

IN SEARCH FOR COMMON PARADIGMS:
CAN FOREIGN PERSPECTIVES BE HELPFUL FOR STUDYING THE ALPINE
ROCK ART?

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In my paper I wish to consider several points which have been in focused of my research in Central Asia and to consider to what extend such perspectives can be applicable to the Alpine rock art (notwithstanding territorial distance between Central Asia and the Alps). These points include: 1. The Indo-European mythology as a context for investigating the meaning of rock art (with the emphasis on methodology); 2. Theoretical implications of applying shamanic models to interpret rock art; and 3. Multivocality of the deer motif (as a common Iron Age motif in European and Central Asian rock art).

Attempts to elucidate meaning of Alpine rock art through the lens of the Indo-European mythology have usually been focused on single images to which semantic parallels from the filed of the I-E mythology were addressed. This line of inquiry, however, could be enriched by trying to find also structural parallels between rock images and mythology. It is still difficult to us to be sure if ancient artists portrayed single concepts, like gods, or more complex ideas. Looking at rock images through their mutual relations offer possibility to find most common (i.e. most repeated) associations, which then can be confronted with mythology. Such approach, which I call semiotic one, is a proposition which I applied to rock art in Central Asia. What is interesting from my research experience is the fact that by analyzing rock art through semiotic perspective it was possible to find associations which could be interpreted both in Indo-European (more exactly – Indo-Iranian in Central Asia) and shamanistic terms (Rozwadowski 2001a, 2001b, 2004). It was interesting methodologically and conceptually as shamanic (i.e. ecstatic/trancing) elements can also be found in the culture of ancient Indo-Iranians. Then it is still possible that the method was not mistaken and the ambiguity Indo-European/shamanic resulted from the presence of trance centered rituals in culture of the ancient Indo-Iranians. The concept of shamanism, however, is very differently applied in rock art studies. In Central Asia and Siberia it is still living tradition while in other cultural contexts it just defines trance experience. The latter concept of shamanism, which can be called a phenomenological one, can still provide productive context for identifying trance experience encoded in rock art. If we accept that such sensations like body elongation, flight, death, aggressiveness, or sexual arousal are typically experienced while in trance, then it offers interesting path for looking at rock art. It can furthermore be productive as this perspective is not in contradiction with finding mythological themes in rock art. An interesting example can provide image of deer, which similarly to Alpine rock

art is one of crucial themes in the Iron Age petroglyphs in Central Asia. Some authors have already suggested the deer images in Central Asian rock art could be important shamanic symbols of Iron Age nomads (Lymer 2002). There were also suggestions that Asian animal style, or some aspects of this conceptual framework, could be transmitted to Europe through Asian nomads penetrating Eastern Europe (Pstrusińska 1999). Then there are still several points to argue that Euro-Asian perspective can provide interesting insight into the Alpine rock art.

References

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