

CROSSING THE CRACK: FLYING TO THE CLOUD INDO-IRANIANS, SHAMANISM AND CENTRAL ASIAN ROCK ART

Andrzej ROZWADOWSKI, Poznan, Poland

Shamanism, understood as a technique of ecstasy practised in different religious systems (Eliade 1972), is especially rooted in Central Asian cultural traditions. Although the most spectacular region of this heritage is Siberia, southern Central Asia (Kazachstan, Uzbekistan, Kirghizia and Tajikistan) also reveal very interesting contexts for investigating this phenomenon (i.e. Sukhareva 1960, pp. 41-58; Bayaliev 1972; Snesarev 1973, pp. 37-46; Domusulmanske verovaniya 1975; Konovalov 1984; Basilov 1992). In analysing the history of Central Asia we find that in its early historical periods, the I millennium BC, this part of the Asian continent was unequivocally associated with Iranian-speaking peoples. Philological analyses of the oldest Iranian (*Avesta*) and Indian (*Rig-Veda*) texts suggest that in the period of circa the III and II millennium BC, i.e., the Bronze Age, the wide steppe and mountainous regions were populated by hypothetical Indo-Iranians, speakers of Proto-Indo-Iranian. Accordingly, the hypothesis of the existence of the Indo-Iranian community is primarily based on the comparative linguistic evidence of the *Avesta* and the *Vedas* (mainly the *Rig-Veda*), which reveal striking lexical and, consequently, cultural similarities.

This paper focuses on the petroglyphs of two valleys: Sarmishsay in central Uzbekistan and Tamgaly in south-east Kazakhstan. These two sites have two features in common. Firstly, both valleys are characterised by numerous rock engravings, which, according to stylistic, subject centered and archaeological analyses, can be dated to the Bronze Age, i.e., the III and II millennium BC (Mariyashev 1994; Rozwadowski 1997). Secondly, although they are separated by a distance of about 1000 km, both valleys are situated within the spatial context of the hypothetical Indo-Iranian community. Although comparative linguistics suggests that the common Indo-Iranian tradition began to decline in the second millennium BC, many mythological concepts appeared in the Ancient Iranian and Indian traditions, which, in all probability, were shared by the original Indo-Iranians, up to the second millennium BC and earlier times (Boyce 1975; Lincoln 1975; Schwartz 1985; Harmatta 1992). Thus, it appears reasonable to claim that the mythology of the Indo-Iranians creates a possible context for revealing the meaning of some Bronze Age rock art in Central Asia (Rozwadowski 1997a).

A careful examination of the mythology of the Indo-Iranians enables us to point out some significant elements of shamanistic connotations in the Indo-Iranian tradition, either from a phenomenological perspective, or with reference to ethnographic data concerning shamanism in Central Asia. Because the culture of the Indo-Iranians was strongly centered around ritual offerings, the nature and structure of such rites is of considerable importance. Many of them were accompanied by drinking the highly revered hallucinogenic drink prepared from a

