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THREE NEW TIBETAN INSCRIPTIONS AND OIRAT-JUNGARIAN ROCK ART IN ALA-BEL AND THEIR REGIONAL CONTEXT, KYRGYZSTAN

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Abstract. At a newly prospected site on the south-western shore of the Issyk-Kul Lake in the Ala-Bel mountainous region, three Tibetan inscriptions done as graffiti of small dimensions were discovered. Furthermore, these inscriptions were associated with petroglyphs from the same period. In this paper, we present the first results of the prospection of Ala-Bel, the three new Buddhist inscriptions and the petroglyphs associated with them. These inscriptions are the ritual prayer formula "om mani padme hum" in a Tibetan alphabet and can be dated to the Oirat-Jungarian period. Furthermore, we interpret these inscriptions in the regional context of Oirat-Jungarian inscriptions in Kyrgyzstan.

Keywords: Rock Art, Tibetan inscriptions, Oirat-Jungar, Buddhism history, Issyk-Kul, Kyrgyzstan *Acknowledgment: t*he authors are very grateful to Napil Bazylkhan for the translation and interpretation of the inscriptions and thank Boris Zheleznyakov and Alexei Rogozhinskiy for their help for this paper.

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ТРИ НОВЫХ ТИБЕТСКИХ НАДПИСИ И ОЙРАТО-ДЖУНГАРСКОЕ НАСКАЛЬНОЕ ИСКУССТВО В АЛА-БЕЛЕ И ИХ РЕГИОНАЛЬНЫЙ КОНТЕКСТ. КЫРГЫЗСТАН

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azamatasein@gmail.com *Автор, ответственный за переписку **Резюме.** На недавно обследованном памятнике, расположенном на юго-западном берегу озера Иссык-Куль в горном районе Ала-Бель, были обнаружены три тибетские надписи, выполненные в технике граффити, небольших размеров. Кроме того, эти надписи были связаны с петроглифами того же периода. В этой статье мы представляем первые результаты проведенных исследований памятника Ала-Бель, три новые буддийские надписи и связанные с ними петроглифы. Эти надписи представляют собой ритуальную молитвенную формулу «от mani padme hum», выполненную в тибетском алфавите, и могут быть датированы ойратско-джунгарском периодом. Кроме того, мы интерпретируем эти надписи в региональном контексте ойрат-джунгарских надписей в Кыргызстане.

Ключевые слова: наскальное искусство, тибетские надписи, ойраты-джунгары, история буддизма, Иссык-Куль, Кыргызстан

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ntroduction: Location and Research History of Ala-Bel

Ala-Bel is a mountainous massif in the Issyk-Kul oblast of Kyrgyzstan (fig. 1.-1). This region is located 7500 m south-west of the Issyk-Kul Lake and 18 km south of the town of Balyktchy. The rock art region of Kara-Too in the Kochkor oblast is located only 18 km southwest of Ala-Bel (Hermann, 2019).

Ala-Bel has a surface of ca 42 km² and the highest point culminates at 2051 m. This region is parted in numerous valleys which are dry in summer (fig. 1.-2).

The central part of Ala-Bel was partially prospected by K. Sh. Tabaldiev who discovered two runic inscriptions (Tabaldiev, Belek, 2008, p. 93; Tabaldiev, 2011, p. 92–93). He called the valley with these inscriptions Chiyim-Tash, even if the inscriptions are inventoried under the name of Ak-Olon, a small village located six kilometres north of Ala-Bel (Alimov, 2013, p. 155–159). It should be noted that another site called Chiyim-Tash is located in the Talas oblast (Hermann, 2018).

In August 2022 we systematically prospected the two first valleys in the western part of this region. Although there are many patinated rocks with large surfaces of very good quality, there are almost no petroglyphs engraved on them. The slopes are very steep and the access to the top is difficult, what probably explain that most of the rocks were not engraved.

The few petroglyphs we found were located between 1690 and 1830 m a. s. l. at the entrance of the valleys and sometimes on the crests between secondary valleys. The main concentrations of rock art are on small hills at the foot of the cliffs at a height of ca 1740 m. We found no petroglyph inside the valleys.

