirigsuurs* and some of these monuments have also been radiocarbon dated, which reveals they were constructed over a period of several centuries *circa* 1350–750 cal BC (FITZHUGH, BAYARSAIKHAN 2009, table 1).

The Mongolian word *khirigsuur* can be literally translated as “Kyrgyz burial” (MAIDAR 1981, 46), but the term is generally applied to prehistoric stone structures with central burial mounds surrounded by circular or square stone perimeters. *Khirigsuurs* differ in size, construction and terrestrial design from small mounds to large clusters of mounds amidst multi-component stone structures (e.g., NOVGORODOVA 1989; ALLARD, ERDENEBAATAR 2005; FROHLICH, BAZARSAD 2005; FITZHUGH 2009c). Grave goods are rarely found in burials so little is known about the culture of these mysterious societies. Therefore, the deer stones and *khirigsuurs* have been proposed to constitute a Deer Stone-Khirigsuur Complex (DSKC) as they are interconnected components of a distinct mortuary and ceremonial tradition within the Late Bronze Age of Mongolia (FITZHUGH 2009a, b, c). It is important to note, however, that not all deer stones are directly associated with *khirigsuurs* and many *khirigsuurs* do not utilise deer stones as part of their construction.

Mongolian type deer stones are renowned for their evocative carvings of a distinctive stag – a highly stylised cervid in profile that features a long snout, a small head with a large circular eye, a great rack of antlers with curled tines flowing over its back and legs tucked under the torso. This style of representation at first appears to be static but variations in form can be seen when one examines a wide range of deer stones (Figure 2). Moreover, the application of the image to the sto-

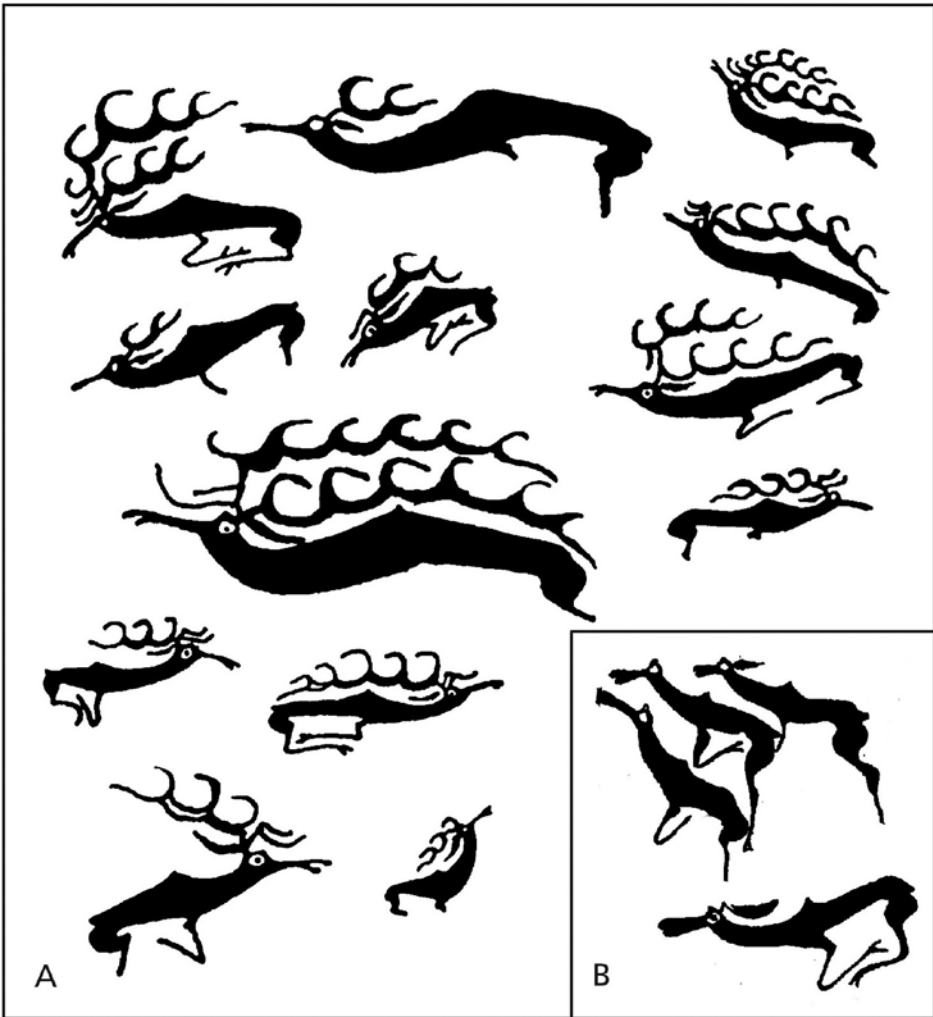


Fig. 2 - The variability of the cervids depicted on deer stones: a) a selection of stags (after VOLKOV 2002); b) possible depictions of females from Deer stone no. 2, Mandal, Bulgan province (after VOLKOV 2002, table 51)

ne surface varies considerably in terms of size, position, direction, orientation and number of cervids depicted together. Each individual menhir or monolith possesses a unique composition and the design layout varies not only between stone to stone but from site to site across the greater geographical region.