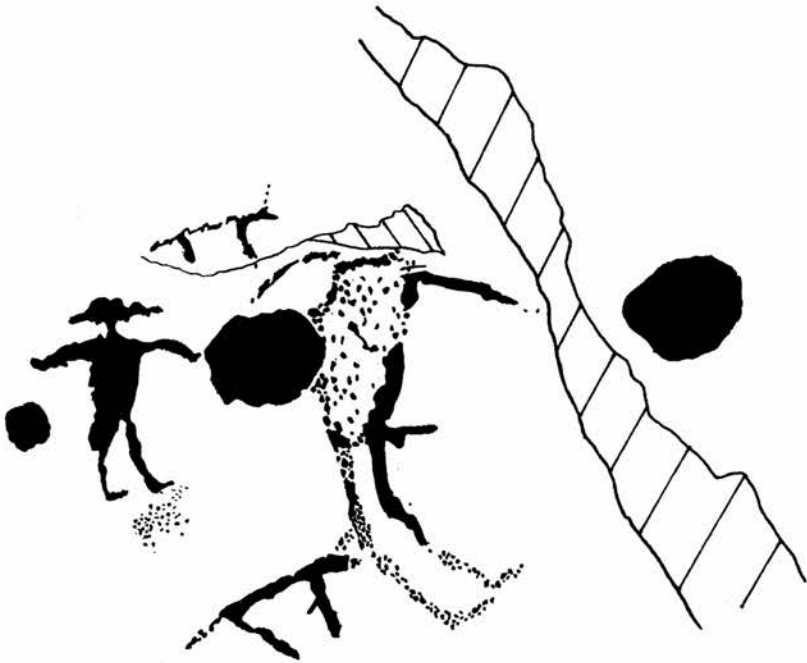


Fig. 50 a-b. Two human figures associated with three circles. The Sarmishsay Valley, Uzbekistan. (rilievo A. Rozwadowski; Archivio WARA W02308, W02309).

plant source, in the *Vedas*, known as soma and as haoma in the *Avesta*. Consumption of soma/haoma induced a state of ecstasy and its use was confined to a limited group of priests. Soma played an important role, not only in different rites, but in corresponding independent ceremonies devoted exclusively to sacred soma, personified as the god Soma. The original soma drink brought about a condition outwardly resembling sleep which targeted visions of what was believed to be a spirit existence (Iranian *menôg* – invisible, spirit existence) (Flattery, Schwartz 1989, pp. 23). Soma also induced other effects characteristic of trance states, such as uncontrolled convulsions and numbness (ib., pp. 13, 110). In the *Avesta* the spasms induced by soma intoxication are compared to those of a terrified cow: “May they (your intoxications), besetting me at their own impulse, not move me about as the trembling of a cow» (*Yasna* 10.14; ib., p. 108). According to the *Avesta* soma intoxication implied a straightness of mind, clarity, and lightness (ib., pp. 110-111) and the *Rig-Veda*, for example, similarly describes soma induced visions as “inextinguishable shining» (RV IX, 113, 7 – O’Flaherty 1981). The play of words induced by soma intoxication is, furthermore, very intriguing, where exclamations, speak of flickering lights (Flattery, Schwartz 1989, p. 110). Experimental and ethnographic research on altered states of consciousness shows that all the above mentioned impressions constitute some of the commonest sensations inherent to trance states (Siegel 1977; Lewis-Williams, Dowson 1988), the crux of shamanic experience (Hultkrantz 1978). These feelings, moreover, turn out to be based on shared neuropsychological reactions to altered states of consciousness (Whitley 1994, p. 1).

Ancient Indian literature indicates that the Vedic rites required a state of “diksha,” initiation, connected with deep mental concentration. Besides, “diksha” was accompanied by “tapas,” which in Vedic times meant inner heat experienced during the performance of rituals (Kaelber 1975), also one of the most widely attested sensations of trance (Dowson 1989, p. 89). Referring to the phenomenology of shamanism, it should be mentioned that soma has also been identified with a bird, a common animal metaphor for a shaman’s journey seen as its flight (Turpin 1994), and its effect has sometimes been described as “keeping death afar, averting death» (Flattery, Schwartz 1989, p. 130) which makes of *soma*/a drink of immortality, another widespread trance sensation (Whitley 1994, pp.16-19). As an intersection of the mythologies of various cultures, the divine Moon also provides an interesting commonly shared focal point for their hallucinogenic experiences (Wierci_ski 1997, p. 137).

Among different universal sensations during altered states of consciousness, the impression of changes in size is very frequent. Examples of such impressions can be found in the *Avesta* and *Rig-Veda* (Jurewicz 1995; 1996). For instance, Indra, the chief Vedic god, inebriated with soma, says: “I am huge, huge! flying to the cloud» (RV X.119,12). Moreover, in primordial times, Indra, again intoxicated with soma, created the world. The air, as an intermediate between the earth and the heavens served to separate the upper and lower worlds, thus, forming the tripartite construction of the Cosmos. This cosmogonic act was repeated and symbolically recreated by rituals. It should be pointed out that the division of the Indo-Iranian Cosmos into three spaces is also a typical feature of Central Asian shamanistic cosmologies (Eliade 1972). Moreover, other typical aspects of many Indo-Iranian rituals are also of considerable interest in the context of shamanic phenomena. Thus, such elements as the Indian sacred tree *a_vattha* or world pillar *skambha* can be convincingly interpreted as equivalents of a cosmic tree and *axis mundi*, motifs

