

THE ENIGMATIC WORLD OF ANCIENT GRAFFITI

ROCK ART IN CHUKOTKA
THE CHAUNSKAYA REGION,
RUSSIA

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Translated by
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Translator's Introduction

This book was originally published as *Zagadochnyi mir drevnikh grafitti* (Magadan: Kordis, 2012).

A number of words, particularly names, have to be brought into English from Russian. How is this done? Every translation, and particularly from Russian to English, has the problem of finding a suitable form of transliteration. None of the three systems available (U.S. Board of Geographic Names [BGN], Library of Congress [LOC], or 'Linguistic' system [Ling]) was felt to be entirely adequate. I have therefore created my own system. In this I use some of the BGN system with a slightly modified version of the LOC. For example, the Russian 'е' ('ye' of BGN) is written as 'e,' following LOC. The Russian 'ё' is also written as 'e' (not as 'yo'), following Ling. The Russian 'э' is written as 'e,' following BGN. Both the Russian 'и' and the 'й' are transliterated as 'i,' unlike any of the three systems. The Russian 'ю' and 'я' are written as 'yu' and 'ya' respectively, following the BGN. The Russian soft sign, which is often dropped in transliterations or replaced with an 'i,' is retained here as an apostrophe, following BGN. In this case, I transliterate the archaeologist's name Кирьяк as 'Kir'yak' rather than 'Kiryak' or 'Kiriyak' or even 'Kirijak'—forms that can be found in the literature. I have also settled, as much as possible, on one ending for words, as the English language dictates, rather than providing the appropriate ending (masculine, feminine, neuter, plural/nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, instrumental, prepositional) that can occur in Russian. And having 24 possible grammatical endings is not the end of it. In the masculine nominative, for a name ending in '-sky' there are at least five possible endings that can be found in English ('-sky,' '-skiy,' '-skij,' '-skii,' '-ski'). In addition, there are aberrant spellings that have been accepted in the literature. For example, Wrangell instead of the Russian Vrangel' has already been adopted in English. Some names are 'semi-formalized' in English. For names that do not have an accepted English form I have used my system above for transliterating. All this in no way exhausts the possibilities and problems the translator faces, but rather it provides a notion of the difficulties attendant upon any translation project.

Why do I not pick one system or another? All three systems (BGN, LOC, and Linguistic) use diacritics, or something similar, making library searches difficult. The BGN uses an unlauded e (ë); the Linguistic system uses a number of diacritics, such as č, š, ž, and others; and the LOC, most problematic, uses an arc between some pairs of letters, such as t̄s, īa, and īu. All the letters in my system are standard Roman letters that can be typed into library search engines.

The term ‘graffiti’ in this work tends to refer to those items that contain examples of intentional marking by humans, without implying that the markings were done illicitly.

I hope the explanation of my method will aid the reader, especially if he or she should want to go back from English to Cyrillic, and I apologize to all whose names I have unintentionally ‘corrupted.’

I would like to thank Anna Gokhman for reviewing the translation for mistranslations and Nan Coppock for helping with all aspects of the translation. Most of all I must thank Dr Margarita Aleksandrovna Kir’yak (Dikova) for permitting her important work to be published in English.

Preface

The idea of a monographic description of a most interesting site arose in 2011 as a consequence of monitoring the territories lying around Lake Rauchuvagytgyn in northern Chukotka, 30 years after its discovery. The uniqueness of this historical monument consists of the material complex of a site containing a representative block of graphic miniatures on slate slabs, small pebbles, and lamellar stones.

In the assemblage of representational artifacts, as if on a mosaic canvas, before us appears an enigmatic spiritual world of the ancient occupants of these places, a world forever gone and lost for us. Recognizing that to hear their voices, even through an attempt at 'reading' these stone documents, is impossible, I tried to understand the expanse of their spiritual interests, relying on the inexhaustible heritage of traditional cultures.

I am grateful to the traveling companions of the field trip of 2011, Nikolai Korav'e and Ivan Vukvukai, for the outstanding photographs depicting the legendary lake and its vicinity. I express deep gratitude to a staff member of the Laboratory of Interdisciplinary Study of Chukotka V. N. Nuvano for aid in the technical design of this monograph.

