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The Recreation of Landscape Settings in Petroglyphs of Northern Central Asia

(and reflections, again, on the sources of
Chinese landscape representation)

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There has long prevailed the assumption that petroglyphs, i.e. images carved on individual rock surfaces, are, for the most part, discreet representations or compositions describing actions but not narrative.^{[1](#)} This has, at least, been the case within the study of petroglyphs of Central Asia and South Siberia. Traditionally, moreover, there has been little interest in the highly significant expressive elements of indicating cause and effect.^{[2](#)} I say these assumptions have *prevailed* because the traditional ways of recording and describing rock-carved imagery do not address qualifying conditions beyond the immediate pecked-out images. These traditional means—whereby traced or rubbed images convey in black and white silhouettes or outlines individual images or discreet compositions, and wherein recognizable and datable elements are privileged over enigmatic or unattractive elements—became well-established in the many volumes published under the name of A.P. Okladnikov. They have continued to prevail in the most recent publications of major petroglyphic sites in northern Central Asia and South Siberia, although in a few cases such transcribed imagery is supplemented by black and white, more rarely color, photography. Black and white drawings may convey certain basic information with a good degree of accuracy, but much, also, is lost: the particular quality of the pecked technique, the frequently significant coloration and texture of the stone surface, the orientation of the image with respect to the immediate physical context and with respect to the view shed and light. Also lost is any significant sense of the interconnection of carved surfaces, one with

another; or of carved surfaces and adjacent—possibly even related—surface structures. These elements—all related to the art of rock-carved imagery—are fundamentally aspects of the story telling of petroglyphs, of their ability to 'tell a tale'. They fundamentally qualify the expressive force of the images themselves. They are essential aspects of a dimension of representation which is closely related to narrative: the creation of a setting, or of an extended space and time; in brief, the creation of a 'landscape'.

That is the topic I wish to consider here: the creation of a setting, of a locale, of a place wherein the represented action of narrative takes place. Within the petroglyphic art of northern Central Asia and South Siberia, that setting will almost necessarily be in the open air; thus, it is most direct to refer to that setting as a 'landscape'^{[3](#)}. In this discussion, my materials will be drawn from several sites which the Joint Mongolian–American–Russian Project, 'Altay,' has been documenting for the last five years^{[4](#)}. While my comments are here based on work done exclusively in petroglyphic sites in the Altay Mountains of the Altay Republic and northwestern Mongolia, they also depend on knowledge of sites in other regions of South Siberia and Central Asia. Whether they would apply to petroglyphic imagery from other regions of the world, I am not in a position to say.

Trees are, of course, a primary way of indicating a natural setting. Unfortunately, there are very few representations of trees in the rock art of northern Central Asia; these are so rare as to be exceptions that offer no rule^{[5](#)}. The representation of mountains or hills occurs occasionally; examples of such representations will be discussed below. In all cases, however, we are particularly concerned with the creation of the implication of a natural setting. This concern for a setting itself, rather than for the 'furniture' of the setting, depends upon the indication of a basic element of narrative represented extension of space and thus of time: 1) through the extension of imagery indicating active cause and effect across a single rock surface; 2) through the extension of imagery related by style and activity over several different surfaces, thus creating an extended 'landscape'; 3) through the treatment of a single boulder as if it were, in fact, a specific landscape setting, such as a mountain or hill; and 4) through the actual representation on a rock

surface of paths or mountain lines used by animals or humans. The space of this essay allows me to introduce only a few instances of each kind of extended space and time; but these examples can be multiplied many times from the sites we have been documenting, and particularly from the petroglyphic complex of Tsagaan Salaa/ Baga Oigor⁶.

The first kind of composition is certainly the most common. It is represented here by a Bronze Age surface from TS IV (Fig. 1), where five long thin wolves approach a large stag and argali. The stag and ram are relatively static and like some of the other animals, partially obscured by lichen and repatination of the rock surface. On the other hand, the elongated bodies of the wolves evoke the sense of movement from right to left, and thus of an extended space in a natural setting. More evocative of a true natural setting is the scene in Fig. 2, from TS I. A great horned argali stands facing right with head lowered, as if trapped at the end of its escape from the crouching hunter in the upper right section of the stone. This figure superbly conveys the tension of the hunter, his body low, his large bow drawn, his head turned to sight the flight of the arrow. In this case, action is suspended, charging the space between the hunter and the argali with a heightened sense of tension. If these figures were reproduced by the traditional method of drawing, that interval would lose its particular power, for it depends not merely on being exact; it also depends upon the specific quality of the stone surface selected by the carver. In this case the stone, basic bedrock, is of a warm and variegated coloration, with a beautiful discoloration creating a series of 'rays' slashing diagonally down from the hunter towards the argali. Deep lines of glacial scrape also lend vitality to the surface itself. The images together with the natural textures of the stone surface evoke a natural setting for the simple action.