Some argue the deer stone stag depicts the stylised form of a reindeer, *Rangifer tarandus* (JACOBSON 1993, p. 157, 169; VITEBSKY 2005, p. 6), but this proposal could be more informed by the fact that the Russian word for deer, олень, can mean either a "deer" or "reindeer". Other researchers, however, have pointed out the images possess a strong resemblance to *Cervus elaphus* (ERDEII 1978, p. 139; GRYZANOV 1984, p. 76), which is known as the maral or Tien Shan/Altai deer in former Soviet countries and the red deer in Britain and Europe.

Upon a closer examination of the antler morphology, one can clearly see curled tines along the beam, which commence with a distinctive brow tine, that are similar to those of a mature male red deer (see Figure 2a). Generally speaking an adult male *Cervus elaphus* grows antlers while the females do not. It is not easy to distinguish the sex of immature deer until a young adult male begins to develop its antlers. Adult males without antlers, hummels, can occur and females have been documented to grow antlers but only in extraordinary circumstances (Goss 2012, pp. 284–296). Moreover, an examination of the large corpus of individual cervid carvings documented by Volkov (2002) reveals a handful of depictions that are antlerless and suggestive of being representations of females (Figure 2b).

Nevertheless, this highly stylised representation of a deer is neither a photographic snapshot nor an anatomically correct drawing. As opposed to lacking qualities of ‘realism’ or ‘naturalism’, the swirling antlers, saucer eye and long thin snout in essence illustrate the embodiment of a unique worldview about deer for Late Bronze Age societies in Mongolia.

VISUALISING DEER

Different perspectives about cervid imagery can be gained by switching our attentions from traditional art historical pursuits and focusing upon how they are enmeshed in people’s visual experiences. This entails an examination of the complexity of relations between images and viewers, while emphasising the role of images and representations as active historical agents entangled within human affairs and human understandings (MITCHELL 2004; STURKEN, CARTWRIGHT 2007). Moreover, images are important in the investigation of the sensory expressions of a society as they provide clues about the way people interact with others and their surroundings (HOWES, CLASSEN 1991; LYMER 2014). Before such discussions can take place, however, it is necessary to first examine some key aspects involved in the sensual experience of vision that are significant to the underlying basis of the optical perception of deer stones.

The human sense of sight (ophthalmoception) involves externalised extensions of the brain – eyes – to focus and detect patterns of visible light using photoreceptors located in a sensitive tissue known as the retina (WANDELL 1995, pp. 111–2). The retina generates electrical impulses that are sent through nerves to the brain and assist in forming our perception of colours, hues and brightness.

Humans, like all primates, have two eyes producing binocular vision, which also occurs in eagles, wolves and snakes. In contrast, ungulate herbivores, such as cattle, horses and deer, have eyes pointing in sideways directions that offer independent views for each eye and a larger field of vision much greater than humans (HOWARD, ROGERS 1995).

Human binocular vision is based on having two eyes at the same horizontal level, but their individual positions are different and allow us to see the world from two slightly different points of view (ROGERS-RAMACHANDRAN, RAMACHANDRAN 2009). In consequence, when perceiving an upright deer stone the right eye sees more of the right side of the plinth than the left eye does, and vice versa. The human brain processes these slightly different views together creating stereoscopic depth and provides the sensation of three-dimensionality. Thus, humans possess

stereoscopic vision (stereopsis) where the two separate optical inputs are combined into one, and this provides us with the ability of depth perception (GIBSON 2014, p. 203). As a result, a person with stereoscopic vision is able to see the deer stone as a solid object (see Figure 1) in the three spatial dimensions of width, height and depth. It is this special ability of perceiving volume that makes stereoscopic vision a rich and sensual experience.