M. A. Kir'yak (Dikova)

Introduction

1. Graphics of Small Form as an Object of Research

Graphics on stone (small forms) has rarely attracted the attention of Russian archaeologists that in the same measure engraved bone has (an exception is unique Old Eskimo items, interest in which has not been quenched since the time of their discovery). Publications are often limited to brief information on the presence of graffiti in archaeological complexes. In special literature these rarities are examined in a general plan, illustratively, without commentary (Oshibkina et al. 1992). In some cases attempts are undertaken at classification and semantic analysis of graphic sources (Grichan 1987). An exception is the monograph of D. G. Savinov, *Ancient Settlements of Khakassia. Torgazhak*, in which outstanding graphic antiquities are presented that reveal ideological-religious foundations of the ancient society in the territory of Khakassia. This is explained by series of reasons of both objective and subjective character: by the discrete character of finds due to incompleteness and irregularity of archaeological survey of the vast territory of Russia, by the relatively rare use in antiquity of stone for engraving small forms (with the presence of softer materials not durable over time—wood, bone, clay), as well as by the difficult access to the information placed in them, the attempt to decipher which bears the danger of wandering from the plane of scientific analysis into an ephemeral world of conjecture and fantasy. Also, it is impossible to dismiss the skepticism of some researchers in relation to the ‘reading’ of these objects.

Meanwhile the graphics, independent of the material (stone, bone, or clay), represent a most valuable stratum of graphic activity and artistic work, touching upon many aspects not only of the ideological-religious order but also the cultural-economic way of life of the ancient societies. In this regard, graffiti are an important cultural-historical resource, the exclusion of which from the field of research not only impoverishes our ideas of the spiritual culture of ancient groups, but also limits knowledge of mankind itself as a subject of early society. ‘Primitive art shows us man, who reaching into the world for knowledge, begins to change the world, and due to this process opens his own potential possibilities’ (Finkel’stain 1956:36).

Studying the rock art of Siberia, I. T. Savenkov stressed that not one stroke, not one illustration, or even pose of an animal is accidental; all have a definite meaning, the clue to which lies in the religious-mythological system of the world views of the early people (from the archive of I. T. Savenkov. See Belokobyl’skii 1986:109). Being essentially symbolic, graphic art of small forms

not only embodied in a certain code the key ideas of the world view or religious-mythological character, but also filled the role of pictography, the informational effect of which was achieved by the fact that the image appeared as a mnemonic device, relying on which memory about the past was transmitted directly from one people to another, when permanent meaning was still not entrenched in signs (Kabo 1981:91). This required a special mentality, the ability to abstract, to focus in a simple 'graphic formula' on the world surrounding man—animals, people, sun, sky, water, and earth—which marked the 'transition from painting to writing' (Finkel'stein 1956:37).

The materials available at the disposal of archaeologists visually convince us of the fact that 'in the Paleolithic and in any of the following periods man possessed the capability to translate his surroundings into symbols and to construct from them a world of symbols parallel to the real one' (Toporov 1972:98). The symbolism of primeval art, concealed under a stratum of tens of thousands of years, has been successfully deciphered by archaeologists V. E. Larichev, B. A. Frolov, and others. It must be acknowledged that with the accumulation of materials the interest in items of mobile art increases (Krupyanko and Tabarev 1996). Nevertheless, in the resolution of problems connected with the materials a significant gap remains, which in first order is related to such kind of representational resources of small forms as graphics.

Graphics on stone (small forms) is a phenomenon widespread in time and space. Engraved pebbles, slate slabs, small stones, debitage from stone tool production, and objects of economic assignment are known in Eurasia and America from the Paleolithic to the Middle Ages. As demonstrational material we will dwell (selectively) on engravings of various times.

The earliest engravings on a stone base in the form of simple linear signs, 'transmitted by visual means,' belong to the earliest periods in the history of humanity. There is information about cuts on the chalky cortex of a tool of Riss times from Mecklenburg (Germany), a pebble with deep incising from the Riss-Würm horizon at Isturitz (France), and a 'furrowed' stone from the middle Mousterian complex of the Hungarian Tata site, the age of which based on radiocarbon analysis is about 50,000 years (Stolyar 1985:125). Cross-shaped figures were carved on a slab of limestone from the Mousterian layer of Tsoukaya Cave in the Republic of Georgia and a small nummulite from the Mousterian complex of Tata (Ibid., Figs. 91, 93).