Many surfaces, of course, display representations of the hunting of animals of animal predators and by humans, but not all are able to evoke the sense of a deliberate and consciously created setting. By the reference of the action they weakly imply the landscape of a natural setting. By the reference of the action they weakly imply the landscape of a natural setting rather than actually represent it. Essential to the creation of a more vitalized setting is the delimitation of a surface in which the activity is indicated (e.g., Fig. 1, and the deer hunt from TS IV,

Fig.3) or the exploitation of the shape of a surface to create a sense of extended space and time. The latter effect is well represented in a section of a large boulder from TSIV, covered with over 100 images. They do not all seem to be related by subject although they may be related in time of execution⁷. On a large section represented here(Fig.3) can be seen a standing elk, facing right, attacked from all sides by a group of dogs or wolves. Below the large animal are two other fine elk, facing left. The majesty of the large contrasts with the small predators and focuses our attention on the elk as the center of the composition. That section in itself is episodic: it simply is, without any significant evocation of a place. However, to the right of this scene we see a horned hunter, carrying a large bow and wearing a quiver, and approaching at a walk. He moves purposefully toward the elk; the curve of the stone between the figure of the hunter and the group of elk and dogs suggests the curve of a landscape in space, and thus a believable extension of space and time. While the other images on this boulder do not necessarily seem to be related to this particular grouping, that involving the hunter and the elk conveys the aspect of a complete 'story' in its own local space.

A third example of the first type of landscape is offered by a surface from BO IV(Fig.4). A group of elegantly stylized wild goats leap over the surface of the stone, from left to right. The particular stylization of their representation is a clear reference to the Pazyryk period. The animals' varied sizes and postures—some standing, some in the process of leaping—suggest their startled response to the small hunter in the upper left of the surface. One has the impression that the animals have scattered across the face of a slope to escape the hunter⁸. The goats leaping across the surface transform the panel into a slope of a mountain wherein the hunt takes place. Here, as in the preceding examples, the scene implies but does not represent the landscape proper. But the intention of the artist is unmistakable.

I have been speaking about the creation of the sense of a setting within the context of one stone surface or panel. A more effective way of creating the impression of extended space and time—that is the impression of a true setting—is found in cases where imagery related by style and activity has been carved over several different surfaces.

Viewed together, these surfaces create an extended 'landscape.' This is well represented by a superb composition extended over a large, broken section of bedrock from TSI(Fig.5). On the surface on the right we see an elegant stag attacked by two long-tailed animals, perhaps snow leopards or wolve. The vitality of leaping stag and attacking predators expresses with perfection the particular beauty of the best of the Pazyryk style⁹⁾. On a stone surface to the left of this panel we see a horned man carrying a bow and walking in the direction of the attack, as if drawn to that scene as a hunter. On another surface of stone about 2 meters above the walking hunter (not reproduced here) is another scene: this of an elegant horse attacked by two predators. The technical and stylistic treatment of all images—deer and predators, walking man, horse and predators—argue that the three separate surfaces were executed by one hand and were intended to indicate int scene extended over three different panels. While it cannot be proven that they were intended to be seen together, it is impossible to deny the logic of their proximity, of the man's purposeful movement, or of the stylistic commonalties.

Another example of this principle of extended composition is found in the case of three boulders spaced over a distance of approximately 12 meters, in the lower level of TS IV(not reproduced here). All three boulders are carved on their east face and all, evidently, by the same hand. Again, the specific rendition of the images and the pecking technique in which they are executed indicate purposeful continuation of imagery across the three surfaces. On the surface furthest to the SE appear three wolves, their out-stretched, low bodies indicating swift movement to the right. On the center surface, to the right of the first, appear several horses, their heads raised in alarm and their bodies indicating the beginning of movement. On the surface furthest to the right two horses graze quietly, as if unaware of the approaching danger.

