Kazakh ethnographic petroglyphs and an Arabic inscription in Eshkiolmes (South-Eastern Kazakhstan)

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**Keywords:** rock art, Kazakhstan, Eshkiolmes, Arabic inscription, Kazakh ethnographic period, literacy in Central Asia

**Abstract:** An Arabic inscription most probably from the 19th century and some Kazakh ethnographic petroglyphs were found in the valley 5 in Eshkiolmes (Almaty region, Kazakhstan). The Arabic inscription consists of 12 characters and does not represent the person who wrote it, but is a description of the landscape or, possibly, the name of a toponym. This inscription is associated with a petroglyph of a zoomorph, raising the question of the relation between the inscription and the depicted animal. Moreover, this inscription, as well as numerous other inscriptions in Arabic in Kazakhstan, as well as in Kyrgyzstan, show that even shepherds could write before the Soviet Union again launched a campaign to eliminate illiteracy. For this reason, the alphabetization of Central Asia before the Soviet period should be questioned. This article also analyzes two other panels with Kazakh ethnographic engravings of this location in order to see the influence of earlier petroglyphs in the Kazakh ethnographic period.

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надпись состоит из 12 знаков и представляет собой не человека, написавшего её, а описание ландшафта или, возможно, название топонима. Эта надпись ассоциируется с петроглифом зооморфа, что поднимает вопрос о связи надписи с изображенным животным. Более того, эта надпись, а также многочисленные другие арабографические надписи в Казахстане, а также в Кыргызстане показывают, что даже представители простого населения умели писать до того, как Советский Союз снова начал кампанию по ликвидации неграмотности. По этой причине следует подвергнуть сомнению алфавитизацию Центральной Азии досоветского периода. В этой статье также анализируются две другие плоскости с казахскими этнографическими гравюрами данного местонахождения, чтобы увидеть влияние более ранних петроглифов в казахский этнографический период.


Introduction (Hermann L., Bazylkhan N.)

Eshkiolmes is a well-known site inscribed since August 2021 by Kazakhstan on the tentative list of the UNESCO for the World Heritage. Due to the large amount of Bronze Age and Old Turkic petroglyphs of great quality, petroglyphs from the Kazakh ethnographic period were almost never published. During a prospection in the valley 5 of Eshkiolmes in summer 2016, new materials from the Kazakh ethnographic period were obtained, among them is an Arabic inscription (fig. 1A)* (*all pictures by Luc Hermann). The Kazakh ethnographic period, as defined by Sala & Deom, covers petroglyphs from the 15th to the 20th century [Sala & Deom 2005: 57]. Another denomination for this period is National Kazakh rock art (народные казахские) but only for engravings from the 19th and early 20th centuries [Рогожинский 2011: 204]. This period was also the topic of a book under the name of Kazakh petroglyphs (казах петроглифы) and is dated by the authors between the 18th and the early 20th century [Самашев, Жетибаев 2005: 119f]. As we see, this period is not well-defined, mostly because archaeologists focus their attention on older engravings, which implies that there are only few papers concerning this topic. Please note that the Kazakh names of the sites are written according to the general transliteration adopted in the publications of these sites.

Location of the site and research history (Hermann L., Bazylkhan N.)

The site is part of the Dzhungar Alatau Mountain Range and is situated in the Almaty region, circa 20–30 km south from the city of Taldykorgan (fig. 1A). The site is an ensemble of more than 20 mountain gorges north of the Koksu River. The site covers circa 470 hectares at an altitude between 700 m and 1000 m above sea level, even if most of the rock art is located on the top of the hills or on their upper slopes.
The first study of the site by A.N. Maryashev and A.E. Rogozhinskiy was published in 1991 [Марьяшев, Рогожинский 1991]. Many drawings of this site were published in 2002 in a general publication on rock art in Semirechye [Марьяшев, Горячев 2002], before a second publication led by K.M. Baipakov and focused on Eshkiolmes was published in 2005 [Байпаков и др. 2005]. Since then, there was no general publication about the site, but new materials from the Old Turkic period were published by A.E. Rogozhinskiy in 2017 [Касанов и др. 2017] and two small papers in order to mention the discovery of some specific petroglyphs, particularly of chariots, were published in the last years [Новоженов, Рогожинский 2019; Hermann 2020]. The topic of chariot in Eshkiolmes is specifically analyzed in some part of the Rock Art Chronicles by V.A. Novozhenov, but this book also offers pictures of some petroglyphs from the Kazakh ethnographic period [Novozhenov 2020: 136]. A comprehensive documentation of the site has not yet been completed. It is estimated that there are circa 10 000 rock carvings [UNESCO 2021].

