



**FIGURE 14.1.** Altaic shamanic drum, the Biysk Local History Museum. Note painted images of camels (among other animals). (Photo: Andrzej Rozwadowski.)

# 14.

## Rock art, shamanism and history:

Implications from a central Asian case study

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During the last two decades of rock art studies, the relationship between rock art and shamanism has been one of the most lively and most frequently discussed issues. Most of this scholarship has discussed shamanistic rock art in the context of art originating in South African, North American or West European Palaeolithic sites (Lewis-Williams 2002b), and has treated shamanism as a universal phenomenon. Such understanding, being in line with the thinking initiated by Mircea Eliade (1972), is based on an assumption that humans have a natural predisposition to transcend the limits of consciousness, and shamanism being one of these contexts, an argument that results from putting this capacity within the framework of an ‘institution’. This phenomenologically oriented interpretation of shamanism overlooked important qualities of Siberian shamanism, sometimes

considered the most classic variety (the word ‘shaman’ itself has its origins in the area).

The neglect of the Asian context in the recent discussions of the prehistory of shamanism had certain ‘natural’ conditioning. Firstly, a major contribution to the considerable theoretical progress in rock art studies observed in recent years was made by English-speaking scholars. The breakthrough work *The Archaeology of Rock-Art* (Chippindale & Taçon 1998) is an explicit example. It does not contain any texts by authors coming from the outside of this circle. For such scholars the ‘natural’ language barrier has for many years efficiently hindered the establishment of rock art discourse between the east and the west. It was only at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the first translations into English of Russian and Asian authors were published (such as Martynov 1991;

Samashev 1993; Tashbayeva and colleagues 2001), which, however, differed considerably from the western patterns with respect to theoretical solutions. There were also pioneering attempts to connect the western and eastern scholarly circles with regard to the issue of Asian shamanistic rock art (Rozwadowski & Koško 2002; Rozwadowski and colleagues 1999). Recent examinations of rock art in northern and central Asia from the perspective of shamanism offer some valuable conclusions with analytical, as well as more general theoretical implications, which have an impact on understanding shamanism.

What differentiates Siberian shamanism from other shamanistic traditions is the different perception of this phenomenon in Asia, in Africa and the 'west'. While in Africa shamanism is a typological notion, defining a ritual character of a given culture, in Siberia it is not merely an anthropological construct, but a living tradition. The word 'shaman' has religious value in Siberia. Therefore, the criticism that the term is used too broadly (Kehoe 2000) is justified to a certain degree, and it also applies to rock art. Emphasising the shamanistic nature of rock art in contexts that vary as much as those of Africa, America or Palaeolithic Europe, even when this is justified by acknowledging its phenomenological character, may, in the long run, give an impression of simplifying the complexity of both non-Asian and Asian cultures. Popular application of this term may also provoke an ethical discussion, since it gives an impression that something very specific is taken away from the culture of Siberian peoples and transferred to other cultural and historical contexts.

Following Eliade's concept of an ecstatic path may also cause oversimplification in understanding the religious life of the peoples of Siberia. A trance, no matter how essential for a shamanistic practice, is not always linked with shamanism. Therefore, attempts to identify trance and vision experience in rock art are vulnerable to criticism when these observations are treated as evidence of shamanism. Lewis-Williams, whose studies embittered the debate on the subject of shamanism in prehistory, is aware that the universal definition of shamanism may cause effacement of differences among various shamanistic traditions and "mask the diversity of social contexts in which they flourished" (Lewis-Williams 2002a: 191). Therefore, after publication of the neuropsychological model

(Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1988), he tried to go beyond mere interpretation of cave iconography and to indicate features of Palaeolithic art other than the images themselves, which might authenticate its shamanistic context, such as the social and topographical contexts of the cave and its internal walls (Lewis-Williams 1997a, 1997b; Clottes & Lewis-Williams 1998).

The dispute over shamanistic rock art is inseparably related to the problem of defining shamanism, or rather to a lack of a commonly accepted definition. It is also problematic to assume that in the near future a consensus shall be reached in the entire scholarly world interested in shamanism. Due to the variety of disciplines participating in the same discourse (ranging from anthropology, through archaeology, psychology, psychiatry, history, religious studies, sociology to linguistics) achievement of a consensus will always be difficult. However, this does not mean consenting to complete arbitrariness. If we accept Mariko Namba Walter's definition according to which shamanism is "a religious belief system in which the shaman is a specialist in the knowledge required to make a connection to the world of spirits in order to bring about benefits for the other members of the community" (Walter 2004: xxii), then even a trance itself ceases to be a necessary condition to define a given cultural context as shamanistic. Undoubtedly, however, everybody agrees that shamanism is a social institution. It is not possible to talk about shamanism with respect to an individual practising a trance to satisfy his or her needs because the social function of shamanism is its key feature. However, to identify such a function in prehistory seems to be particularly difficult. It is easier to formulate evidence that we are dealing with art inspired by visions, but it is much more difficult to prove the social function of such experience.