One of the most effective means by which Bronze and early Iron Age artists created specific landscape settings was by using unusually shaped rocks to recreate a mountain or hill. This narrative device is actually very close to that described in the first category; but it represents, in my view, a more determined intention to translate a single boulder into the scene of a mountain setting, sometimes with the images of tiny animals. They dash about, like so many wild goats and sheep

across a mountain. The similar style and technique with which these lovely animals have been rendered indicates a single hand and a single conception; and the vitality with which they are rendered effectively transforms the boulder into a mountain. As is typical throughout this part of the TS/BO complex, the animals are scattered primarily on the upper west, south, and east faces of the boulder; the north, darker and uphill side is left uncarved. There are no surviving images of predators visible here, nothing to explain the impetuous movement of the little animals. In some cases the images are lost under lichen, in others they disappear into damaged sections of the surface. Because such small and vital animals are frequently found in scenes datable to the Bronze Age, I would place this boulder, also no later than the early first millennium B.C.E., and probably earlier^{[10](#)}.

A particularly delightful example of the artistic imagination transforming a whole boulder into a mountainous setting may be found at TS III (Fig.7). This boulder may be conveniently labeled, 'Goat Rock', because of the fact that it is covered by well over seventy images of small goats. The animal images were originally clearly pecked out of the stone surface, but they were never deep; by now they have been worn down to shadow images and many of them are covered by lichen. On the lower east side of the boulder is a small frontal figure wearing a mushroom-shaped headdress. His rendition is of the same style and worn quality as that of the goats. This is probably the herder, or possibly a herder-hunter; his head gear indicates the Bronze Age date of this composition. What lends to this stone an unusual and delightful interest is that the small animals are scattered across its surfaces, moving primarily from east to west, up and down over the protuberances of the stone. As if to underscore the fact that the artist imagined the stone to be a whole landscape, pecked-out paths along which the animals move can still be clearly made out under the lichen. With the paths and the irregularities of the surfaces, the boulder becomes a miniature version of the mountain slopes immediately surrounding this location, and the tiny animals become a reflection of a herd and its herder such as one still sees in the surrounding landscape.

Let me cite one other example of the ability of the petroglyphic artist to recreate, even in the Bronze Age, a mountain setting out of a

single stone. This relatively small boulder (Fig. 8) is in a petroglyphic complex we are documenting in the valley of the Tsagaan Gol¹¹⁾. All except its underside are covered with exquisite images of animals dashing away from hunters. There are seven hunters, and they all wear mushroom-shaped hats and carry long bows. The hunters are concentrated in three parts of the stone, as if they were responsible for driving before them the scattering horned and antlered animals. These images demonstrate a gem-like refinement of carving: despite the extreme wear of the boulder, the little animals—some measuring no more than 2 cm. in length—are rendered with extraordinary clarity and grace; their contours are sharp in many places, and the deliberately rendered texture of horns, knobby or smooth, increase the sense of vitality throughout this scene. In this case, the artist evidently conceived of the whole boulder as a mountain landscape. He covered the rock surface with a brocade of dashing, leaping images punctuated by the images of hunters intent on their prey. Although such scenes can be repeated throughout the rock art we have been documenting in northwestern Mongolia, this is the finest example of this type of hunt rendered on a single boulder; it is the most indicative of an intent to recreate a mountainous setting¹²⁾.

'Goat Rock', of TS III, actually represents, also, a fourth device by which ancient rock artists evoked the sense of a landscape setting. I mentioned that there can still be seen several paths meandering along the stones. Most are now obscured by lichen growth, but enough remain visible to indicate that they were intended to create an actual path on a mountain slope; or they were intended to indicate the path taken by the goats as they cross the surface of a slope. In either case, the intention of the artist is clear. By pecking in the paths, the artist was able to demonstrate the extension of space and time which is the essence of a landscape setting. By tracing the paths in meandering fashion over the sides of the boulder, the artist transformed the small rock into a mountain slope. Simply but effectively, the paths demonstrate the fullness of anonymous artist's narrative vision.

It would be incorrect to say that paths occur frequently in rock art of the Bronze and early Iron Ages, but they do appear often enough to indicate that it was a known option for the artist who wished to make his

intentions crystal clear. Another Bronze Age example of the path with animals occurs in the famous scene of large 'dancing' figures from the important Altay site of KalbakTash^{[13\)](#)}. That path is fairly short, however, and the animals are somewhat static. A smaller example of the same device can be seen in a small boulder from BO I(Fig.9). On a path arranged vertically are visible several small running goats. The style in which they are rendered indicates a date in the Bronze Age^{[14\)](#)}.