Presentation of the new materials from the Kazakh ethnographic period (Hermann L., Bazylkhan N.)

1. Arabic inscription with a zoomorph (fig. 1B; 2–3): an Arabic inscription is engraved on a south-oriented rock. This inscription measures 35×9 cm and is constituted by 12 signs. A zoomorphic figure with four legs is engraved directly beneath the inscription, using the same technique of superficial thin lines on the surface of the rock. Due to the lack of horns, it is impossible to determinate it as a caprid (goat). However, it has also no head what prevents to interpret it as a possible horse.

1A. Transliteration: Tasta[r] [Tasta [h?]] Dalasïnd [an?] – Тастар (немесе) Тастак даласында (даласынан?)
Translation: In the steppe field of stones/rocks. A variant would be: In the steppe field of Tastaq (as toponym).

1B. Datation: This is an Arabic inscription in Kazakh language. Since the graphics and language of this inscription are written close to the Kazakh phonology, there is a good reason to say that it belongs to the 19th century. Such inscriptions, also dated from the 19th century, were found at other sites in Kazakhstan [Базылхан и др. 2013; Железняков и др. 2019].

1C. Analysis: This inscription is very peculiar: usually the writer wrote his name (for example in Tamgaly, Akkainar, Kulzhabasy or in the region of Zharkent) or the name of a person who probably passed away short before the inscription (for example in Tamgaly) [Базылхан и др. 2013; Железняков и др. 2019]. Nothing similar here: the engraver did not write his name but a description of the location where he was.
Another possibility is that he wrote the name of a toponym. Furthermore, there could be an interesting link between the zoomorph and the sentence, as if the words «in the steppe field of rocks» would apply to the animal: instead of depicting an animal within a landscape, the artist described the location of the zoomorph. However, if the animal was done before the inscription, it is still possible that the writer wrote this sentence by making a reference to the depicted zoomorph. If the animal was done after it, the same interpretation is possible if the drawer was able to read the Arabic inscription, what is unfortunately impossible to prove. Due to the patina and the engraving technic of the zoomorph and of the sentence, we are almost sure that the animal and the inscription are from the same time and done by the same hand.

2. Two engraved goats (fig. 4): another rock circa 150 m west of the Arabic inscription shows two goats. This panel is facing the south and the goat depictions measure 9×9 cm. The left one seems older than the second one (right) because the right one partially covers the first one. Both depictions were done by engraving and not pecking in the same technic that the Arabic inscription. These goats are however stylistically different from the animal depicted under the inscription. The left goat has two legs and a body shaped by two horizontal lines. Inside the body, there are 10 vertical lines. Its horns make two curves in a half-circle. The goat depicted in the artwork has its head positioned between the horns and a long neck, which leads us to believe that it belongs to the Old Turkic period. This conclusion is drawn through the patina and the engraving technic of the zoomorph.
a comparative analysis with other animals depicted in a similar style [Касанов и др. 2017: 224ff]. The second goat has four legs. Its body is depicted by a single line. It has no neck nor head and its horns are depicted by two broken lines. For this reason, we attribute this goat to the Kazakh ethnographic period, and probably to the late 19th century by stylistic comparison [Самашев, Жетибаев 2005: 70]. On this panel, it seems that the second goat is inspired by the presence of an older caprid. It is relevant to see that the more recent animal was partially engraved on the older petroglyph and not somewhere else on the rock, as if the new goat was a kind of copy of the older one.