Stereopsis also allows us to perceive where objects are in relation to our own bodies with great precision (HOWARD, ROGERS 1995, p. 2). This is especially useful when those objects are moving toward or away from us in the depth dimension, such as walking to and fro from a deer stone. We can see a little bit around the deer stone without moving our heads and we can even perceive and measure the space between deer stones with our eyes and brains. It is also worth noting that the effect of stereopsis is the greatest at close distances and important for the coordination of tasks involving accurate hand-eye coordination, such as carving cervid forms into stone or erecting monuments.

Our engagements with spaces, however, are not static but dynamic and integrated with all our senses and experienced through our bodies in motion. If we take a kinaesthetic approach to the examination of lived experiences we can consider the deer stones were deliberately constructed to create a particular spatial understanding and visual experience by which the movement through space was an important feature.

The site of Uushikiin Övör in central Mongolia, for example, is composed of deer stones arranged in two rows that lie west of a large khirigsuur mound (Figure 3). This creates a particular physical exchange between the viewer and the



Fig. 3 - A view of the deer stone arrangement at Uushikiin Övör, Khövsgöl province (photo by C. Hinds)

viewed as each deer stone is a three-dimensional entity positioned within an architecturally defined space. Moreover, moving closely among the individual stones there is a physical interaction with the human body as one senses their presence and monumentality in kinaesthetic and physiological ways. Walking towards the stone you are required to perceive the stone's physical characteristics, such as solidity, temperature (hot or cold) and the coarseness of the mineral surface. When positioned in close proximity to the stone you are able to touch the deer images, but the power of binocular vision also establishes its spatial volume in relation to our bodies – some stones may be the height of a person, but others may dwarf an individual with the immensity of their size.

Deer stones, however, are not simply pillars adorned with elaborate decorations. When one takes a closer look at them it can be seen that the deer are placed tightly side by side on the stone at an angle (see Figure 1) and this upwards tilt across the surface imparts a sense of movement to our eyes. This visualisation significantly suggests the forms were more than just deer and may sensually represent powerful other-than-human-beings sprinting towards the heavens (LYMER *et al.* 2014, p. 165), perhaps linked with a shamanistic voyage into the otherworld (MAGAIL 2005, p. 178).

Furthermore, the production of deer stones and their spatial placements facilitate the sensation of particular experiences and their relationships to khirigsuur funerary constructions strongly suggest they are intimately connected to religious beliefs and cultural understandings of death and the afterlife. In effect, the deer stones sensually create a necro-landscape, which was part and parcel of the sensory expressions of Late Bronze Age societies.

ROCK ART

In addition to the deer stones, evidence from the phenomenon of rock art contributes another important clue towards understanding the sensual complexity of deer motifs. The distinct form of the cervid was not only limited to menhirs and monoliths but also deliberately placed in the natural landscape on exposed bedrock surfaces at rock art sites across Mongolia. Here we find a degree of variation in the form of the stag from image to image as well as occasional antlerless depictions that, perhaps, could be considered representing females (Figure 4).

As opposed to the contained boundaries of the standing stone, rock art depictions of deer are executed in response to the idiosyncratic features of the natural rock surfaces situated in various positions along the sides of hills and mountains. Whereas deer stones follow the convention of depicting the cervids side by side, many rock art scenes could be considered to be acts of experimentation, playing with the medium, while at the same time being empathetic with the qualities of the rock surface. Furthermore, some of these images were executed in large, expansive dimensions as they horizontally spread out across the surface of several rock faces.

While deer stones want to be seen, rock art is not easily found. The images are usually installed in hard to reach places along steep hillsides and on the top of mountains that are 'invisible' to being easily detected by the human eye from the valley below. It requires physical effort and actions on the part of our bodies