In view of the above argument, the context of Asia seems to be less complicated, since it does not concern attempts to find traces of an unknown form of shamanism, as is the case of the European Palaeolithic, but quite the contrary – it follows the tradition which has been recognised ethnologically and historically. Although for a long time Siberian shamanism has been a subject of numerous ethnological and religious studies, the problem of its prehistory is touched upon only occasionally (for example Hopál 1992). Too often Soviet studies of the prehistory of shamanism originated from an **evolutionary**

approach that treats it as the most archaic system of beliefs common for all people; therefore its origins should belong to the mysteries of prehistory, and the only attempt that can be made is to describe it at a given stage of its development (Devlet 1998: 195).

Talking about Siberian and Central Asian shamanism is in a way a simplification, since it has many shades, both ethnic and ecological. The very fact that it encompasses such a vast territory seems to be evidence of its antiquity. Shamanism can be found from Ural to Kamchatka – a region of great ethnic diversity. Shamans can be found in each language group of this huge territory: among the Uralic, Turkic, Mongolian, Tungus-Manchu and Paleoasian. The roots of shamanism in all these ethnically diverse groups clearly suggests that shamanism belongs to an ancient cultural heritage in this part of Asia and its origins go back to remote times.

## CENTRAL ASIAN ROCK ART AND CULTURE

The tradition of making rock art in central Asia, which was initiated in prehistoric times, lasted for thousands of years. It was still occurring in the Middle Ages and, to a smaller degree, it has survived to relatively recent times (Rozwadowski 2004). Among the recognised symbolic traditions with which rock art has been associated over the ages, there were official religions, as well as less formalised systems of beliefs. In chronological order, the oldest context was the pastoral Indo-Iranian tradition dating back to 3000 and 2000 years BC, related to the first Aryans or their direct predecessors, who finally settled the north-western parts of India and the Iranian Plateau (Rozwadowski 2003). Another tradition is related to the ‘Early Nomads’, the so-called Sakas from central Asia, who spoke an Iranian-related language and were the first true nomads who mastered horseback riding. At the turn of the era, some of the rock art in the south of central Asia, mainly in the area of the upper Indus River basin, evidenced the expansion of Buddhism, thus becoming a part of the ideological role of the Silk Road. Islam, one of the last great traditions of this area, was not expressed in rock paintings due to its commonly known religious constraints. The expansion of Islam from the south coincided, in general chronological terms, with the

formation of a new Turkic tradition in the north (in the area of the Altai and Sayan mountains), whose symbolism was also reflected in rock art found in the vast areas of central Asia. According to the recognised rock art, a thesis may be formulated that its main creation contexts were the symbolic and belief systems which originated beyond the official (state) religious circles, one of them obviously being shamanism. To emphasise what was said before, shamanism here is not a cultural type, but a local symbolic tradition. If we agree that it is a local tradition, then we have to acknowledge its culture-related specifics and its own history. When we talk about tradition, we obviously assume both continuation and change. Historical studies allow us to suggest that shamanism was practised about 2000 years ago (Potapov 1978). However, this chronology is determined by the accessibility of written sources. It is therefore natural to suspect that **this** shamanism has a much longer history and that it did not appear suddenly 2000 years ago. By acknowledging shamanism as a cultural tradition, it is justified to ask a question about its traces in archaeological sources and particularly in rock art<sup>1</sup>.

## TRACING SHAMANISTIC SYMBOLISM IN ROCK ART

Contrary to some sceptical voices concerning the possibility of identifying shamanism in the rock art of central Asia, in this chapter I conclude that shamanism is a potential semantic context which has not been fully explored. Therefore, the intention of this chapter is not to offer any final solutions or ‘target’ interpretations, but rather to indicate potential interpretative traces.