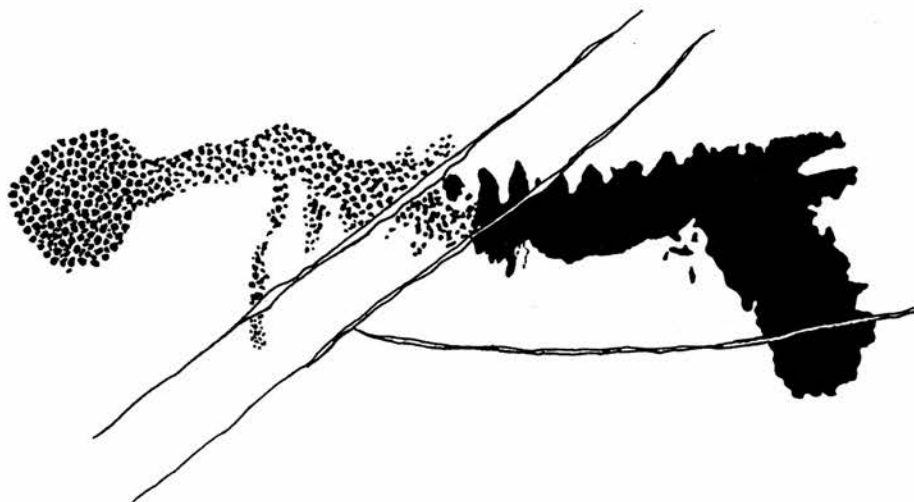


Fig. 51. The transformed image of the horse divided by two parallel cracks. The Valley of Tamgaly, Kazakhstan. (rilievo A. Rozwadowski; Archivio WARA W02310).



Fig. 52. The body of a human figure disappears in the cracks. The Valley of Tamgaly, Kazakhstan. The scale is 10 cm. (rilievo A. Rozwadowski; Archivio WARA W02311).

almost universally inherent in shamanic cosmologies and perceived as a means of contact with the spirit world (Ogibenin 1968; Turpin 1994, pp. 76-77). The pole driven into the ground in the Vedas was identified with the way by means of which the sacrifice ascended to the upper world, a process enabling the sacrificer to get in touch with the gods. During the crowning ceremony of *vajapeya*, the sacrificer also symbolically climbed up to the top of the sacred pole, and the ritual dialogue between him and his wife at the moment of reaching the highest point of the shaft clearly corresponds to many Siberian shamanic myths (Ivanov 1974, p. 119). There was also the belief that a holy man who sat in the shade of *a_vattha* was endowed with the ability to understand the language of animals (Stutley 1977, p. 27). Undoubtedly the above mentioned remarks, due to the limitations inherent in this paper, cannot expound in detail the shamanic roots of Indo-Iranian mythology and, as such, cannot unequivocally be taken as proofs for the claim that this rock art was created within a shamanic context. However, the clear connotations of some elements distinguished here with shamanism, appear to justify the assumption that at least part of the Bronze Age rock images in Central Asia can be subsumed under shamanism as a broad interpretative framework.

In analysing petroglyphs, as the first step of this inquiry, the threefold nature of the ritual act during which the sacrificer had to cross three worlds to make it succeed is used as the reference point. Leaving the earthly world, he separated himself from his body, entered the spirit world, and, only in the end, returned to a worldly existence. The journey was very dangerous and only a trained and properly predisposed person was able to perform the act correctly. According to the Vedas, a bad ritual performed by an untrained or unprepared sacrificer could result in madness or even death (Smith 1985). The three-fold course of ritual corresponded also with the concept of the Cosmos composed of three parts: the upper (sky), the middle (atmosphere) and the lower (earth). Some petroglyphs of the Sarmishsay Valley seem to reflect this idea. One of them represents the image of two human figures associated with three circles. The first human figure on the left is shown together with the smallest circle; the second, less clear, with the mid-sized circle; the biggest circle on the right of the composition stands alone. What is interesting is that the juxtaposition of the two human figures with three circles not only corresponds to the Indo-Iranian concept of Cosmological construction and the course of ritual performance, but the sequence of the three circles, from the smallest to the largest, appears to resonate the idea of the shaman's journey. The not so clearly defined shape of the human figure, second from the left, may express the exteriorisation of a shaman during trance, the moment when he loses identification with his earthly body. The third circle, not associated visibly with any of the human figures, could, consequently, express the highest state of ecstasy, the moment when a sacrificer or shaman has entered the other world. The intriguing aspect of the scene under consideration is also the ledge dividing the scene into two parts: one consisting of two circles along with two images of humans, the second one of a circle standing alone. If one accepts the hypothesis that the petroglyphs were engraved intentionally on such a rock surface, then it might be hypothesized that the ledge was intended to enhance the meaning of the scene as a graphic metaphor of entering the divine world.