Engravings of scenes with an animal theme are reflected in small forms in the upper Aurignac, France. Stream pebbles, slabs of limestone, and stone (measuring 3 to 5 cm) were used as the substrate. The drawings were applied most often on one surface, but there are also bifacial engravings. Entities on them are a woolly

rhinoceros and a brown bear (a bifacial composition on a pebble from the rock shelter of La Colombière, France), a mammoth (a double image from Laugerie-Haute, France), a bison (from Bruniquel, France), a wolf (from Polesine, Italy) (Ibid., Figs. 147–150, 164). In the opinion of A. D. Stolyar, the named engraved figures are a representation of models with the skin of animals thrown on them (Ibid., Fig. 206).

Magdalenian is considered to be the time of formation of small-form engravings. Based on the opinion of researchers, its appearance was preceded by bas-relief and ‘engraved contour’ (Ibid., 223). An engraved image of a bison on a sandstone slab and a reindeer on a stone slab from Isturitz were executed in bas-relief in the style of an ‘engraving with raised plane’ (Ibid., Figs. 198, 200).

Eighty-seven slate slabs with 224 engraved figures were found during excavations at Gönnersdorf (Germany). Chronologically the finds were determined to be Magdalenian in time (Bosinski and Fischer 1974).

Engraving was strongly developed in the Upper Paleolithic. Amazing precision and beauty in the engraving of bone, antler, and stone appear in the art of small forms. It is possible to assign as true masterpieces of animal art the image of a hare carved in a stone slab with all the natural details (Stolyar 1985: Fig. 208). A female image on a retoucher made from a slate slab from the Rogalik XI site (Northern Donets) is unique (Gorelik 1997). Executed in a tentative manner, it portrays an image in the style of known Paleolithic statuettes.

Attracting attention is the preferred relation of Paleolithic engravers toward mammoth tusk. Carving on bone is widely represented in eastern European sites—Eliseevichi, Mezino, and the Siberian site of Mal’ta. As an ornamental raw material slabs of marl (Kostenki IV) and sandstone (Kostenki I) were also used (Abramova 1962). At other sites (Afontova Gora II and Afontova Gora III—Frolov 1974) blanks of agalmatolite underwent engraving. The representational elements are simple: lines (parallel and intersecting), geometric figures—angles, triangles, and radiating segments. Engraving was also applied to working tools (flint artifacts). In this regard, the complex of the Upper Paleolithic Khotylevskii site (Desna River) is indicative. Together with decorated bone objects, in the Khotylevskii complex there is a block of flint artifacts (blades, gravers, scrapers), on the chalky cortex of which were engraved ‘simple compositions of simple geometric elements forming angles, triangles, rhombs, crosses, hatching’ (Zaveryaev 1981:154). Noting in some cases rhythmic cutting, the researcher believes that they served as a record for ‘some quantitative expressions.’ Speaking of the purpose of engravings, he proposes that among them might be tally markers, stones for divination, magic, and spells, or the simplest churingas with spirits of ancestors embodied in them (Ibid.).

An engraved tool is known in the Paleolithic of Yakutia (Krupyanko and Tabarev 1996: Fig. 3:2). In the Paleolithic of Primor'e (the southern Far East) a carved image on soft stone was noted. As researchers suppose, embodied in the engraving is the head of a snake (Ibid., 68, Fig. 1). Sandstone slabs with line and dot engraving were found in Upper Paleolithic Layer VI of the Ushki I site in Kamchatka (Dikov 1979: Figs. 21, 22; 2004: Figs. 21, 22). An engraved pebble was found in the Upper Paleolithic site of Bol'shoi El'gakhchan II (the Northern Even Region of the Magadan District) (Kir'yak [Dikova] 2003: Fig. 45).

In the vast literature on Paleolithic art, engravings on stone are also described (see the Bibliography: [Abramova 1962; Stolyar 1985]).

Rather rare in the Mesolithic of Northern Eurasia is graffiti on stone. There are three centers of Mesolithic art in the territory of Eastern Europe: the Veretye culture (Eastern Prionezh'e), the Oleneostrovskii cemetery (Karelia), and the peatbog Vis 1 (Vychehda Basin). At Veretye 1 about 50 items were collected with ornamentation, hatch marks, primitive engraved figures, and symbols, but they all were executed on an antler or bone base (Oshibkina et al. 1992:11, Figs. 8–25). Only one engraving on stone was found: an engraving in the form of intersecting straight lines executed on a (white) cobble surface of black flint, worked by edge retouch (Ibid., 33, Fig. 44; Krupyanko and Tabarev 1996: Fig. 3:1[2]). If we judge by its reproduction in the named sources, the impression is created that engraving was applied to the figure of a mammoth, the white silhouette of which is easily traced on the dark background of the substrate.