The appearance of running animals associated with literal paths evokes a real slope or mountain out of a small boulder or rocky outcropping. Less common but of considerable interest is a variation on the theme of the path with animals. I have gathered three clear examples of this unusual device within the complex of TS/BO; here I will a remarkable example of the transformation of deer antlers into the contours of a mountain slope(Fig. 10). The stone is striking because of its smooth surface and because of the clear traces of both glacial scrape and, possibly, ventifaction. There are more than 75 images on this boulder, and all appear to be part of one composition. The subject of the scene is a hunt: on the left, archers take aim at large elk and a bull; in the lower center, dogs appear to be attacking a laden bull; and on the right, archers take aim at bulls with large looped horns and large tails. A path meanders from the lower right up and across the center of the scene, dropping down near one of the hunters taking aim at a large-antlered elk on the left. It is only with careful attention that one begins to realize that the path originates from the head of a small deer in the lower right. Indeed, the 'path' is the antler of the deer, and on the 'antler' stands one of the hunters taking aim at the bull whose tail terminates in a large round ball. The treatment of the bulls, the mushroom-shaped hats of two or three of the hunters, and the alert and refined treatment of the small deer and of several of the running animals in the lower left justify a date no later than the late Bronze Age. Within this composition, the rendition of the 'antler-into-path' is so unified by style and subject that one must conclude it was deliberate and visionary: it transforms the mountain into the antlers of a deer, or the antlers of the deer into a mountain landscape.

In previous publications I have drawn attention to the transformation of deer antlers and caprid horns into mountainous landscapes^{[15\)](#)}. The

examples I adduced were all, however, from Pazyryk and Saka culture; that is, from Eurasian nomadic cultures of the mid-first millennium B.C.E. In that discussion I cited, in particular, the wooden horns from Tuekta where felines stand between the knob-mountains of the horns; several examples of deer antlers being transformed into mountain-like extensions in objects from the Pazyryk cemetery; and related examples of transformed antlers and caprid horns, from Eurasian nomadic cultures of the latter first millennium B.C.E. These earlier discussed examples indicate the extent to which, by the Pazyryk period, landscapes were evolving from the motifs of caprid horns and deer antlers. The boulder surface from BO I, together with at least two surfaces from the TS/BO complex in which antlers are transformed into mountainous lines, indicates that this particular ornamental tradition existed much earlier than the early Iron Age. To judge from rock-carved imagery, it was already well-developed in the Bronze Age, i.e., by the middle-to-late 2nd millennium B.C.E.

I have described four specific means by which Bronze and early Iron Age artists of rock-carved imagery deliberately created the space of a landscape setting, either by evocation or by actual representational devices. The examples I have adduced here can be multiplied many times by materials taken from within the sites being documented by the Joint MAR Project in northwestern Mongolia. Of course, the vast majority of these rock-carved surfaces are dominated by images of a relatively static appearance. The most common carved surfaces include single images, often arranged in a somewhat emblematic presentation; or two or more images joined by implied psychological or physical interaction. In many cases from TS/BO, these carvings are of unusual quality in every respect. Since the represented animals are wild, or because the surfaces of stone are necessarily delimited in size, one could argue that even these carved surfaces imply a natural setting. But I would argue that in such cases, the artists had in mind the animal itself and its image or images rather than the animal(s) within a particular setting. Where the artist has exploited the particular qualities of a rock surface and its shape in order to represent the extended space and time of a specific action or actions, or where the artist has taken advantage of adjoining rock surfaces to extend even more literally that activity in space and

time, in such cases the viewer's attention is shifted from what is represented to the context of representation. In some cases, of course, such a shift of attention is accidental: the artist might have casually decided to take advantage of an unusually beautiful surface to present his otherwise static, emblematic animals. In other cases, however, I would argue that such a shift was intended: that there was, in other words, an artistic intent to go beyond the images of the animals or humans themselves to the representation of their interactions in space and time. That artistic intention becomes explicit in cases where the whole rock has been transformed into a mountainous landscape. In such cases we cannot deny the wit and imagination of one eager to evoke a slope or a whole mountain out of a small boulder. The addition of paths make that intention absolutely explicit. Within this last group—the compositions with pecked-out paths—the most intriguing are those few in which deer antlers become the source of the paths or of the indication of mountainous slopes. These compositions, I believe, carry artistic vision back to the realm of lost archaic myth.¹⁶⁾