Methodology

The study of a rock art site employs a comprehensive approach in which the whole site is prospected in order to document all engravings, to fix them in their landscape through GPS points or a general map done by tachymeter, to fix their orientation and dimensions through pictures with a scale, but also by documenting other archaeological monuments of the site,

such as settlements or graves in order to analyze the images in their contextual reality and in their relations with each other.

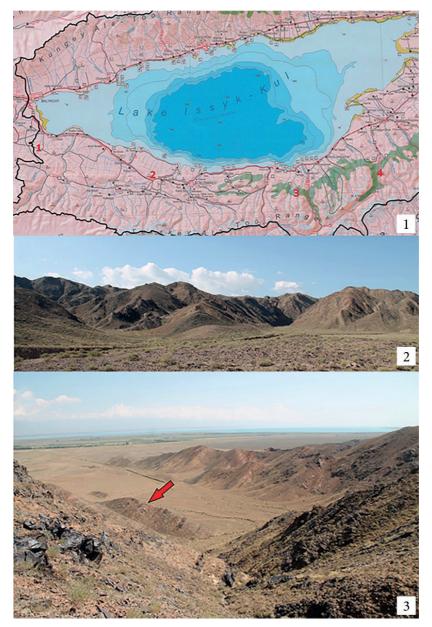


Fig. 1. 1 — Location map of the Tibetan inscriptions in the Issyk-Kul oblast, Kyrgyzstan (1 — Ala-Bel; 2 — Kesken-Bel; 3 — Tamga; 4 — Dzhuuku); 2 — View of the prospected valleys in Ala-Bel; 3 — Location of the hill with the Tibetan inscriptions in Ala-Bel

Рис. 1. 1 — Карта расположения тибетских надписей в Иссык-Кульской области, Кыргызстан (1 — Ала-Бел; 2 — Кескен-Бел; 3 — Тамга; 4 — Джууку); 2 — Вид на разведанные долины в Ала-Бел; 3 — Местоположение холма с тибетскими надписями в Ала-Бел

Furthermore, rock art should be analyzed through its stylistic features in order to see the development of the rock art site, but also to understand to which period each engraving belongs. The chronological attribution of petroglyphs is based on a stylistic chronology of the rock art of Central Asia as established by many Russian and Kazakh archaeologists (Baipakov et al., 2005; Beisenov, Maryashev, 2014; Kasanov, Kan, Rogozhinskii, 2017; Rogozhinsky, 2011; Samashev, 2012; Shvets, 2012; among others).

Results

Rock Art in Ala-Bel

In the documented valleys, we only found 54 engraved rocks with 272 petroglyphs. 13 of them could be attributed to the Bronze Age; 34 to the Iron Age and 151 to the Turkic times. Furthermore, there are 40 drawings from the 19th–20th centuries, whereas 16 engravings could not be attributed to a chronological epoch.

18 petroglyphs near each other on a small hill at a height between 1730 and 1740 m present the same patina and are done in the same technic, viz. are superficially engraved, and composed with few lines (fig. 1.-3). They have small dimensions (ca 4–5 cm) and are difficult to see. Among them, there are three Tibetan inscriptions (figs. 2; 3; 4). For this reason, these 18 engravings are attributed to the Oirat-Jungarian period: nine are depictions of animals, among them seven caprids and two undetermined (fig. 5.-1), whereas four are undetermined signs. Two of these signs are very peculiar: one seems to be a stylised mask or human face (fig. 5.-2), and the second looks like a flag (fig. 5.-4). Furthermore, there are two schematic anthropomorphs of small dimensions (ca 10×10 cm) (fig. 5.-3).



Fig. 2. Tibetan inscription No. 1 in Ala-Bel Puc. 2. Тибетская надпись № 1 в Ала-Бел



Fig. 3. Tibetan inscription No. 2 in Ala-Bel Puc. 3. Тибетская надпись № 2 в Ала-Бел





Fig. 4. Tibetan inscription No. 3 in Ala-Bel Puc. 4. Тибетская надпись № 3 в Ала-Бел

