

## THE ROCK ART OF THE KARAKOL REGION (TCHOUÏ & NARYN OBLAST) IN KYRGYZSTAN

### Localisation and research history

The Karakol Region of Kyrgyzstan is between thirty and fifty kilometers south of Bishkek, at between 1,800m and 4,800m altitude in the Tien Shan mountain zone. The north of the region is part of the Kyrgyz Ala-Too chain, while the south is attached to the Jumgal Too mountain chain. The eastern part of the region is separated from the western zone by the Karakol Ashuu pass (at 3,485m altitude). The western zone touches the frontier of two Kyrgyz provinces: the Tchouï and Naryn oblasts. As several Kyrgyz valleys and towns are named Karakol, this region should not be confused with the town south-east of Lake Issyk-Kul nor with the valley in the Talas oblast in which rock art has also been documented (Hermann 2017).

The region is crossed by numerous valleys oriented north-south, the water they contain flowing towards the Tchouï plain, while a valley oriented west-east has the River Karakol flowing into the Kotchkor plain. These valleys are still used by shepherds in summer. The rock art was done on the moraines situated along the watercourses at between 1,800 and 3,000m altitude, as well as on the summer pastures at the valley summits between 3,000 and 3,700m (Fig. 1). Seven groups of petroglyphs were inventoried, as well as other disparate stones in different valleys.

Even though the region's rock art was well-known to locals, no prospection had been carried out until now and no publication mentions this region. Since 2015, a group of zoologists from Bishkek has photographed and recorded with GPS all engraved rocks seen during expeditions carried out with the organisations Biosphere Expeditions and NABU in the Karakol region while studying the snow leopard (Tytar et al. 2017). To do this, Amadeus DeKastle developed with his colleague Dr. Marc Foggin a smartphone application ("Lapis Guide"), so that local guides could also document engraved rocks: each photo is thus added to a data base with GPS coordinates. Even if the documentation is not perfect (for example absence of a scale or information on the orientation of a panel), they are to be congratulated on their work to make local populations aware of the importance of preserving the rock art heritage, as well as the creation of the data base with the results presented here.

### Presentation of the groups of petroglyphs

The rock art of the Karakol region is essentially concentrated in seven groups. However, one hundred and twenty additional stones with four hundred and sixty depictions were disparately inventoried over the whole of the region.

1. **Tchon Tchikan** is a valley in the north-west of the western zone of Karakol in the Kyrgyz Ala-Too, at between 2,960 and 4,090m altitude (42°22'46"N; 74°42'39"E). Most petroglyphs were situated between 3,500 and 3,600m altitude. 690 petroglyphs on 164 stones were counted, with 152 from the Iron Age and 286 from the Turkic Medieval period.

2. **Kashka Tor** is in the south-west of the western zone of Karakol, in the Jumgal Tor, between 3,000 and 4,220m altitude (42°19'24"N; 74°45'29"E). All the petroglyphs were

between 3,300 and 3,600m altitude. 204 drawings on 48 stones were counted in this group, with over half (112 depictions) from the Iron Age.

3. **The Iyry Suu valley and Lake Sary Kul** group are in the south-east of the western zone of Karakol, in the Jumgal Too, between 3,200 and 4,200m altitude (42°20'36"N; 74°49'46"E). This is the largest group with 222 stones engraved with 896 petroglyphs with nearly half from the Turkic medieval era (435 depictions).

4. **Takyr Tor** is in the western zone of Karakol, between the Kashka Tor and Iyry Suu valleys in the Jumgal Too, between 3,050 and 4,050m altitude (42°20'16"N; 74°47'58"E). 114 engraved stones with 520 petroglyphs were documented, with 172 Iron Age drawings and 259 from the Turkic era.

5. **Donguruma** is in the eastern zone of Karakol, in the Kyrgyz Ala-Too at between 2,954 and 4,472m altitude (42°24'37"N; 74°55'55"E). Only 15 stones with 107 drawings were inventoried, among them 83 Iron Age petroglyphs.

6. **Kara Tor** is north of Iyry Suu in the eastern zone of Karakol, in the Kyrgyz Ala-Too between 3,200 and 4,225m altitude (42°23'51"N; 74°49'25"E). 36 stones with 94 engravings were counted between 3,200 and 3,700m.

7. **Pyty** is situated between Kara-Tor and Donguruma in the eastern zone of Karakol, in the Kyrgyz Ala-Too, between 3,060 and 4,320m altitude (42°24'44"N; 74°52'24"E). There are two small glacial lakes at the summit (3,700m altitude) of this valley. There is an engraved rock near one of the lakes. Only six stones with 45 carvings were counted, mainly from the Iron Age (36 petroglyphs).

### **Chronology and themes of the rock art**

Seven hundred and twenty-five engraved stones were inventoried with 2,986 engravings in all. Animals significantly dominate the repertoire with 2,819 depictions. Anthropomorphs are relatively rare (104 depictions)<sup>1</sup> while signs or geometric lines which were impossible to interpret were 36 in number. There are additionally twenty-five tamgas (clan signs), nine Cyrillic inscriptions, four podomorphic motifs, two patterns of a yurt and probably one of a sword, as well as a recent soviet star and a sun.