The rock-carved surfaces I have considered in this essay may most properly be said to evoke rather than represent landscape. With rare exceptions, the ancient rock artists did not actually represent the natural elements of landscape—trees, rocks, rivers, and so forth—but they did exploit the shape of a surface or adjacent surfaces in order to recreate the impression of a natural setting. They took advantage of the natural textures and tones of the rock surfaces, and they saw mountains and valleys in the dips and rises of boulders. Occasionally they pecked-out trails to emphasize the idea of animals moving along the sides of a slope. And in at least a few cases, these anonymous artists turned to metaphor in the form of antlers to convey, perhaps, a mythic understanding regarding the source of mountains and the extension of space. Now, all of these artistic means of evoking a natural setting belong to the category of narrative devices; as such, they are best understood as expressive rather than documentary aspects of rock art. Such expressive aspects, however, have been poorly served by the traditional means of documenting and publishing petroglyphs. Whether free-hand or traced, drawings are at best approximate indicators of the quality of outlines, silhouettes, and rock surfaces. Rubbings are a somewhat more effective

means of transmitting textures, images, and compositions, but the destructive nature of that technique has by now been so well established that it should never be used on rock art of any place or period. Assuming that duplication of rock art is essential to dissemination and understanding, one is led to the conclusion that photography is the only satisfactory means for duplication of the expressive aspects of rock art. It is the only means by which to convey something of the relative shape and size of a surface or surfaces, something of the tones and textures that characterize the carved surfaces, and something of the quality of pecked-out outlines and silhouettes. If we are to begin to seriously consider rock art as the expressive formulations of individual artists and as the expressive reflections of ancient cultural values and institutions, then we must realize the shortcomings of the methodologies we use to record, to contextualize, and to disseminate. The almost complete lack of interest, to date, in the evocation of landscape and the creation of narrative spaces in rock art of Central Asia and South Siberia is probably due, at least in part, to our persuasion that with drawn replication, what we see is what is there. Even the black-and-white photographs used in this article should make clear that such an intellectual position is insecure.

AFTERWARD:

Reflections, Again, on the Origins of Chinese Landscape Representation

In a paper written in 1985, I first suggested that a significant number of motifs found on Chinese censurs, jars, and inlaid tubes of the early Han Dynasty appear to have been borrowed from the vocabulary of nomadic portable arts, albeit through an uncertain means of transmission^{[17](#)}. I proposed that the vital formulation of a mountain landscape in the early Han must be referred back to China's growing interest in Central Asia: an interest prompted by imperial expansion and the inevitable conflict with steppe peoples, but furthered by the common interchange occurring at border trading posts. At that time, however, I was able to use only published materials from Pazyryk period burials or,

more problematically, unprovenanced materials such as gold plaques in the Siberian Treasure of Peter the Great (Hermitage Museum). My more recent work in the Mongolian Altay has allowed me to gather much more meaningful paradigms for the Han landscape formulations. These examples, a number of which I have introduced in this paper, establish precedents for the representation of landscape settings at a much earlier period than the late Zhou and early Han but in the region north of China and inhabited by China's erstwhile enemies and trading partners. The vitality and freshness of these Han scenes, like those on the molded pottery hill jars from the same era, seem to have emerged literally out of nowhere in the early Han artistic culture. In the 1985 article, I pointed to specific motifs on a number of these Chinese objects which had to have been borrowed from a nomadic vocabulary: leaping tigers, tigers fighting with wild boar, figures riding camels. Against a background of visual parallels, I argued that the very theme of a wild landscape in which dashing animals expressed a freedom of movement and an extension of space unknown, previously, in Chinese art must have been derived from China's northern neighbors. But there was little to go on for that argument other than undeniable visual parallels: the nomadic material I cited was all from broken burials, or from unprovenanced sites. Although I could point to the probability that motifs and ideas crossed from the nomadic world into a Han artistic sensibility with the products of a vital border trade, my proposals remained on the level of an hypothesis: that the early Chinese interest in the representation of landscape emerged in the late Zhou and early Han as a direct result of interaction with the nomads to the north.