Ethnographic studies prove the significant coherence of shamanism both on the level of its external image and its symbolism. It allows for a certain modelling. The figure of a shaman should surely be treated as the central constituent of such a model, whose essential quality, or even a necessity, is the ability to cross into a different world, in the transformed shape of an animal. Thus, basic shaman’s attributes – drum, staff and a special dress – symbolise an animal, which, in turn, is a metaphor of movement in the imaginary world of spirits. It is a coherent

configuration of symbols, which can be found in the vast territory of central Asia, and this vast territorial distribution can indirectly be treated as evidence of its ancient character. Searching for the antiquity of shamanism should therefore be conducted not only on the level of recognising objects, but also on the level of symbols, which as such can be older than their different material manifestations.

In the discussion of shamanistic rock art, the majority of writers usually concentrate on prehistoric art. However, it is worthwhile to stress that in central Asia there are numerous examples of recent rock art, clearly reflecting shamanistic tradition. It allows us to make a statement that shamanism, at least in recent years, provided the symbolic context of this art<sup>2</sup>. These 'recent' engravings and rock paintings offer numerous references to ethnographically documented aspects of shamanistic practices and beliefs. It is most evident in the example of shaman's paraphernalia such as drums, staffs or ritual robes (Okladnikova 1988; Martynov 1993; Devlet 2001; Kubarev 2002). Their representations can be found in rock art iconography of various Siberian sites, with the most spectacular examples in the area of southern Siberia, in particular Altai and the Sayan mountains, but also further north, for example in Yakutia (Rozwadowski & Knurenko 2002). There we come across representations of historical drums, as well as elements of the characteristic dress of a shaman. Since a shaman mixed with the world of spirits, when crossing the border of this world, he or she had to change into a disguise. Therefore, on the one hand the ritual robe served as his protection, on the other it was an expression of a shaman's transformation. Since a shaman often mixed with spirits of animals in this other world, he or she appeared there in a similar form. Therefore, apart from a robe, the shaman also had a ritual headdress, often imitating the head of an animal (with antlers being one of the most characteristic attributes).

Shamanistic ceremony was a symbolic journey. Similar to other shamanistic traditions, in Asia it was often symbolised by a bird. By taking the form of a bird, a shaman rose to the higher cosmic levels. A bird became a metaphor of crossing various spheres of reality and of the speed of moving between them. Some shamans' robes represented only birds (Kubarev 2002: 110), others were rich in ornitomorphic 'ornaments' attached to sleeves and the rest of

the robe. These represented the materialised symbols of the shaman's guardian spirits, which in various parts of Siberia were identified with various birds. In southern parts they were frequently eagles, eagle owls or falcons, while in other Siberian shamanistic traditions waterfowl played an important role. Water birds have their peculiar symbolism thanks to their ability to tranverse all spheres of the cosmos (Pavlinkaya 1994). In the most common pattern, the world was divided into three regions: the underworld, the earth and the upper world (and each of these spheres can be divided into sub-spheres). A water bird has a unique ability to visit each of the realms.

The symbolism of dress also translates into the symbolism of the drum, the most easily recognised attribute of a shaman. A drum was not only an instrument, but also a riding object on which a shaman travelled to another world. After a special ceremony of animation (Potapov 1947; Vajnštejn 1996), a drum ceased to be merely an instrument. It became an enlivened object, another entity. It gained a different ontological category. It transformed into an animal, usually into the animal of whose hide the drum membrane was made. Explicit representations of shamanistic drums are present in historic art.

At this point we touch upon an issue raised above, namely that following the history of shamanism cannot be reduced to merely looking for copies of ethnographic shamanism. If we limit ourselves to this most spectacular attribute, then the history of shamanism would turn out to be rather short, at least on the indicated territory. It is difficult to find unambiguous representations of drums in art older than the first millennium AD. There are a few older rock engravings which can be associated with drums, but one cannot be sure whether they are really representations of drums. One example discovered recently (Semenov and colleagues 2000), can be found in the Sayan mountains. The context of the engravings indicates that it is highly probable that they are older than the first millennium AD, probably created in the Bronze Age. It particularly concerns one human figure holding a round object (Semenov and colleagues 2000: Table 31). His torso is covered with protruding elements which might represent the dress. Additionally the figure is presented in an interaction with a moose which makes the shamanistic character of the scene more probable. The form of

the object held by the figure can be associated with a drum. However, it is surprising that an analogous round motif is also found in another place at the same site, this time as an isolated representation, not related to a man. Another interesting composition comes from south-eastern Kazakhstan, where in a scene with camels there is a man holding an object resembling a drum stick in one hand, hitting a round object raised in the other hand (Rozwadowski 2004: Fig. 95). Unfortunately the rock is broken at this point and it is not possible to say what the rest of the composition looked like (if it existed at all). It cannot be excluded that this element associated with a drum is a fragment of a rope to lead an animal. The age of the engraving has not been clearly defined either; it lacks characteristic features to connect it with the art of the 'Early Nomads', either Iranian or later Turkic. It could potentially belong to a more ancient Bronze Age art.

