

KAZAKHSTAN

The Petroglyph Site of Tamgaly-Tas

The petroglyph (rock engravings) site of Tamgaly-Tas is located 25 km north of Lake Kapchigai, along the cliffs of a gorge on the right bank of the Ili river in an arid landscape. It consists of three main engraved rocks supporting five images of Tantric deities of the Buddhist Lamaist pantheon, and few inscriptions in Tibetan, Mongol-Djungar and Manchu scripts. Some images and inscriptions are engraved within an area of 50 m x 50 m on the southern and south-east surface of some of the largest rocks. Three main stone blocks, 30 m from each other, are covered by large-size images of Buddhist deities and inscriptions in Tibetan, Mongol-Djungar and Manchu. Also a few other rock surfaces in the immediate surroundings have some inscriptions. All the images can be recognised by their attributes as Tantric deities belonging to the Buddhist Lamaist pantheon:

- 3 Buddhas (fully enlightened beings): 1 historical Buddha (Sakyamuni) and 2 self-born transcendental Buddhas (Akshobya and Man-la),
- 1 Bodhisattva (re-embodied ancient Buddha or helpful future Buddha): Chenrezig-Avalokitesvara,
- 1 enlightened patriarch: Nagarjuna.

All the inscriptions, either beneath or near the images, are religious invocations.

The first study and documentation of the Tamgaly-Tas gorge was by the ethnographer Chokan Valikanov who visited the site in 1856 and made some watercolour sketches of the rocks' Buddha images and inscriptions. In 1856 and 1857, the historian Z Semenov visited the site, reporting that the gorge of Tamgaly-Tas was crossed by the main caravan road between Tashkent and Kulja and



Tamgaly-Tas, Buddha images and inscriptions (drawing by Chokan Valikanov, 1856)



View of the area of Tamgaly-Tas with the petroglyph site on the right bank of the Ili river



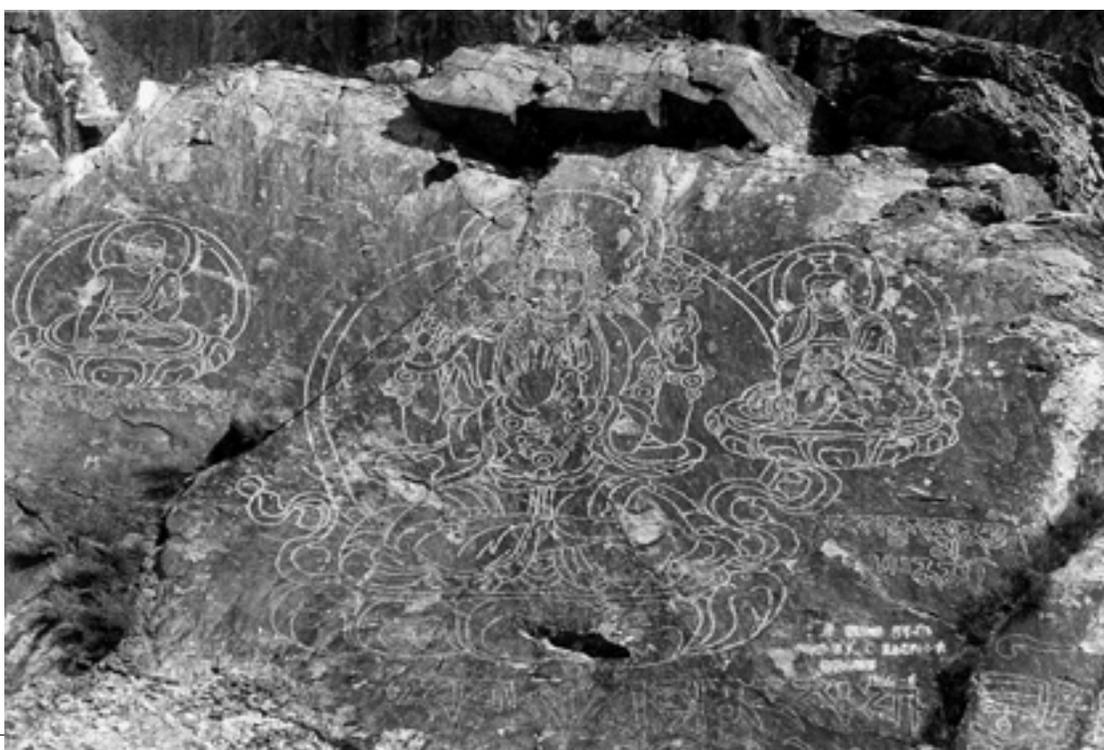
Tamgaly-Tas, stone 1

Semipalatinsk, and making some sketches of the rock engraving (by the painter Pavlov Kosharov). The most complete description and photographic documentation of the site was carried out in only 1897 by orientalist and local historian, H H Pantusov. He presented the material to the academic A A Posdniev who partially translated the Tibetan inscriptions.