The suggestion concerning the inscription of rock images on surfaces of specific shape or structure, i.e. cracks, can be confirmed by other petroglyphs in the valley of Tamgaly in Kazakhstan. One of them represents, in the centre of the scene, five images of human figures and the image of a horse. Each human figure

holds a kind of crosier shaped stick in his hands, which, according to ethnographic data, was a characteristic attribute of some Central Asian shamans (Basilov 1992, 288). The short protrusions spreading from the legs, body and arms clearly indicate a disguise. In considering that the mane of a horse resembles protrusions on a human body, the symbolical identification of the human figures with the horse may be suggested. It is interesting, as well, that the image of the horse is juxtaposed with a human figure, which, in comparison with the other images of men is the smallest and less deeply engraved. The following images of humans are, sequentially, from right to left, larger and more deeply engraved. A logic similar to the one in the scene from Sarmishsay Valley may be observed here: the human figures in Tamgaly create a sequence that begins with the smallest and least shallow image and finishes with the largest and most deeply engraved figure. It is all the more interesting, that the images of humans become about twice as large and considerably deeper after crossing over the crack in the centre of the scene.

In context of the petroglyphs analyzed thus far, the second scene from Tamgaly seems to be of crucial significance. It represents the image of a mysterious animal divided in the centre by two parallel cracks. On the left of the cracks are marked the tail and one rear leg of the animal, on the right, a big neck and head. The mane engraved on the neck suggests that this is a transformed image of a horse (not only the image but also the engraving technique is transformed). There are two features, which can bring us closer to the possible meaning of the analyzed petroglyphs. On the one hand, the mane of the mysterious animal shows a clear correspondence to the manes of other horse images in the Tamgaly Valley. As it has been shown, some of these images are associated with humans characterized by common shamanistic attributes – unique headdress, sticks and disguise. On the other hand, the characteristic animal's tail completed by a circle can be observed also in some human figures in the Tamgaly valley. A metaphorical association between horse and human can, thus, be noted. In making reference to Indo-Iranian mythology, it should be pointed out that the horse was a highly worshiped animal. It had many symbolic connotations and main rituals were connected with equine sacrifices. What is, all the more, interesting is the fact that the horse's head was considered to be particularly sacred and imbued with potency (Stutley 1977, p. 24), and the act of separation of the heads of numerous animals is a recurring topic in many Indo-Iranian myths having important symbolic significance (Coomaraswamy 1935, pp. 375-387; Ivanov 1974, p. 103). Accordingly, the idea of separating a horse's head, because this part of animal's body is associated with spiritual energy, can create one of the possible contexts for elucidating the metaphorical meaning of the horse's image divided by means of the cleft. Such features like the animal's transformation, the concept of crossing the crack and the association of the horse's head with spiritual power are, doubtlessly, very suggestive of shamanism. It should be noted that a similar transformation can be observed also in other petroglyphs in this valley (see Rozwadowski 2001, 73-76, fig. 5.8). Taking into account all the above considerations, one can assume that these petroglyphs graphically represent the idea of a shamans' trance experience. The significance of natural features of rocks seems to be of crucial regard in this context and recent studies on South African (Lewis-Williams, Dowson 1990) and south-west American (Whitley 1992) rock art show that the shaman entered the spirit world through the cracks and unevenness of the rock surfaces upon which the paintings or engravings were inscribed.