These are a few cases which can be associated with drums, but their identification with drums remains doubtful. Therefore, one should wonder why drums were not represented more frequently if they were important shamanistic symbols. It seems that at least a few answers can be taken into consideration. Either shamanism did not constitute a context for rock art creation, or there was a direct prohibition concerning the representation of the attribute. However, rock art examples from historic times do not confirm such a hypothesis. Another possibility is that shamanism did not exist at that time (however, this seems to be doubtful), or, finally, prehistoric shamanism was not a copy of the historic shamanism and its specific aspects which we know from ethnographic times were not present at an earlier date. This last option seems to be the most probable, compatible with the opinion of certain ethnographers who believe that a drum became an attribute of shamans relatively recently, probably not earlier than in the middle of the first millennium AD (Sagalaev 1984: 9). If so, then we should look for the possible continuity of shamanism on the level of symbols, and not historical attributes (although it cannot be excluded that certain attributes or their variations may be much older).

If we go back to the drum, its symbolic function as a riding animal may turn out to be a useful avenue of thought. Usually a drum was perceived to be a horse on which the shaman travelled to the

other world. This metaphysical journey was often expressed graphically on the drum membrane: a depiction of a human figure standing on a horse was a shaman travelling on the drum (a ritual killing of a horse served a parallel function – the actual sacrifice of a horse transferred the shaman's spirit to the upper world). If we come across images of shaman's attributes in the historic rock art, providing evidence that shamanism was a context for some rock art, then one may suspect that this type of symbolism could also have been expressed. The rock art of the Oglakhty in the Upper Yenisei Valley is an interesting example. It is identified with the recent works of the Khakass (dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries). Explicit representations of shamans among the images indicate that shamanism could be a symbolic context of at least some of this art. These are the arguments of Kyzlasov and Leontev (1980) who interpret human figures standing on horses as a graphic expression of a spiritual journey on an animal, which would be a horse according to the shamanistic symbolism. Gala Argent (2005) is also inclined to see the symbolism in much older art, dating back to the Bronze Age. She indicates similar compositions where human figures are standing on horses, contrary to images of horse riders. Further, Argent points to the fact that there are isolated images of horses in the Bronze Age art, whose representation only slightly resembles an intention to show the animal realistically. Some horses are shown upside down, others look as if they are stopped in movement, not horizontally, but as if they are they were caught in the moment of rising up into the air. The punctured lines protruding from the mouths of some of them are quite intriguing, since this feature can be associated with a graphic attempt to express death (fleeing 'spirit' – since, according to ethnography, a spirit fled from a ritually killed horse, and the journeying spirit of a shaman was associated with it). Undoubtedly, it is one of the interpretative traces whose importance is supported with symbolism known ethnographically.

A drum was identified not only with a horse, but also with other animals, such as a deer or a camel. Identification of a drum with a camel can be found in southern Siberia, in the Altai. This should not be surprising if we keep in mind that southern Siberia is a steppe area, an ecological niche creating natural conditions for breeding and the cultural use of

camels. The presence of camels in the area may date back to the Bronze Age; they must have 'arrived' in southern Siberia from the south, across the eastern part of the Asian steppe. The shamanistic symbolism of a camel is also confirmed there, which is quite similar to the symbolism in Altai. In central Asia (Kazakhstan) a shamanistic string instrument known as *kobyz* was identified with a camel. According to the legend, the first *kobyz* was made of a camel's hide. We cannot tell how old this symbolism may be. We know of few rock art representations of the instrument (Zhetybaev 2002), but they do not originate from prehistoric times. It cannot be excluded then that such symbolism might not be very ancient, which probably also concerns the camel symbolism of the Altaic drums. Evidence of the southern origins of such symbolism could be the Tibetan parallels – the ritual Lamaistic drums, considered to be the Pre-Buddhist heritage of Tibet and Mongolia – are also identified there with, amongst other depictions, a camel (Sagalaev 1984: 20).

