

Dogs on a leash in rock art from Saimaluu-Tash in Kyrgyzstan

Introduction

Saimaluu-Tash is located in the center of Kyrgyzstan, circa 40 km south of Kazarman, on the eastern slope of the Fergana range. The main site (called Saimaluu-Tash 1, fig.1) is situated at 3,100m a. s. l. and has been documented in the past 30 years, even if there is no whole publication on it (Martynov *et alii* 1992; Tashbaeva *et alii* 2001). A second site (Saimaluu-Tash 2) is located northeast of the main site at an altitude of 3,300m (Fig.2). This site was almost never documented nor published.

In our prospections between 2013 and 2017, 2,320 engraved rocks were documented in Saimaluu-Tash 1 and 1,550 in Saimaluu-Tash 2. The petroglyphs are mainly dated from the Bronze Age, but many are also from the Iron Age and from the Turkic medieval time.

Both sites are important for the study of rock art in Central Asia, not only due to the large amount of drawings, but also for the diversity of the iconography as well as for the fact that some drawings which are

very rare at other sites were frequently found in Saimaluu-Tash, such as ploughs and the so-called sunhead-deities. During our research, we found some panels with anthropomorphs keeping a dog on a leash. Although we documented 13 sites in the provinces of Almaty and Zhambyl in Southeastern Kazakhstan and 24 sites in Kyrgyzstan, we only found this kind of petroglyph in Saimaluu-Tash.

Brief overview of the wolf domestication and of the dog's symbolism in Central Asia

Wolf (*canis lupus*) was certainly the first domesticated animal. Its domestication probably occurred around 17,000-15,000 BP in Europe (Larson *et al.* 2012) and around 12,000 BP in the Near East (Dayan 1994). However, the exact chronology and place in Eurasia of the wolf domestication remains uncertain because the morphological criteria of early domesticated dogs (*canis lupus familiaris*) are controversial. With the genomic sequencing, new theo-

Fig.1: View of Saimaluu-Tash 1



Fig.2: View of Saimaluu-Tash 2



ries regularly appear, as for example that the origin of domesticated dogs would be in Central Asia (Shannon *et alii* 2015), but such theories are also put into question by a revision of the same data (Wang *et alii* 2016). In any case, the wolf domestication occurred in Eurasia at the end of the Upper Paleolithic.

The dog became a symbolic animal since the Neolithic. In the Natufian of Israel, a dog was found beneath the upraised hands of a buried woman (Snyder & Moore 2006: VIII). In a number of Indo-European cultures, the dog is associated with the Underworld, as for example Cerberus in the Greek mythology or Anubis in the ancient Egyptian religion. Due to this association with the Death world, dogs were considered as impure in Greece and Italy and their sacrifice became cathartic (De Grossi Mazzorin & Minniti 2006: 63). Their regular presence in Greek and Roman necropolae could also be considered as an act of accompanying the deceased in the journey to the Underworld (De Grossi Mazzorin & Minniti 2006: 64).

In Central Asia, dogs' burials were found at Botai in North Kazakhstan and dated from the Eneolithic (5,650-5,050 BP, after Olsen, 2000). Dogs' sacrifices were common in the Fergana Valley (South Kyrgyzstan and East Uzbekistan) before the Islam (Bernshtam 1997: 407). Furthermore, dogs were associated with shamans in Altai (Shvets 2012: 153).

In rock art from Central Asia, wolves and dogs are difficult to differentiate.

Fig.3: Hunting scene with two canids and a caprid, Iron Age, Saimaluu-Tash 1, 26x34 cm



Some archaeologists interpret a curved tail as an identification feature for dogs (Bernshtam 1997: 407; Shvets 2012: 152). We categorically reject this interpretation. Among felines, snow leopards also have a curved tail. Furthermore, if dogs have a curved tail, it doesn't mean that a canid without this kind of tail is automatically a wolf. Actually, dogs and wolves can only be differentiated by the general context of the scene. However, we constate that even in hunting scenes, it is often unclear if the canids are dogs attacking the hunted animals or wolves preying on them in concurrence to the hunters (Fig.3).

In Southeastern Kazakhstan and in Kyrgyzstan, canids are statistically the second most depicted animals in rock art from the Bronze and the Iron Ages, even if there are sometimes some regional differences (Hermann 2017: 232). During the Bronze Age, canids usually constitute around 25% of the bestiary behind caprids (25 to 50 %) and sometimes behind bulls (usually 5 to 10 %, but 25 to 30% at some sites in Kazakhstan). During the Iron Age, canids represent 5 to 10 % of the depicted animals behind caprids (65 to 85%).

Depictions of dogs on a leash

11 panels were documented with the thematic of dogs on a leash in Saimaluu-Tash, viz. five panels in Saimaluu-Tash 1 and six panels in Saimaluu-Tash 2. These panels are described here below with their inventory number (following our own documentation). Some of these panels at both sites are very near to each other, but their styles and themes differ from each other, so that it is obvious that these depictions were not done by the same artists and that they are also not copies of each other. Each panel has its own structure, features and characteristics, so that they should have their own message and were not the repetition of a common motif.