From Siberian finds an argillite slab with a drawn design in the form of a net is known (Verkholenskaya Gora) (Mezolit, 1989: Fig. 110:30). We found a fragment of graffiti on a slate slab in the Mesolithic site of Tytyl' IV, Locus 3 (Kir'yak [Dikova] 2003).

An insignificant number of engravings discovered in Mesolithic sites can probably be explained by poor study of the sites of this period.

An entirely different picture is seen in the Neolithic. The sites of mobile art, including engraving, are many.

A representative group of stone churingi with engraving were noted in the Verkhnevolzhskaya culture.¹ Engravings on stone are encountered in various sites. At the site of Sakhtysh VIII a fragment of an oval stone slab was found, one side of which was covered with a hatched design in the form of a herring

¹ A churinga is a sacred religious object of the Australian aborigines. Of course, the author is not implying that the above-mentioned churingi are Australian, but rather, similar.—*Trans.*

bone pattern (Oshibkina et al. 1992: Fig. 92). Another churinga from the same site has engraving on both sides: by fluting, on one side was carved the figure of an oval intersected by lines radiating in different directions; on the opposite—as if twisted (counter-clockwise) in a spiral, circular lines with arc-shaped segments radiating to the opposite direction (the impression is given of swirling movement along a spiral associated with a spinning top) (Ibid., Fig. 94). A churinga from the Ivanovskoe VII site is represented by a trapezoidal slab with an engraving of a net (?) with equilateral cells (Ibid., Fig. 93:1). In the Verkhnevolzhskii layer of the Zamost'e II site 58 churingi were found. On them were engraved designs in the form of stairs, circular figures, and hatching. On one of the subrectangular slabs were carved short segments grouped in fours and directed in various directions (Ibid., Fig. 93:2), on another—an unfinished triangle with a sloping cross in the center (Ibid., Fig. 93:3).

Small stones with slotted images were found in the Tverskaya Region at the sites of Berendeevo XVIII and Ozerki 5. They all, in the opinion of researchers, are reminiscent of Australian churingi (Ibid., 74). Sandstone churingi of the Bronze Age are known from 'Podkova' cave (Northern Priazov'e).

Judging by the sources presented, in Neolithic engravings on stone images of a conditionally geometric character predominate. In the assembly of symbolic figures the most used were acute angles, triangles, straight and sloping crosses, doubled and disparate segments, parallel and multidirectional lines, stair- and herring bone-shaped 'constructions,' concentric circles, and other geometric images that attest to the rather developed abstract thinking of people of the Stone Age. In addition, realistic forms from the world of nature surrounding man were also reflected in graffiti. An image of the head of a moose scratched on a slab, found at the mouth of the Vetluga River (Nikitin 1980:163). There is a similar figure on a slate slab from the Khunny site of Ivolginskii settlement in Zabaikal'e (dating to 3rd–1st centuries B.C.) (Davydova and Minyaev 1975:198). In Bronze Age burials in the territory of Tuva, stone vessels with images of animals scratched on their body are known (Mandel'shtam 1973:228). Information about finds of graffiti on a stone substrate also appears from other regions of Siberia and the Far East, but they bear an incomplete character and are not always accompanied by illustrations.

In the Neolithic layer of a settlement on the Kochechumo River (Lower Tunguska Basin), in the complex of artifacts there are also slate slabs with images scratched on them (Andreev and Studzitskaya 1968:153).

A whole series of stream pebbles and stone slabs with engravings were found in the region of the Irkutsk reservoir. Among them face-shaped figures and images of fish are especially significant. A set of linear symbols in the form of paired

segments, arrow-shaped figures, zigzags, and sloping crosses was used in the compositions (Klimashevskii 1974). In the motifs of Angara graffiti a cult of ichthyophages can be traced, which is reflected not only in stylized images of fish but also masks, which in all probability personified the patron of fishing luck.

A representative collection of graffiti (41 specimens) is from the territory of Gornii Altai; it was collected during excavations of ancient Turkic kurgans and enclosures and near them (Grichan 1987).