Only eleven stones could be interpreted as being **Late Bronze Age**. They contain eighteen petroglyphs: fifteen animals (thirteen caprines, a roe deer and a wolf) and three anthropomorphs.

For the **Iron Age**, 166 stones with 931 petroglyphs were inventoried. Animals constitute 94.4% of the depictions (879 engravings). There are also 48 anthropomorphs, one horseman, and five signs impossible to interpret. Caprines represent the majority of the bestiary (Fig. 2), with 751 depictions, meaning 85% of the animals. Furthermore, there are sixty-four wolves (7%), fifteen horses, ten felines (probably snow leopards), seven deer, four camels, a cow, a snake and a bird, as well as twenty five undetermined animals. Following scenes should be noticed: an anthropomorph is connected by three lines to two caprines and a horse, in what is however not necessarily a hunting scene (Fig. 3). There is also a

hunting scene of a caprine with two dancers accompanying the hunter (Fig. 4). There is a/so a panel attributed to the same period showing two anthropomorphs with outspread arms and having a clear gender distinction: the hair of the left-hand figure is shown as well as two bumps half-way up the body to suggest a breast, whilst the right-hand figure is ithyphallic (Fig. 5). Finally, three anthropomorphs (Fig. 6), are in a style rather similar to certain anthropomorphic signs documented at Chiim-Tash in the Talas region, two hundred and forty kilometers west of Karakol (Hermann 2018: 16).

Concerning the **Turkic Medieval era**, 1,251 engravings on 239 stones were documented. Once again, animals are dominant with 1,182 petroglyphs (94.5%). Furthermore, forty -six anthropomorphs (including eleven horsemen and three camel-riders), twenty-four tamgas, seven indeterminate signs, four podomorphic signs, a probable sword and a yurt can be attributed to this period. Caprines make up nearly 77% of the bestiary (909 petroglyphs), followed by ninety-six wolves (8%), sixty-two camels (Fig. 7), twenty-five equids (including three donkeys), nine deer, two felines, a bull and a serpent. However, seventy-seven animal could not be identified. For this period, there is thus a lower proportion of caprines compared with the Iron Age, but more camelids (5% instead of 0.5%). Anthropomorphs are regularly shown in hunting scenes (Figs. 8-9).

The **Kyrgyz era** (from the XVI<sup>th</sup> Century to the XX<sup>th</sup> Century as a general time period) has ninety stones engraved with 188 drawings: 171 animals (nearly 91%), nine Cyrillic inscriptions from the second half of the XX<sup>th</sup> Century, three signs, an anthropomorph, but also a tamga, a sun, a yurt and a soviet star. 92.4% of the animals are caprines (158 petroglyphs). There are also three wolves, a camel, a horse, a deer (Fig. 10) and seven undetermined animals.

20% of the petroglyphs **could not be attributed to a precise period**; their style could equally well be interpreted as belonging to the Late Iron Age, the Turkic era, or even the Kyrgyz period, viz. 598 engravings over 291 rocks: 572 animals, twenty-one signs and six anthropomorphs, including a horseman. Among the animals: 476 caprines, eleven wolves, three horses, a camel; how ever, there are also eighty-one indeterminate animals.

Even if certain of these seven groups have more Iron Age or Turkic Medieval era petroglyphs, we have seen no significant difference in the statistical spread of animals and anthropomorphs between these groups, apart from a bigger presence of camels at Takyr Tor for the Turkic period compared with other valleys. For this era, camels represent 5% of animal figures (sixty-two depictions). At Takyr Tor, there are 20 camel petroglyphs for 248 animals (8%). In other groups, camels in the bestiary oscillate between 3% and 5%.

## **Conclusions**

The repertoire, dominated by animals and particularly by caprines, reflects the pastoral use of the valleys of this region, providing a continuity from the beginning of the Iron age until nowadays. In spite of successive periods and styles, the imaginary context is basically still the same in the rock art depictions, with caprines, sometimes attacked by wolves, and some isolated hunting scenes. The Turkic period gives more importance to camels as well as to representations of clan signs, perhaps to mark zones of pasture. In the Soviet era the shepherds continued to represent almost exclusively caprines. However, except for a star and nine Cyrillic inscriptions, the Soviet world does not seem to have influenced the graphic

representations. But this may be caused by a partially biased documentation: the inventory was made through the goodwill and interest in Kyrgyz history of zoologists and nature guides photographing everything they considered interesting. If this considerable source of information regarding a high mountain region difficult of access has been obtained thanks to their remarkable efforts, it also has an inherent problem for the archaeologist who has not seen the petroglyphs in their original context and cannot be certain of how systematic the documentation has been.

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### **Endnote:**

1. Horsemen being counted both as anthropomorphs and zoomorphs (horses or camels), the statistics could seem incorrect in terms of the total number of designs.