During the Soviet period the site was mentioned in many publications on Kazakhstan petroglyphs, but no additional research was carried out. In 1981, the Alma-Ata Regional Council of National Deputies decided to nationally recognise and protect the late medieval petroglyphs of the Tamgaly-Tas gorge (Decision of the Executive Committee of 27 February 1981, No 4–91). However, nothing has been done: the area of the heritage protection zone for the site has not been determined and no interpretation boards about the site's value have been put up. Recent surveys of the site by members of the Laboratory of Geo-Archaeology discovered remains of Neolithic camps, Bronze Age settlements and other rock engravings in the area surrounding the Buddhist monument.

To our knowledge, the stones of Tamgaly-Tas were engraved by the Oirat-Djungar (or Kalmyk) people who were Western Mongol tribes converted to Tibetan Lamaist Tantric Buddhism in the 16th century. Under the rule of Galdan, they built the new and last of the steppe empires in conflict with the Manchu, Russian and Kazakh powers. During the early 18th century, the Djungar conquered East Semirechie and moved their headquarter from Semipalatinsk to Kulja. It was at that time that Tamgaly-Tas was built (1705–1710?). The Oirat-Djungar were defeated by the Russian, Kazakh and Chinese armies several times, the final defeat being in 1755–1758 in Djungaria resulting in their massacre and deportation.

The Tamgaly-Tas petroglyph site, built on an important river crossing of the Silk Road, shows all the characteristics of a temple. On one side its construction follows the general many-millennia long tradition of rock engravings always signifying places endowed with spiritual powers and ceremonial functions. On the other side, it follows the specific Buddhist tradition of open-air ritual sites, of which parallels can be found in the Himalayas, Zanskar, Tibet, Pamir, Tienshan (Issyk-Ata in Kyrgyzstan), Mongolia, no doubt quite common among nomadic peoples. The Buddhist



Petroglyphs of Tamgaly-Tas, stone 1

petroglyphs of Tamgaly-Tas represent the most westerly and northerly example of such ritual sites, and, when compared with the traditional Tibetan compositions, show some particular Central Asian traits, because of the presence of the Buddha of Medicine.

In recent decades, easier access to the area and increased visitor numbers were enabled by a road running along the river's right bank in the immediate proximity of the rock art. As a result during weekends and festivities the site is now a destination for picnics, fishing and also rock climbing activities on the steep cliffs a few metres behind the site. In 2003, a caravanserai was constructed on the left bank of the river to shoot a film, a fact that increased the tourist attraction of the area. Due to the natural and artistic beauty of the site, its cultural uniqueness and proximity to Lake Kapchigay and to the town of Almaty, the number of national and international visitors is increasing annually, making Tamgaly-Tas one of the main tourist attractions in Kazakhstan.

When comparing the drawings and photos of the site of the 19th century with its condition up to five years ago, the images and inscriptions are seen to be in quite a satisfactory conservation state. But the present increase of the social use of the site demonstrates on the one hand the site's growing popularity, its prospects as a tourist destination and its importance as cultural heritage. On the other hand, it indicates the beginnings of site pollution, disturbance to its magnificence, and threats to its safety. Over the last four to five years, modern names have been engraved next to most of the old petroglyphs. But the most serious threat of all is that all three groups of figures have been vandalised by throwing stones or deliberately shooting at some symbolic parts of the figures, such as the hands and eyes.

The Laboratory of Geo-Archaeology has developed a detailed work program to protect the Tamgaly-Tas petroglyph site, which will hopefully be put into action soon with NIPI PMK (State Institute for Scientific Research and Planning on Monuments of Material Culture) and the Municipality of the town of Kapchigai.

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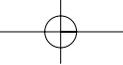
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Tamgaly-Tas, stone 2, detail



Petroglyphs of Tamgaly-Tas, stone 2



Tamgaly-Tas, stone 3

Tamgaly-Tas, Tibetan inscription



Tamgaly-Tas, litter at the foot of the petroglyphs