In some respects, the situation has not changed. No major finds from the Chinese side of the Han border have revealed, in intervening years, nomadic materials which can be certainly dated and which prove my hypothesis. Nonetheless, when one compares the Chinese materials and examples more recently drawn from rock art of the Altay mountain region, and introduced earlier in this essay, one can only conclude that the parallels are tantalizing, even if inconclusive. For example, both Chinese Han period incense burners (*boshan lu*) and contemporary inlaid bronze tubes elegantly conjure up a fantastic landscape setting, in which small animals dash about amid tendrils and streamers of gold and silver.

Within the rock art I have introduced here, one finds persuasive and more ancient formulations of the mountainous landscape the Chinese were going to adopt and develop in the late Zhou and early Han dynasties. The most intriguing and common parallels can be found in the small, dashing animals so frequently represented in late Bronze Age rock art of the Altay region and represented here in the boulder from TS I (Fig. 6). These humorous, vital creatures racing over the irregular sides of boulders are too close to those of the fantastic landscapes of Han censers and hill jars to discount. In contrast to the controversial authenticity of some of the materials I earlier cited, this more recently gathered material from Mongolian petroglyphic sites are of undoubted authenticity and provenance, even if the dating of individual compositions may be open to debate. But how the transition from the outer steppe world of the nomad was made into the inner settled world of the Chinese is still far from clear. Taken together with the parallels I adduced in that earlier article, however, the probability that nomadic sources must be considered for the origins of Chinese landscape representation cannot be discounted.

Although I have here described only one rock-carved scene where antlers are transformed into mountain slopes, the confidence with which it has been executed, and the two other instances we have documented at TS/BO, suggest that there existed, at the least, an oral paradigm for what is here given visual form. These examples, and especially that from BO I (Fig. 10), are striking parallels to the fanciful tendrils which appear in Han inlaid tubes and censers. Taken in conjunction with the representations of mountains in 5th c. Saka material, e.g., the Issyk headdress, and earlier paradigms of antlers or horns transformed into mountains, from 6th and 5th c. Pazyryk burials, one is faced with the strong probability that the earliest Han representations of fanciful mountains are somehow rooted in nomadic traditions of representing landscape.

FIGURES



Fig.1 Wolves staulking elk and argali. Tsagaan Salaa IV. Photo: Gary E. Tepfer.