In Saimaluu-Tash 1

Panel 56 (Fig.4): an anthropomorph with upraised arms keeps a dog on the lead. Both are behind a deer. Two lines are on



Fig. 4: Panel 56 (detail), Bronze Age, Saimaluu-Tash 1, 27x33 cm



Fig. 5: Panel 82 (detail), Bronze Age, Saimaluu-Tash 1, 17x10 cm

the left of this scene. Due to the style, this panel is dated from the Bronze Age.

Panel 82 (Fig.5): a man, identifiable with his phallus, keeps with one hand a dog on the leash, whereas he has a curved stick in the other hand. The man has two lines going down from his head and figuring his hair, as well as a line depicting a tail as part of his clothes. Man and dog are above a horse. In front of them, there are two other canids and a wild boar. Other drawings are on the same panel, but some of them are in a different style and technique (three caprids and a bull). Probably from the same hand are a man leading a plough, two canids preying a deer, and a canid attacking a caprid. The curved stick in the hand of the man with the dog

is similar to another depiction from the same site (Hermann 2020) and looks like a crosier-shaped staff used by Central Asian dervishes (Rozwadowski 2004: 72). Due to this stick and to the clothes with a tail, the drawing probably depicts a shaman. Stylistically, this panel is from the Bronze Age, and could be attributed to the Seima-Turbino tradition due to a similar stick on a rock engraving in Arpa-Uzen (Rogozhinskii 2011: 92).

Panel 119 (Fig.6): an anthropomorph has two lashes going to a canid. In this case, it is not clear if the dog is on the leash or if it is whipped by the human. This scene is on the left side on the rock. In the middle and on the right, there are three caprids (one of them with a canid behind it), two



bulls, a horse, as well as an anthropomorph leading a plough with a bull and a horse, and perhaps an axe. The drawings are from the Bronze Age, but there are other engravings on this panel which are stylistically from the Iron Age (canids behind the Bronze Age caprids, two other caprids and an anthropomorph).

Panel 1345 (Fig.7): an anthropomorph



Fig.7: Panel 1345, Bronze Age, Saimaluu-Tash 1, 47x29 cm

keeps a dog on a leash. They are behind another animal which is much smaller than a canid, and above another animal,

Fig.8: Panel 1367, Bronze Age, Saimaluu-Tash 1, 81x73 cm



probably a fox due to its tail. This panel is from the Bronze Age.

Panel 1367 (Fig.8): an anthropomorph with an upraised arm keeps a dog on a leash with its other hand and has clothes with a tail. The dog is behind a horse. It seems that the dog is jumping and barking. Another animal, probably a horse, is unfinished and there are two lines on the right of the scene. These drawings are from the Bronze Age, but a canid was added in the Iron Age or in the Turkic medieval epoch.

In Saimaluu-Tash 2

Panel 352 (Fig.9): on a rock with many lines, a small scene on the left shows an anthropomorph with an upraised arm and keeping a dog on a leash with the other hand. Under them, there are two canids. One of them seems to



Fig. 9: Panel 352 (detail), Bronze Age, Saimaluu-Tash 2

Fig. 10: Panel 356, Bronze and Iron Ages, Saimaluu-Tash 2, 36x30 cm



attack another anthropomorph who holds probably a bow in a hand. This panel is from the Bronze Age.

Panel 356 (Fig.10): an anthropomorph and a dog were added in the Iron Age above a canid behind a caprid from the Bronze Age. It is probable that the anthropomorph is putting its dog on a leash.

Panel 462 (Fig.11): a man with a phallus holds a bow in one hand and keeps a dog on a leash with the other hand. The animal is directly behind two deer. This scene is from the Bronze Age.

Panel 635 (Fig.12): this panel, from the Bronze Age, depicts on the left a man leading a plough with two animals, as well as a caprid on the right. In between, an unclear anthropomorph is above a scene with another anthropomorph keeping four animals on a leash. Three other animals are between the plough and the



Fig. 11: Panel 462, Bronze Age, Saimaluu-Tash 2, 62x42 cm

Fig. 12: Panel 635, Bronze Age, Saimaluu-Tash 2, 70x38 cm



animal kept on a leash. The three “free” animals, both animals pulling the plough and the four animals on a leash are similar. Due to the fact that they are pulling a plough, it would be easy to identify them as horses. However, their proportions with the plough and the anthropomorphs, their general morphology, their tails, ears and heads, identify them as dogs. It seems surprising that dogs could pull a plough,

Fig. 13: Panel 805 (detail), Bronze Age, Saimaluu-Tash 2, 13x12 cm



a Greek skyphos from the 6th century BC depicts a similar scene with a dog pulling a plough (Kampmann-Platt 1939). Furthermore, on the panel 805 at the same site a plough is also pulled by two animals that we identify as dogs (**Fig.13**) and which largely differs from horses' depictions.