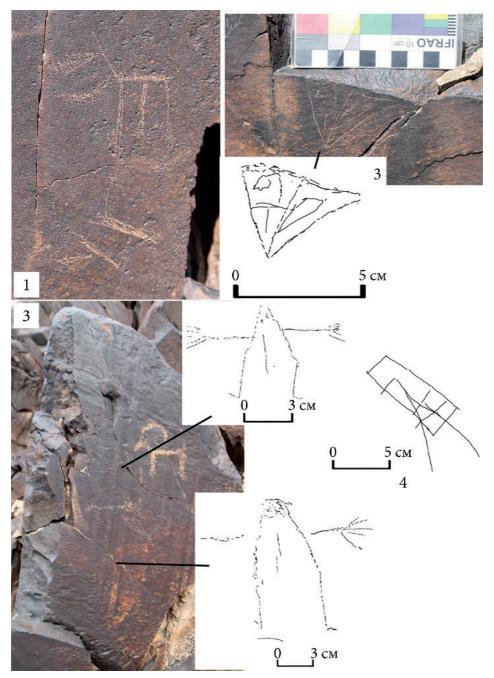


Fig. 5. Oirat-Jungar petroglyphs in Ala-Bel Puc. 5. Ойрат-джунгарские петроглифы в Ала-Бел

Such engravings are until now not known at other places with Tibetan inscriptions in Kyrgyzstan.

Tibetan Inscriptions of Ala-Bel

The three Tibetan inscriptions were found on two different rocks and are written in the Tibetan alphabet:

Inscription No. 1 (fig. 2): it is on a rock with many depictions of goats, probably from the Turkic times. The Tibetan inscription is engraved in the upper part of the panel. This inscription is very small and only measures $8\times11,5$ cm. This panel is south oriented. The ritual formula "Om mani padme hum" is engraved but limited to the letters for "om mani".

Inscription No. 2 (fig. 3): it is on the second rock in its upper part and oriented to the east. It measures 9×10 cm. The ritual formula "om mani padme hum" is completely engraved.

Inscription No. 3 (fig. 4): it is on the lower part of the second rock. This inscription is very difficult to see because its dimensions are only of 2×3 cm. It is also oriented to the east. It is the same prayer formula but limited to "om hum".

Discussion: Tibetan Inscriptions of Ala-Bel and Their Regional Context

Tibetan inscriptions are already known on the southern shore of the Issyk-Kul Lake. Usually, they show similar features, as observed in the valleys of Dzhuuku and Tamga, and at the foot of the Kyzyl-Too mountains by the Kesken-Bel pass near Ak-Say (fig. 1.-1):

- 1. At Dzhuuku, three rocks of very large dimensions and a fourth smaller rock (circa 20×50 cm) with inscriptions were discovered. On one of the rocks the four horizontal lines of inscriptions are very difficult to see, also due to the fact that some modern graffiti cover them. Each letter has a length of circa 10 cm. The whole inscriptions have a length of 1.5 m and are 90 cm high (Uhlemann, 2003, p. 45; Tabaldiev, Belek, 2008, p. 120). This site is sometimes called Darkhan. The small rock is nowadays in the museum of Dzhety-Oguz. The ritual formula "om mani padme hum" was engraved, as well as other Tibetan inscriptions, not translated until now.
- 2. At Tamga-Tash, six kilometres south of the village of Tamga, there are five rocks with the formula "om mani padme hum". On one rock, only "om" was engraved. These five inscriptions are engraved as a relief and are clearly visible (Uhlemann, 2003, p. 45–46). This site is still frequented by Buddhists.
- 3. By the Kesken-Bel pass in the Tong district of Issyk-Kul, the formula "Om mani padme hum" was engraved at least eight times with a length of 25–30 cm, but there are also four other inscriptions, not translated until now (Uhlemann, 2003, p. 57; Tabaldiev, Belek, 2008, p. 123–124) (fig. 6.-*1*–2).
- 4. At Ala-Bash in the Tong district of Issyk-Kul, there are two rocks, each with two inscriptions ("Om mani padme hum"). Each letter has a length of circa 10 cm (Tabaldiev, Belek, 2008, p. 121–122).
- 5. Near the village of Ak-Olen (or Ak-Olon), six different stones with the formula "Om mani padme hum" were found and are nowadays in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg (Tabaldiev, Belek, 2008, p. 119). It is not clear exactly where these stones were found in Ak-Olen, but they could come from Ala-Bel, because the village of Ak-Olen is located six kilometres north of Ala-Bel. Both runic inscriptions of Ala-Bel are also inventoried under the name "Ak-Olon".