Engraved stones are also known in Far Eastern cultures. A series of graffiti (26 items) belongs to the Neolithic complex of Rudnaya Pristan'. Three types of decorative motifs used in the engraving can be distinguished: designs combining parallel lines and half-arcs, nets, and 'herringbone' (Krupyanko and Tabarev 1996: Figs. 2, 3). It is typical that a graphic figure imparts to individual objects—oval and subtriangular pebbles—an anthropomorphic touch.

A representative series of engravings on stone was obtained by A. I. Lebedintsev at sites of the Late Neolithic Tokareva culture (Northern Priokhot'e). All the graffiti were executed in the form of pendants, with the exception of one composition engraved on a flint flake. The engravings were represented by lattices, herringbone-shaped figures, line segments, and randomly located straight lines (Kir'yak [Dikova] 2003: Fig. 51). One of the compositions transmits the idea of the ancient Tokarev people of the world model with its spatial orientations (Ibid., Fig. 51:1). Attracting attention in the collection of graffiti from the Tokareva sites is the engraving of figures on carefully ground (thinned by grinding) blanks, likening them to blades, and the selection of raw material that took into account a color (yellowish-pinkish, reddish, grayish-brown) reminiscent of the color of copper or bronze (in the complex of the inventory there is a copper artifact). Considering these features, it can be supposed that the Tokarev people imitated in the preparation of pendants metal forms that had already begun to appear on the Okhotsk coast by the end of the 1st millennium B.C. (Lebedintsev 1990, 1996). We note that the Tokarev people, commanding the decorative art in perfection, also engraved everyday items of bone: harpoon heads, combs, punches, needle cases, spoons, and graver handles (Lebedintsev 1996:145). They preferred to make pendants from stone.

Two engravings on a stone substrate were found during excavations at the Pridorozhnaya site (Upper Kolyma region, Magadan District) (Slobodin 1996:100, Figs. 17:8, 18:14). Engraved on one of them were parallel straight lines and 'stairs,' on the second—an oval divided into parts (Kir'yak [Dikova] 2003: Figs. 49–50).

Two miniatures with graffiti were found (on the modern ground surface) by N. N. Dikov in Eastern Chukotka. The first engraving has the form of a tent or tripod

structure among the northeastern Paleo-Asiatic peoples (Dikov 1993: Pl. 94:1), on the second—a strange image of intersecting straight lines (Ibid., Pl. 102:2).

A block of graffiti (about 70 specimens including very small pieces) was acquired in the process of surface collections and excavations at the Rauchuvagytgyn I site (Western Chukotka).

The art of carving on stone existed a rather long time, which can be attested by various finds in sites of the Middle Ages. On the premises of a 12th–13th century workshop (city of Suzdal) a honing stone for dressing blades and needles was found. On its surface was scratched the image of a human face in profile, and to its side several stair-like figures (Glazov 1973:58).

A large number of engravings on a stone substrate have been found in North America (including the island region) and Canada.

We do not set before ourselves the goal of creating a global corpus of items of graphic art—this laborious task is not for the shoulders of one researcher. Indisputable only is the fact that these resources, representing a whole stratum in the art of the Stone Age, deserve a multifaceted investigation. The repetition of many design elements (in the form of various geometric figures and their combinations) is surprising, beginning with items from the earliest times to the Middle Ages.

We note that Paleolithic items of mobile art (engravings on bone and stone), even excellently described and scrupulously taken into account, have meanwhile not been an object of interdisciplinary research.

Publications about Neolithic engraving in the majority of cases bear a survey character. Meanwhile the very phenomenon of this kind of art is attractive, which by the Paleolithic does not fit in a common channel of a realistic (in essence) reflection of the world surrounding man and is so unusual, imbued with symbolism in all subsequent stages of the Stone Age. The Neolithic art of engraving stone and bone has roots that go back into the Paleolithic. In only one collection of engraved plates and fragments of mammoth tusk, found at the Paleolithic site of Eliseevichi, is contained a whole spectrum of linear symbolic figures, widely used in Neolithic engraving.

The symbolic system of the Stone Age is an important informational resource. The place of the sites of this category in world view-mythological systems of ancient societies, semantics, and assignment of the graffiti in all stages of the Stone Age are questions requiring consideration and response. The resolution of these problems will help fill the sizable gap in this system of cultural wealth, which came to us from the depths of distant millennia.