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The Rock Art of the Mt. Aragats System

Rock art in Armenia mainly includes engravings, which are widely extending over the slopes of the volcanic mountain systems. There are extensive congestions of engravings on the peaks and on the slopes of the Aragats, Gegham, Vardenis, Djermouk and Syunik mountains.

The results of the research of the Aragats volcano system rock art are introduced in this paper.

Due to the publications, there are no exact documentations of rock art, especially of rock paintings in Armenia till 2002. During scientific researches and surveys - carried out by Armenian-French joint archeological mission, together with the Institute of Archaeology of the Armenian National Academy of Sciences and Maison d' Orient (France), as well Armenian branch of the Gfoeller foundation of USA (project directors Boris Gasparian and Christine Chataigner) - series of open-air rock engravings were discovered in Voskehat, Aghavnatun, Lernamerdz, Amberd, Vardenut etc., that are situated on Western and Southern slopes of Aragats, as well as a shelter with new rock paintings in the canyon of the Kasakh River.

Rock Painting in Kasakh Valley

The Kasakh valley is situated in Aragatsotn region that consists of the huge volcanic shield of Mt. Aragats (formerly Alagyaz, whose main cone rises 4090 meters above sea level). It contains a tributary of the Arax River which has deeply cut into the basalt layers. In its north-south course at a mid point at the foot of Mount Arailer (2,577 m), a huge bubble or blister in the last basalt flow provides a shelter open to the south-west at around 70 metres above Kasakh on the left bank of its canyon (Fig.1). The Geghamavan-1 shelter has 1738m altitude. It is accessed by the plateau following a path on the cliff edge, which winds between erratic basalt blocks and herbaceous vegetation. The access route is interesting as it reveals several medieval ruins and an anthropomorphic petroglyph, deeply incised on a rock facing the canyon. The shelter is easily spotted in the landscape once you arrive the canyon. Its dimensions are relatively large (11 m wide, 4 m high, 8 m deep at its opening). In the interior the ceiling is continually peeling off in decimetre blocks that could have been the backing for paintings. A spring runs at the back of the shelter, running over layers of basalt and tuff. The tuff, laden with iron oxide, would be a possible source of colouring matter. All the shelter walls are exposed to daylight, but only those in the front get direct light. The sun's path in summer meets the perpendicularity of the

porch roof at the beginning of the afternoon. It seems unlikely that the shelter was a habitation site with its peeling ceiling and summer heat which would have made it an unpleasant kind of refuge.

Description of the Paintings

The paintings are situated on the basalt slabs with smooth surface texture at the exterior and interior of the shelter. The decoration entirely consists of red designs. They spread over some twenty metres with small panels at the centre and with larger dimensions on the lateral zones. They are at heights ranging from 40cm above the floor to 6.50 meters. The folded basalt layers create a set of vertical slabs cut like the canyon and, at the centre of the shelter, the figures are on the faces of the cleavage of the slabs, the panels at the exterior of the shelter face the canyon. Frontal (anthropomorph) and profiled (zoomorph) figures face towards the south or towards the floor. The panels at the site are morphologically defined by breaks, fissures or major ruptures of the slope of the rocks.

There are over 60 panels with its 112 figures, also three Arabic inscriptions and graffiti (which cover the earlier paintings). Zoomorphs are the dominant representations (43%), followed by anthropomorphs (28%) and then signs (24%) and some undetermined lines (5%). In general they have small or medium size. Only few of them reach 50-56 cm.

Techniques and Style

In the whole observed iconography there are only paintings in red monochromic solution. Natural paint of red volcanic tuff formations inside the cave was used for these paintings.

According to differences of the ochre's preservation, quality and colour tones it is obvious that tuff was used both in clear and mixed ways.

Various applications of techniques were used. There are simple lines done by a block of tuff and lines done by finger soaked in the coloured liquid. This showed several different states, more or less liquid or paste-like. The authors of more recent graffiti made use of the red tuff, which can be found in the shelter. There, however, exists a whole range of tones of red and it is difficult to distinguish whether this is due to varying sources of supply, to the addition of binders or to different levels of preservation.

According to the perception of the image and stylistic particularities there are three groups with different approaches:

1. In the first group the figure is obviously isolated, there isn't the compositional connection with another figures. Paintings of profiled animals differ from all the iconography with their better proportional forms, static position, usage of volume, solid style, more detailed realistic treatment and great dimensions (Fig.2).

2. The second group has 2 subgroups:

- a. There are simple compositional scenes, the partial voluminal figures have stylistic at the same time static solution, they have solid style.
- b. Here are represented the schematic and stylized figures with comparatively small sizes, they have contour (a figure below a bovid with long horns in twisted perspective reminds of milking scenes in African rock art), liner design which dominates in the iconography (Fig.3). Obvious attempts of perception of the space in two-dimensional plane, of evenly distribution of the figures in the composition, compositions with complicated structural and various thematic (hunting, figures with weapons, horseman) solutions are visible in this group. The similar features have the petroglyphs from Gegham and Syunik Mountains.

3. In the third group there are three Arabic inscriptions and the contemporary graffiti which cover rock paintings destroying them.

Chronological Proposal

Excavations in the cavity of the shelter in the hope of obtaining a cultural attribution for the art were carried out in vain: only numerous shards of medieval wheel-turned pottery were identified. Another small test excavation was made on the slope in front of the shelter: it proved sterile. Without archaeological evidence, chronological attribution can thus be done only by stylistic and thematic comparison of the designs.

