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Book Review

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FLYING DEER AND SUN GODS
(PREHISTORIC SOCIETIES IN CENTRAL ASIAN ROCK ART)

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Johannes Reckel, Merle Schatz. Flying Deer and Sun Gods (Prehistoric Societies in Central Asian Rock Art). Nunnerich-Asmus Verlag and Media. 2022. pp. 400.

The scientific study “Flying Deer and Sun Gods (Prehistoric Societies in Central Asian Rock Art)” by Johannes Reckel and Merle Schatz can be considered as the result of the scientific expedition conducted in the territory of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Mongolia. In their book, the authors paid attention to common historical and cultural monuments of these three states. They looked out to the similarities, chronological periods, and typological features of historical monuments. In addition, the authors described common cultural trends in the countries with stone petroglyphs, deer stone, balbal, statue stone, and other monuments.

The first part of the book “The Human in Central Asian Rock Art” is devoted to the structure and purpose of the study. In the chapter “What is Rock Art”, a descriptive explanation of stone inscriptions in the territory of Central Asia as art is given. In this section, the authors focused on stone inscriptions in the countries of Central Asia and gave importance to determining the age of petroglyphs and their chronological division. This chapter continues with the next section “Humans on Petroglyphs - Four Concepts” and focuses on the general classification of rock paintings with petroglyphs, dividing it into several groups. For instance, it was considered according to the image of a person in stone paintings and his body parts. In this regard, the first conclusion gave importance to the hand marks on the stone images of the inhabitants of Central Asia in the Bronze Age. It was concluded that the signs of the hand on the stone arose from the belief of the people of that period to protect themselves from various evils. The authors’ description of the petroglyphs in stone as a whole is considered to be related to the magical concepts of the time. Similarly, the anthropomorphic image of a human figure in stone is given as an attribute of the Bronze Age culture. The uniqueness of these stone stelae indicates that they belong to a particular ethnic and social group. In general, the authors consider the beginning of the appearance of the full body in stone images as a common culture belonging to the Neolithic and Bronze Age. The appearance of human faces or sun-headed gods in the stone paintings defines the spiritual culture of the Bronze Age in the Khairkhan Mountains of Mongolia, and in some regions of Siberia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan is considered as a sign of Shamanism.

The “Rock Arts Images – Animals and Humans” section shows the development of hunting in the early stages of community building, when almost similar rock images of the sun god, camels, birds, horses, and other animals started to appear. The images of sun-headed gods explain the beliefs of early humans. In addition, the beliefs of the human race in this Bronze and early Iron Age can be seen in various petroglyphs and in the horse cult in the mounds in the Mongolian Altai, Arzhan 2, and Tuva. Moreover, BC 3500 years ago, the beginning of horse domestication in the territory of Kazakhstan was also connected with human civilization in Mesopotamia in this book.

The next chapter of the book is called “Rock Art Sites: Mongolia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan” and consists of a description of historical monuments in real stone on the territory of Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and Kyrgyzstan. The monuments from the Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age are considered as a territorially and culturally common value. The authors considered climate change as a reason for the common cultural connection in the Eurasian steppe. For instance, the cold and dry weather in the later Paleolithic period affected the fauna of that time. Only in the Bronze Age period BC 2400 years ago, it can be seen that the Eurasian steppe turned into the present-day steppe region, and the animal world acquired a common character. These long-term climatic changes have also had a significant impact on migration trends of people. In general, common climatic changes did not affect the culture of the indigenous people of the Eurasian steppe. For instance, we can see the appearance of “monster style” in artifacts found in historical monuments and archeological excavations.

However, natural climatic changes, humidification of the air, and resulting migration processes adapted the people to a nomadic life, formed their identity as an ethnic group, and the beginning of the use of a common language. In this regard, the authors proved that each region began to form its own culture through stone paintings found in that region. For instance, they wrote that the appearance of the Scythian “animal style” in this period reflected the common cultural traditions of the Central Asian people. The authors also examined the influence of these cultural changes and the beginning of ethnic and linguistic identity of people on other cultural trends. For example, the Scythian “animal style” was found in monuments in Iran and Pakistan. In the same way, the cultural monuments of the Altai Mountains continue with the cultural trends in Siberia and show similarities in the Andronovo and Afanasievo cultures of the Bronze Age. It shows that the Great Silk Road influenced the formation and development of such cultural ties.

The next section of the book “Local Archaeological Cultures and Styles” was devoted to the description of cultural similarities in the Bronze and Early Iron Age in the countries of Central Asia. For example, it was shown that the monuments of the Afanasievo and Andronovo culture were found in the territory of Southern Siberia and Northern Mongolia, and the monuments of the Andronovo culture were found in the Ural and Altai mountains. In addition, the writers considered the deer stones of Western Mongolia as a separate culture. The encounter of deer stones in Siberia, Kazakhstan, and the Altai region shows the common culture of the period of BC 1400-800 years.

In general, the similarity of historical monuments in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Mongolia was described based on common similarities. It included monu-

ments from the Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age culture and monuments from the Turkic period. For example, mounds and petroglyphs in Mongolia, Siberia, Altai, and Kazakhstan during the Bronze Age are described, and deer stones are considered a common cultural value in later periods. The nomadic people's hunting style is interpreted as a culture common to the countries of Central Asia. In the same way, the encounter of balbal stones and symbols in the Turkic period proved the ethnocultural integrity of the period of the Western Turkic Khaganate through stone paintings such as Sholpan Ata, Saymaly Tas in the Kyrgyz territory; Tamgaly Tas, Kuljabasy in Kazakhstan; monuments in Bayan Ulgii, Kobda (Khovd), Gobi Altai region in Mongolia.

In conclusion, the chronological framework of the given materials covers a very deep and extensive geographical area. Therefore, the book of Schatz and Reckel is unique as an analysis of the common similarities of monuments in mentioned three countries and can be considered as a valuable research for archaeologists, ethno archaeologists, and ethnographers.