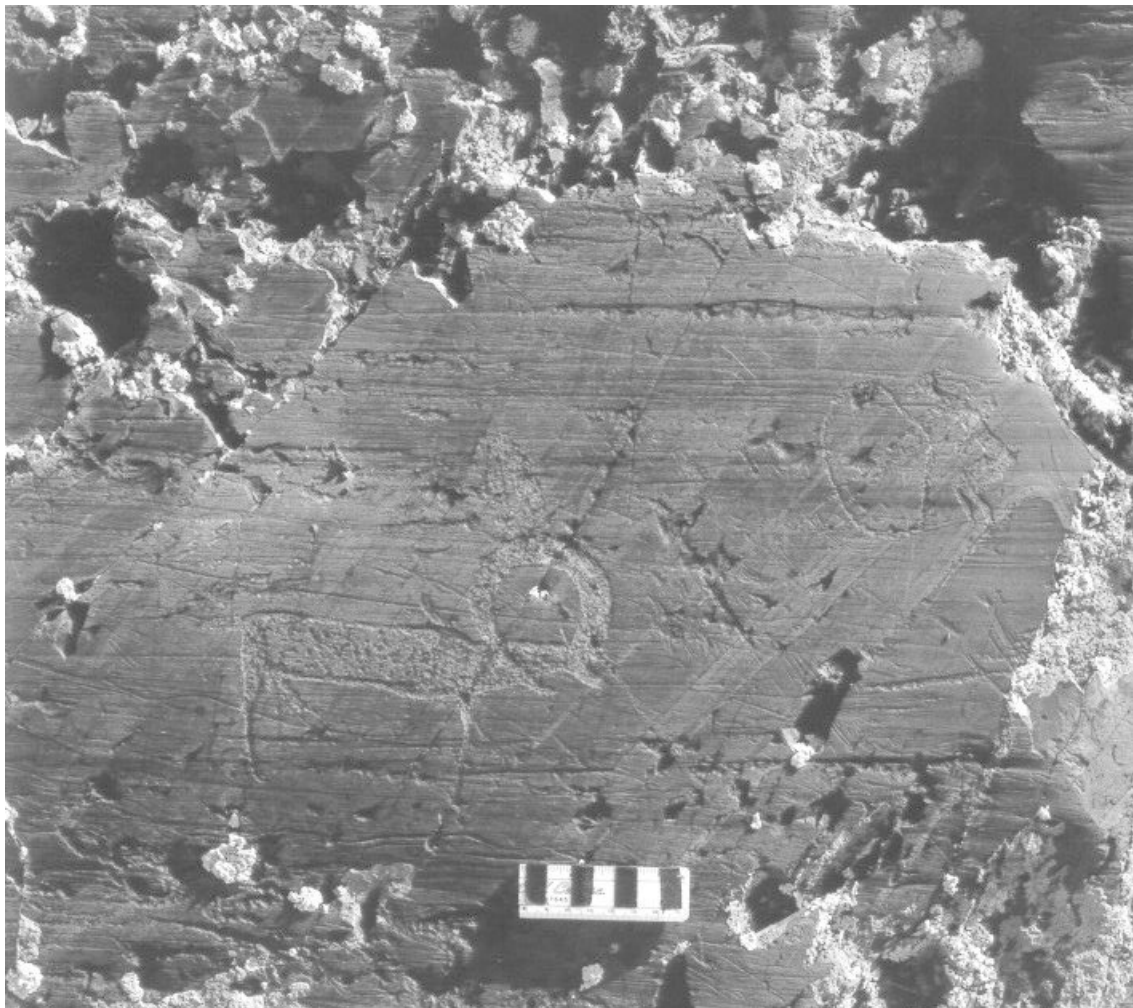


Fig.2 Hunter taking aim at an argali. Tsagaan Salaa I. Photo: Gary E. Tepfer.



Fig.3 Section from boulder, with dogs attacking large elk, approaching hunter on the right. Tsagaan Salaa IV. Photo: Gary E. Tepfer.



Fig.4 Wild goats and small hunter. Baga Oigor IV. Photo: Gary E. Tepfer.