The artistic analyses of the paintings show that they carry characteristic feature of ancient and late periods and confirm, that Geghamavan -1 shelter had been visited and used continuously. The observations show the fundamental subject of the *first group* is fixation and cognition of the real animal's image that already speaks about their ancient being. It is possible that panel N20-1 (Fig.2) is related to the cultural context of the Kmlo-2 cave site situated nearly 2 km north in the same canyon (the drawing of the horse-like animal most likely belongs to *Equus hemionus* Pall., during the excavation were found the remains of *Equus hemionus* Pall in Kmlo-2). Perhaps the earliest paintings of Geghamavan-1 shelter belong to the art of the Late Mesolithic-Early Neolithic population of the cave Kmlo-2 and could be dated with the same period XI-X Millennium B.C..

In the *second group* there already exist interconnectional disposition of figures and attempt to pass the information. Here we can notice the conception of generalized image of animal. It is becoming important to render ideological content, which suggests schematic solution. All these are typical to the thinking of man in middle and late periods.

By analogical point of view the second group with its similarity with Transcaucasian art can be dated to the Late Neolithic VII-VI Millennium B.C.. Another subgroup with highly schematic representations, linear technique and thematic similarity to petroglyphs, known from the different part of Armenia (Gegham Range, Vardenis Range and Syunik), dates to IV-I Millennium B.C., it is quite possible that part of them (stylized goats, cross) were done in the Medieval ages.

Third one contains three Arabic inscriptions, dating back to 1680, contemporary graffiti with oil and tuff that spoiled most of the drawings. Natural processes of decay also made the best part of the drawings to disappear.

Aghavnatun -Lernamerdz -Voskehat Group

Recently found petroglyphs distributed on the Southern slopes of Aragats, with its conversion to the Ararat plateau on 1010-1058 m above sea level are of great scientific interest.

Rock engravings extend from Aghavnatun till Voskehat in the context of Early Bronze Age-Iron Age archeological sites-cemeteries, towers, wall structures etc.. Area is covered of decimeter size andesite-basalt resulting of a cryoclastic flow. Vegetation is scarce. All these groups of rock-engravings are very similar and regular concentration of them around small natural hill-structures with chaotic congestion on the top can be seen. Here engravings are distributed from the peak of the hill up to the slopes.

Engravings mainly meet with groups and rare separately (for today 3 big groups are fixed). As a rule engravings are executed on surfaces of andesite-basalt rock formations. The surfaces are weathered resulting in a black shiny patina, and can be seen that those patinas have been chosen for engravings as a "canvas". There are few samples with two engraved stone-surfaces.

The rocks are generally 30cm up to 2m in size.

The main part of the engravings has Southern orientation, towards the Ararat valley, however there are images, which are directed upwards aside the sky.

According to the iconographic content zoomorphic figures (goats, deer, dogs, bulls, seldom panthers, birds, snakes) basically dominate, the smaller part makes up anthropomorphs, signs and non-figurative figures, unfinished vague lines.

The techniques of the examined petroglyphs are various. There are used separate and mixed techniques, the last one, by the way, dominate. The following kinds of techniques were used:

- pecking
- rubbering
- mix of these two techniques (the majority of engravings)
- liner incision (these images are rare and relate to late epoch).
- scratching
- polishing (these images are rare)
- usage of these techniques in various combinations.

The stylistic analysis of rock drawings showed here, that the majority of figures are represented in linear style. Solid and contour styles are rare.

From the point of thematic approach there are various scenes: groups of people and animals together and separately, dance (Fig.4), hunting, goats drinking water, a goat with baby, bulls, ploughing scene with harnessed bulls (Fig.5), flock of goats (Fig.6), fantastic images (anthropomorphic figure with the bird's legs, orant), signs (female).

It's important to note that rocks have been found, where a natural relief (cracks, hole, concavity) of a rock is used as parts of the figures. For example, on one of the images bent anthropomorph figure is engraved simultaneously on two surfaces of the rock (two-sided corner of a stone is used for more real representation of the bent position). The form of a rock's surface is also used as a frame for the figures.

One of the most important things that have been noticed in three places during the study is the arrangement of rocks, which suppose about the altar (vertical engraved rock is disposed with other horizontal block, which carries traces of water). Some of the rocks are also remarkable with its artificial cavities and a groove connected to them (probably served for running off water or other liquid). It is quite probable that they have had ritual meaning.

From the point of view of composition, figures in general are located chaotically. There are very rare figures located in regular arrangement (quadrupeds placed like arc, symmetrically located goats against to each other). By the way compositional scenes with many figures are also very rare for all three sites. Several of them have superimposition, which is possible to give chronological information.

Preliminary results allow to date the petroglyphs in the time range of IV-I Millennia B.C. and realize them in the context of the above mentioned surrounding archeological sites located in the vicinity (Agarak Early Bronze Age settlement, Aghavnatun, Voskehat Bronze Age cemeteries etc.). It is possible also by stylistic, thematic, technical comparison of the designs analyses, by analogy with petroglyphs found in Gegham Mountains and Syunik (IV-I Millennia B.C.). All these nuances speak about one fact, that they are part of one-united complex distributed from village Aghavnatun, Lernamerdz up to area of the villages Voskehat and Agarak.

Generalizing preliminary results of researches of petroglyphs of these sites, it is possible to note, that they differ with their local features among the numerous rock drawings of various parts of Aragats, and as a whole, they represent the big interest in the study of rock art of Armenia dating back from Mesolithic up to Iron Age (XI - I Millennia B.C.).

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Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6