3. Two archers and a goat (fig. 5): this panel is oriented to the west and the lower scene with the archer and the goat measures 20×13 cm. On this panel, there is another archer in the upper part of the scene. This anthropomorph is done by engraved lines and its bow is typical for the Old Turkic period [Касанов и др. 2017: 131ff]. The lower scene with the other archer and a goat is made in another technic: the depictions are pecked but the bow of the hunter is engraved. However, this bow is not from the same style than the Turkic one. The same kind of bow is attributed to the Kazakh ethnographic period [Самашев, Жетибаев 2005: 16ff]. For this reason, we attribute the second archer and the goat to the Kazakh ethnographic period without being able to determine a more precise chronology. On this panel, we see again the influence of a former petroglyph for the depiction of a more recent one. The second archer was directly engraved below the

Fig. 3. Eshkiolmes, valley 5. Left part of the inscription (“Dalasïnd[a]”)
3-сур. Ешкіөлмес, 5-алқабы. Мәтіннің сол тұсы (“Даласында”)
Рис. 3. Ешкиолмес, долина 5. Левая часть надписи (“Dalasïnd[a]”)

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the first one. However, the drawer of the Kazakh ethnographic period decided to complete the scene with a goat in order to justify the presence of a bow. If the archer of the Old Turkic period could be interpreted as a hunter or a warrior due to the absence of an animal or of another anthropomorph, the Kazakh ethnographic petroglyphs show in contrary a hunting scene.

Reflection on the Arabic sentence: the question of illiteracy in the Kazakh SSR (Hermann L., Bazylkhan N.)

Analphabetsm was a reality in the first years of the Soviet Union [Werth 1986]. This led the Soviet power to campaigns against illiteracy, also in the Kazakh SSR [Zubeer and Darakhshan 2020: 38]. The results of these alphabetization campaigns were celebrated by the Soviet power, for example in Dziga Vertov’s film Three songs about Lenin (Три песни о Ленине, Moscow, 1934). In this film, the Central Asiatic population is depicted as illiterate due to the oppression of the religion (first song in Vertov’s film: В чёрной тюрьме было лицо моё). According to this film, people went free from religion and had access to education, becoming able to read and write thanks to the instauration of soviet communism in these countries. This idea of the alphabetization of Central Asia thanks to the communism was widespread through such a film. The statistics on literacy rate in Kazakh SSR before 1926 and after 1939 seem to confirm this idea [Zubeer and Darakhshan 2020: 38]. However, there were already schools for the education of some
parts of the Kazakh population at the end of the 19th century under Czars [Zubeer and Darakhshan 2020: 36–37]. After these authors, the local population was educated both in Russian and in Kazakh in order to establish elite for the administration. By considering the numerous Arabic inscriptions in Kazakhstan [Базылхан и др. 2013; Железняков и др. 2019], and also in Kyrgyzstan [Hermann 2018: 13; 2019: 20] done during the 19th century and the early 20th century, a more complex picture of literacy in Central Asia should be sketched: some of these inscriptions in the high mountains or in the steppe, associated with petroglyphs of goats or horses, were engraved by shepherds; they were able to write their name but also some more complex sentences like in Eshkiolmes. This fact raises many questions:
- Why were shepherds able to write during the Czars reign even though they did not belong to the elite?
- What was the role of the Islamic schools for the alphabetization of the nomads before the Sovietization?
- Are the statistics of illiteracy before the Sovietization of Central Asia really accurate?
- What was exactly an illiterate Kazakh during the Soviet Union? Somebody who was not able to write and read or somebody who was not able to write and read Cyrillic? In any case, some shepherds were not illiterate, even if the alphabet they knew was Arabic.
Conclusion (Hermann L., Bazylkhan N.)

The two panels with engravings from the Kazakh ethnographic period presented here show that they were done on rocks with older engravings (from the Old Turkic period) with the same topic (a goat covering another goat and an archer under another archer), as if the former subject was copied in the Kazakh ethnographic period. Further research focused on this later period could bring more information about the influence of former petroglyphs on ones that are more recent and the willingness to copy them.

The Arabic inscription of Eshkiolmes is particularly interesting because it is not the name of a person who wrote it, but a description of a landscape or the name of a toponym. Furthermore, it seems that there is a relation between the depiction of an animal and that inscription, as if the writer used the language to describe the environment of the zoomorph instead of directly depicting a hill or a mountain. This inscription also shows another aspect of the Kazakh society probably in the late 19th century but at least before the Sovietization of the country: a part of the population was able to write in Arabic, and not only its name, but also more complex sentences. And among this part of the population, there were also shepherds. This shows that the alphabetization of Central Asia (at least of Kazakhstan and of Kyrgyzstan) begun before the Sovietization of these countries. For this reason, a differentiated approach for the study of literacy in Central Asia should be undertaken by taking into account the Arabic inscriptions found on rock art sites.

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