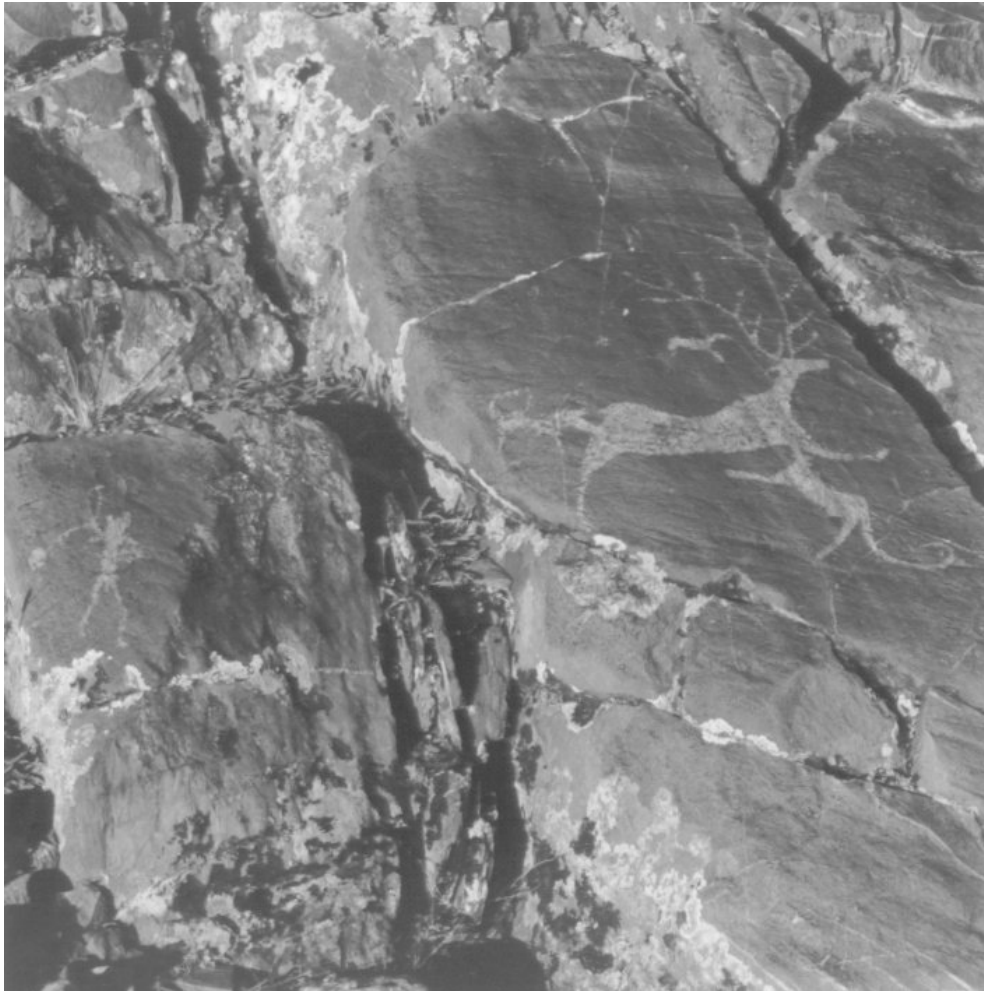


Fig.5 Snow leopards attacking elk, horned hunter approaching on the left. Tsagaan Salaa I. Photo: Gary E. Tepfer.



Fig.6 Boulder covered with small running animals. Tsagaan Salaa I. Photo: Gary E. Tepfer.



Fig.7 Boulder covered with images of goats; small human figure in lower right, paths under lichen. Tsagaan Salaa III. Photo: Gary E. Tepfer.



Fig.8 Boulder covered with hunt scene, Tsagaan Gol. Photo: Gary E. Tepfer.



Fig.9 Boulder with row of goats on a path, on left side of carved face. Baga Oigor I. Photo: Gary E. Tepfer.

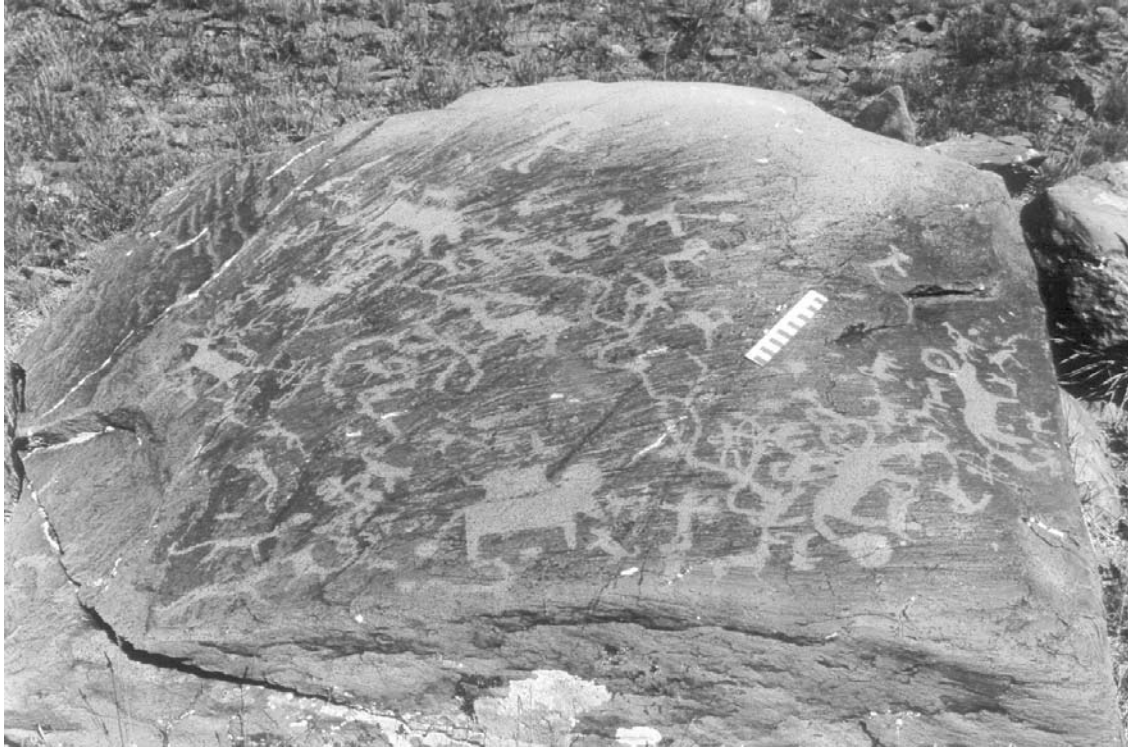


Fig.10 Boulder with hunters and 'mountain path'. Baga Oigor I. Photo: Gary E. Tepfer.