Another aspect of crucial importance to the author's considerations is the

pharmacological nature of soma/haoma. Many years of prevailing botanical identification of soma with the mushroom *Amanita muscaria* has finally been questioned in favour of identifying soma with *Peganum harmala* – a common plant characteristic of the Central Asian ecological zone. This new interpretation of soma is especially absorbing, because it enables an investigation of the rock art of Central Asia in the unique light of the phenomenology of altered states of consciousness, since the main psychoactive alkaloids of Asian *Peganum harmala* turn out to be the same as alkaloids included in *yajé* (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) – a sacred hallucinatory drink used by the Tukano Indians of Colombia in the upper Amazon. According to Flattery and Schwartz (1989) sensations evoked by an equivalent of the original soma described in Middle Iranian literature strictly correspond with visions the Tukano used to perceive under the influence of drinking *yajé*. An image of a man from the Sarmishsay Valley possesses some features often described as characteristic of shamanistic art, also stimulated by hallucinations (an elongated and schematic body, projections from the head, superimposition – Lewis-Williams 1988; Schaafsma 1994, p. 52; Whitley 1994). The most interesting, however, is a geometric pattern associated with the human form. This pattern reveals striking correspondences with common Tukano decorative art motifs (Reichel-Dolamtoff 1978, especially Plate XXIII and XXXII) which are construed by Tukanos as “*yajé* images” (“We see these images when we drink *yajé*!» – *ib.*, p. 15). Although there is no doubt that the question of similar visions induced by the same alkaloids needs further investigation, a pharmacological insight into drug induced art can reveal new dimensions of perceiving the shamanistic contexts of rock art.

In summary, the crucial role of hallucinogenic sacred soma drunk during the majority of rituals considered should, once again, be emphasized. The associations of rock images with clefts may be of considerable interest in this regard due to the important symbolic associations between rock and water which can be found in many myths. One of the commonest is the concept of releasing rainwater from the rock. Moreover, in both Ancient Indian and Iranian traditions, soma has often been described as “having or giving a hundred waters,” which leads to the suggestion that haoma was not only regarded as beneficial to the waters but also because it had a role to play in the production of water (Flattery, Schwartz 1989, pp. 150-152). Thus, because it seems justifiable to suggest that some Indo-Iranian rites, implicitly connected with drinking hallucinogenic soma/haoma, reveal some shamanistic features, the symbolic connotations of soma with rain may suggest that the aim, of at least some of Indo-Iranian rituals, was rainmaking. Moreover, because the word “rock” is regularly used in the Vedas in a mythological sense for “cloud” (Macdonell 1897, p. 10) and the horse is sometimes identified with the rain-cloud (Stutley 1977, p. 24), could Indra’s words “I am huge, huge; flying to the cloud”, perhaps, metaphorically, mean “flying into the rock” – through the cleft?

Riassunto

L'articolo è focalizzato sui petroglifi di due valli dell'Asia Centrale che hanno degli aspetti in comune: entrambe possiedono numerose incisioni rupestri che sono datate all'Età del Bronzo; entrambe si trovano nell'area dell'ipotetica comunità Indo-Iraniana. La tradizione Indo-Iraniana implica degli elementi di connotazione sciamanica, come offerte ed atti rituali, alcuni dei quali includevano il consumo di bevande allucinogene che portavano ad uno stato di estasi. I petroglifi considerati sono la rappresentazione grafica dell'idea di trance sciamanica.

Summary

The article focuses on the petroglyphs of two valleys in Central Asia, which have some features in common: they have numerous rock engravings which can be dated to the Bronze Age; they are situated in the hypothetical Indo-Iranian community area. The Indo-Iranian tradition involves elements of shamanistic connotation, such as ritual offerings and ritual acts; some of them included the consumption of hallucinogenic drinks which lead to a state of ecstasy. The petroglyphs analysed are the graphical representation of the idea of the shamanistic trance experience.

Resumé

Cet article est focalisé sur les pétroglyphes de deux vallées de l'Asie Centrale qui ont des aspects en commun: elles possèdent de nombreuses gravures qui sont datées à l'Âge du Bronze; elles se trouvent dans la zone de l'hypothétique communauté Indo-Iranienne. La tradition Indo-Iranienne implique des éléments de connotation chamanique, comme des offres et des actes rituels, dont quelques uns comprenaient la consommation de boissons hallucinantes qui conduisaient à un état de transe. Les pétroglyphes examinés sont la représentation graphique de l'idée de transe chamanique.

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