Panel 743 (Fig.14): lines, caprids and canids were added in a posterior phase of the Bronze Age on a panel with two caprids from an earlier phase of the Bronze Age. Among the added drawings, there is an anthropomorph keeping a dog on a leash above both caprids from the earlier phase.

Panel 1220 (Fig.15): an anthropomorph with an animal-head (canid?) keeps a dog on the leash. This drawing is from the Bronze Age. Wheels, lines, and three goats are on the same panel. They are also from the Bronze Age, but in a different style and technique.

Common features and interpretation

Even if there are only 11 panels in our inventory, common features can be observed for some of them:

1. Ten panels are from the Bronze Age, and only one from the Iron Age (panel 356 in Saimaluu-Tash 2). However, this last one does not directly depict a dog on a leash, but shows the human putting the dog on a leash.

2. Dogs on a leash seem to be associated with shamans in a couple of cases: anthropomorphs with animal clothes (due

to the tail) and/or holding a staff can possibly be interpreted as shamans (panels 82 and 1367 in Saimaluu-Tash 1). Furthermore, an anthropomorph with an animal-head is probably a depiction of a shaman (panel 1220 in Saimaluu-Tash 2).

3. On three panels (56 and 1367 in Saimaluu-Tash 1, and 352 in Saimaluu-Tash 2), the anthropomorph has at least one upraised arm like a worshipper, but it is unclear what he worships. There is no sunhead-deity near these panels nor a peculiar animal (except for a deer on panel 56). Are these upraised arms worshipping the dogs on the lead?

4. Although caprids are the main depicted species in Bronze Age rock art from Kyrgyzstan (25 to 50 % of the animals), dogs on a leash are directly associated with them on only four panels (82 and 119 in Saimaluu-Tash 1, 356 and 743 in Saimaluu-Tash 2), and indirectly on a fifth panel (1220 in Saimaluu-Tash 2).

5. Engravings of deer are quite scarce in Bronze Age rock art from Kyrgyzstan. They only represent 2 or 3 % of the animals' depictions (Hermann 2017: 232). For this reason, it is almost surprising to see that two scenes with a dog on a leash are directly associated with deer (panels 56 in Saimaluu-Tash 1 and panel 462 in Saimaluu-Tash 2), and there are also two canids preying on a deer on a third one (panel 82 in Saimaluu-Tash 1).

6. Dogs on a leash and ploughs are on the same panel in three cases (82 and 119 in Saimaluu-Tash 1, 635 in Saimaluu-Tash

Fig.14: Panel 743 (detail), Bronze Age, Saimaluu-Tash 2



Fig.15: Panel 1220, Bronze Age, Saimaluu-Tash 2, 18x15 cm



2). However, we do not observe a direct association between these elements. Their relation on the same panel remains unclear. Perhaps both should symbolize the domestication of nature? In two other cases, it seems that dogs are pulling a plough. Usually, ploughs are pulled by bulls or horses, but dogs were also probably used to that purpose as seen on a Greek skyphos. In these cases, the depictions of dogs pulling ploughs should not be symbolic but realistic.

Comparisons with other Central Asian sites

We didn't find nor know similar depictions of dogs on a leash at other sites from Kyrgyzstan. In Southeastern Kazakhstan, only one depiction (probably from the Iron Age) is known in Sauyskandyk (Samashev et al. 2014: 236): an anthropomorph with a stick keeps a dog on a leash. Behind them, there is another anthropomorph with raised arms.

Furthermore, ploughs are also very scarce or completely absent at other sites from this region, so that we also do not know dogs pulling ploughs elsewhere. However, it is probable that the animals tied to a plough were automatically interpreted as horses, because this is what archaeologists expect to find. For this reason, a new analysis of ploughs should be

undertaken to see if they were pulled by horses or by dogs.

In Akkainar in Kazakhstan (Hermann 2015), a depiction of the Early Iron Age shows an anthropomorph on a cart pulled by two dogs (**Fig.16**). The human is whipping the canids and his clothes have a tail. We also do not know any similar engraving, but the tradition of dogcart for carrying milk was still in use in Belgium until the 1950s' and the use of dogs for sleds still exists in Scandinavia and Canada.

Conclusions

Even if there are only 11 depictions of dogs on a leash, some characteristics can be observed in a few cases: these dogs possibly accompany shamans and are sometimes associated with deer and ploughs. However, due to the scarcity of these engravings, it is difficult to draw conclusions, but they should have a meaning by their frequency in Saimaluu-Tash. In any case, they shed a new light on the relation between human and canids in the Bronze Age.

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*Fig. 16: Iron Age, Akkainar
(Kazakhstan), 29x17 cm*

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