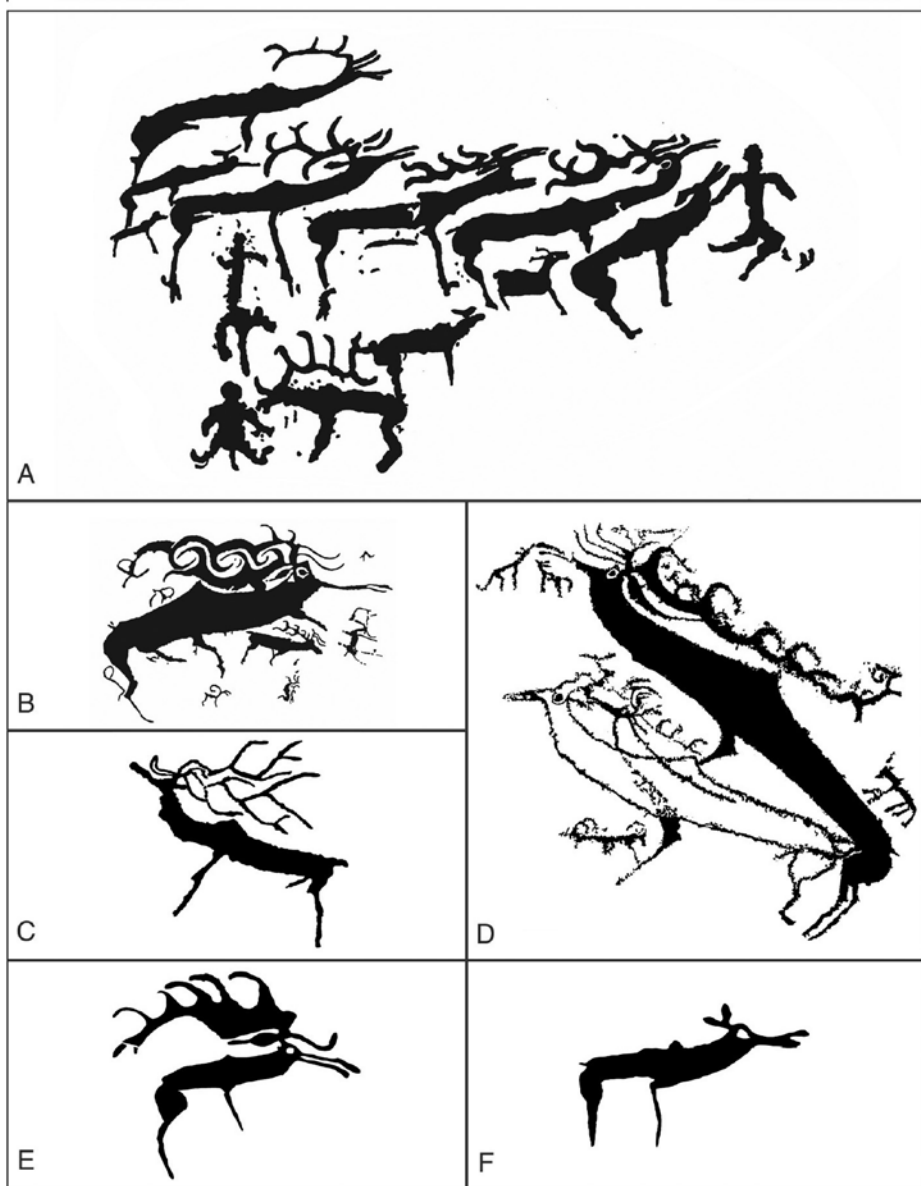


Fig. 4 - Examples of deer from Mongolian rock art sites: a) Baga Oigur, Bayan Ölgii province (after KUBAREV et al. 2005); b-c) Tsagaan Saala, Bayan Ölgii province (after KUBAREV et al. 2005); d) Khuren Uzuur Khadan Uul, Khovd province (after SEOGHO 2009); e-f) Biluut Tolgoi, Bayan Ölgii province (tracings by the author)

to ascend rocky hillsides for visual and sensual access to the images. Moreover, upon reaching them, the images cannot be observed all at once as their size and position dictates only one or a few can be seen at a time.

To view them up close also demands physical exertion and the contortion of the human body as we shift around and clamber about in an attempt to exami-

ne a panel in its discrete location. The rock art scene may be only visible during certain times of the day as the change in lighting conditions from dawn to dusk also creates a shifting interplay of light and shadows upon the rock surface. These sensations may synchronise with a visual focus upon the colour of the stone as well as being able to perceive the details of various pigmentations derived from the rock's mineral content.

An individual is able to see with stereoscopic vision the width, height and depth of the natural surface and perceive sensations of three-dimensionality. Our senses, however, work together in a coordinated manner as we experience things in the world around us. Running one's fingers over the entire surface of the stone can also detect the voluminosity of the rock. Touch is actually a complex somatic sensory system comprising of several feelings including vibration, temperature and pain (SCHUENKE *et al.* 2010, p. 179). Thus, the contours of the rock art image can be felt through delicate vibrations by the skin while brushing across the textured stone surface. The temperature of the rock in the morning may be cool but by mid-day in the summer the surface may become too hot to touch and sensations of pain may also be experienced. Some images, however, cannot be touched due to being quite inaccessible and remain out of reach to all physical efforts of trying to engage with them.

Moreover, it is important to point out that these cervid representations are more than just a form of memory or documentation, but also possess sensuous awareness and responsiveness. For example, it is an often cited experience that people feel portraits hanging in art galleries stare back at them. This demonstrates the uncanniness of images that involves a spectrality of representation where it looks at the onlooker, responds to them and even requires some kind of response from them (W. Mitchell cited in GRØNSTAD, VÅGNES 2006). It is possible able to consider that these images may also want to be heard, touched, smelled and even tasted in addition to merely being viewed or seen.