Fig. 6. Tibetan inscriptions: 1–2 — Kesken-Bel; 4 — Issyk-Ata; 3 — depiction of Buddha in Issyk-Ata Рис. 6. Тибетские надписи: 1–2 — Кескен-Бел; 4 — Иссык-Ата; 3 — изображение Будды в Иссык-Ате

Furthermore, there are three Tibetan inscriptions associated with a depiction of a Buddha at Issyk-Ata, 45 km south-east of Bishkek (Plumtree, 2018, p. 344). One of these inscriptions and the Buddha are partially covered with a modern gold colour, as if this rock is still worshipped (fig. 6.-3–4).

Altogether, at least 33 Tibetan inscriptions are known in the Issyk-Kul oblast, all on the southern shore of the lake. Among them, 29 are the ritual formula "Om mani padme hum". Three other inscriptions are known in Kyrgyzstan south-east of Bishkek in Issyk-Ata. As common features of the 33 previously recorded inscriptions before the discovery of Ala-Bel, they have big dimensions (more than 20 cm) and were deeply pecked in the rock, giving a kind of relief or becoming a relief in Tamga-Tash.

The Tibetan inscriptions of Ala-Bel are 55 km west of Kesken-Bel, 100 km south-east of Issyk-Ata, 114 km north-west of Tamga and 130 km north-west of Dzhuuku. Contrarily to the other inscriptions of the Issyk-Kul area, the inscriptions in Ala-Bel are made as a kind of graffiti, superficially engraved and of very small dimensions. Other engravings of anthropomorphs and caprids were made in the same style and technic, but there is no depiction of Buddha.

We observe some differences between the inscriptions from Ala-Bel and from the other sites:

1. In Ala-Bel, the inscriptions are almost not visible, whereas at the other sites the inscriptions are well visible from far away. This is the result of the differences in their technic and di-

mensions. Very small inscriptions engraved by very thin lines in Ala-Bel and inscriptions fully pecked and of big dimensions at the other sites.

- 2. In Ala-Bel, other engravings were done in the same technique and with approximately the same dimensions. They have the same patina and are more probably contemporary of the inscriptions. At the other sites, such engravings were not found, but further prospections could perhaps reveal some.
- 3. In Ala-Bel, the inscriptions were executed at the foot of the hill. In Kesken-Bel, they are located on the top of the hill, what increased their visibility. At the other sites, they were mostly done on big rocks, well visible in the landscape, sometimes at the top of a slope.
- 4. In Issyk-Ata, the inscriptions are associated with a depiction of Buddha, what is also known in Kazakhstan in Tamgaly-Tas (Rogozhinsky, 2010). Other depictions of Buddhas are not known in Kyrgyzstan.

Conclusion

The region of Ala-Bel is important for the comprehension of the Oirat-Jungar (or Kalmuk) rock art, not only because three new Tibetan inscriptions were found there, but also because they are associated with some petroglyphs such as animals, anthropomorphs and signs. Furthermore, the inscriptions are very different than the other ones already known in Kyrgyzstan: they were done as very small graffiti and not engraved as relief clearly visible. Contrarily to Tamga, Dzhuuku, Kesken-Bel or Issyk-Ata, Ala-Bel seems not to have been a cultic place. The inscriptions have little visibility: does it mean that these inscriptions were done later and that the Buddhist who did them should hide his religion? This interpretation is very weak, firstly because the Oirat tribes leave the region when the Kyrgyz tribes occupied it since 1758–1759, meaning that all inscriptions were made between 1680 and 1758. Secondly, why would it be necessary to hide Tibetan inscriptions, when at the same time the other inscriptions which are well visible on the southern shore of Issyk-Kul were not destroyed by the Kyrgyz, and are still a cultic place like Tamga-Tash and in Issyk-Ata with the depiction of Buddha covered with gold? Another explanation would be that a shepherd learned to write the prayer formula and transformed that place as his own altar or cultic place when he was away with his flock. However, the discovery of six other stones with inscriptions near the village of Ak-Olen in the past raises other questions: were these rocks found together or in different places near Ak-Olen? Were these rocks found in the same place (or near it) that the newly discovered ritual formulas of Ala-Bel? Without any further information about the previously discovered Tibetan inscriptions, it is difficult to establish a relation with the newly found inscriptions. Only new research in the massif of Ala-Bel could bring some enlightenment about it.

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