A special form of spectrality may be encountered when visiting a unique rock art panel situated close to the shore of Khoton Lake in the Altai mountains of northwestern Mongolia (Bayan Ölgii province), which border China. Here the deer have been pecked into the natural rectangular features of the exposed sandstone and emulate deer stones at a smaller scale (Figure 5). Not only does this scene significantly demonstrate the permeability of boundaries between rock art and deer stones, but also the deer seem to be emerging from the stone surface as if struggling to get free.

When stone carvers among the Inuit of arctic Canada create a sculpture they consider it to be the act of releasing an animal or spirit from within the stone (CARPENTER 1964). Moreover, it is known that art objects come to life through ceremony and performance in different cultures around the world. The Kwakwaka'wakw artists of the Northwest Coast of Canada, for example, create elaborate wooden masks that transform into the other-than-human-beings, which they depict, during sacred ceremonies full of music and drama (VASTOKAS 1992, pp. 27-29). Meanwhile, the Aboriginal groups of Australia paint onto rock the images of *Wandjinas*, beings that create and maintain Dreamtime landscapes (DAVID 2002; TAÇON, OUZMAN 2004). These scenes, however, do not only depict *Wandjinas*,



Fig. 5 - Rock art panel near the shore of Khoton Lake, Bayan Ölgii province, northwestern Mongolia (orthographic photo and tracing by the author)

but they are in actuality the living *Wandjinas*; they speak, listen and generally act with intentionality as well as possessing the ability to react to the presence of humans within the vicinity (POVINELLI 1995, p. 505).

In consequence, we should not dismiss the possibility that the awareness of a special scene of rock art created by particular members of a community could then be matched by the image's awareness of these individuals. The Khoton Lake scene, perhaps, not only represented other-than-human-beings, but the very act of pecking the images into the surface of the rock allowed the artist to access the power of the spirits and negotiate with them. The Mongols, like many Central Asian peoples, have an explicit concept of agencies dwelling in the environment known as powerful 'owners' or 'masters' of nature called *ezed*, which are also called *cherning' eezi* among the Tuvans and *jaratkan* among the Kazakhs of Xinjiang province, China (HUMPHREY *et al.* 1993, p. 53; YENHU 1996, p. 8). Furthermore, the deer may have also performed the role of an intermediary as, for example, among some Mongol groups the shaman's drum is called the 'black stag' (HEISSIG 1944, p. 47) and importantly acts as a go-between between the practitioner and the world of the spirits. Thus, the Khoton Lake scene's power may have also related to its role as a mediator between other-than-human-beings and people of the past, while at the same time playing a crucial role in the expressive and sensual landscape of its locality along the shores of a lake in the Altai mountains.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The deer stones are not just beautifully designed objects of art as there were complex relationships occurring between the menhir, its imagery and Late Bronze Age audiences. The cervid images found on deer stones and at rock art sites were part and parcel of the visual perception of past societies during the Late Bronze Age in Mongolia, and played an active and meaningful part in the sensual lives of individuals. As discussed above, fresher understandings about the entanglement of deer imagery with people's lives are possible through the closer examination of the ways in which the images are sensually encountered and this approach offers a valuable glimpse into dynamic engagements with the landscape by past societies.

The powerful relationship between an image and its past viewers is also entwined with the intimate experiences of place and space. The deer stone, and its associations with *khirigsuurs*, provides a religious statement by a group. It's a public commemoration or celebration of the dead that was sensually experienced by each member of society through music, songs and stories accompanied by the physical participation of different types of movements through defined spaces. In contrast, the rock art images of deer were executed in the intimate spatial context of natural stone surfaces and feature idiosyncratic responses ranging from experimentations to religious engagements in discrete locations among the rocky outcrops of hills and mountains. Moreover, the deer not only emerged from the veil of the rock face but also straddled the boundaries between the intimacy of rock art and the monumentality of deer stones, while embodying the sensual process of transformation.

All in all, the image of the deer depicted on deer stones and in scenes of rock art never cease to captivate our attention; however, they are also a source of immense frustration as we become entangled deeper and deeper within trying to solve the mystery of their meanings. As researchers we demand many things from them and they, in turn, reciprocate and make demands on us – image and viewer have an effect on each other and are shaped by one another in a complex web of relationships. In consequence, prehistoric art challenges us to not only rethink our preconceived notions about the world, but also the role of people and images in the past as well as the present.

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