An informative value can also be found in associating a drum with a deer. Some scholars believe that this may be the oldest animal symbolism of a drum, which later merged with connotations of a horse or a camel. The plane on which such syncretism was possible was the symbolic function of a drum. Similar to a horse or a camel, a deer also played the role of a shaman's riding animal. The argument for the more ancient symbolism of a deer may be the fact that many Siberian peoples frequently refer to a drum as a horse, although they make the drum with the membrane of a deer hide. Potapov suggests that making a drum from a foal's hide may be a recent custom, since some of the elderly claimed that in their times (in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) such a practice was not permitted (Potapov 1947: 178). If we assume such chronological order, deer – horse – camel, then seeing a deer as the oldest symbol of a shamanistic journey could set another interpretative trace. There are engravings in southern Siberia where a human being is standing on a deer, which can be associated with the symbolism of a man travelling on a horse, referred to above. If we also assume that shamanism was present in the culture of the 'Early Nomads' of the first millennium BC, then it cannot be excluded that a deer, which was a key symbol of the nomads, also had shamanistic connotations (see Lymer 1999, 2002).

Following the above traces of evidence, it is also important to stress that the animation ceremony concerned not only the drum, but also the staff (Diakonova 1981). On the symbolic level it was a substitute for a drum, or – chronologically, as some scholars suggest – a drum substituted a staff. There are some who suggest that a staff could belong to the archaic shamanistic attributes which had been used long before drums became popular. Moreover, rock art seems to confirm such logic. I have showed that it is difficult to find images of drums in prehistoric art, while a staff is a frequently depicted feature of human figures associated with at least the Bronze Age. This observation is important since this attribute can be found in scenes which, due to their other features, evoke associations with shamanistic symbolism. If we refer to the engravings mentioned above, it is interesting to observe that a human figure shown as if standing on a deer holds a staff, and has a tail. Although a tail attached to a human being can be interpreted in many ways, its animalistic connotations cannot be ignored in the context of shamanism (Basilov 1984: 96-117). I will refer to this trace later on.

Staffs in rock art are attributes of human figures not only in the south of Siberia, but also in central Asia. An interesting context of such figures can be observed in the Tamgaly Valley in south-east Kazakhstan (Rozwadowski 2001b, 2003, 2004). Some features of the figures are important in the context of this paper. Firstly, they occur in relation to a horse, an animal strongly rooted in the tradition of local shamanism. They have numerous protruding elements on their body and legs, similar to the horse's mane depicted next to the human figure. They could symbolise identification with a horse or simply show a dress comparing a man to a horse. It should be added that on some shamanistic drums (particularly of the Kets), similar motifs of human figures with protrusions on their torsos can be found (Ivanov 1954: Figs 80, 88-90). Similar representations are known in the upper Yenisei River, south Siberia, possibly dating back to the first millennium BC, also in association with a horse (Sher 1994: surface no. 100). Secondly, some of the figures and one horse motif (with a characteristic mane) show a subtle relation to rock crevices, as if it were the cause of their transformation. In the mythology of the peoples of central Asia, there are numerous references to rock crevices

or caves which were perceived as a gateway to the other world, which in turn is often referred to in shamanistic cosmologies. Thirdly, they are also found in compositions with large anthropomorphic figures, whose heads are replaced with oval shaped forms of concentric circles with radiating lines or concentrations of points. The resemblance of the 'heads' to some entoptic images as seen in trance states is significant (Rozwadowski 2001b, 2003). It is also worth adding that in the arrangement of the largest composition with figures of such type, it is possible to observe a compositional similarity with the distribution of motifs on shamans' drums (Rozwadowski 2002a: 969, 2004: 75). It concerns a characteristic motif represented on drums, the central anthropomorphic figure, whose arms are topped with two oval forms (usually symbolising the sun and the moon – as we know from ethnographic studies) and a row of helping spirits shown below. A similar, although not identical, structure can be observed in the engravings discussed above. The compositional similarities between rock art and images on drums was also pointed out by Kyzlasov and Leontev (1980) while interpreting historical engravings of the Khakhas. They stress the analogous motif consisting of rows of schematically presented persons holding hands which has parallels in drawings on shamans' drums in the Altai and Sayan mountains.

Following this trace, we can find more engravings of shamanistic features in central Asia, either due to resemblance to shamanistic paraphernalia (dress, staff), or possible visualisations of trance experiences (Rozwadowski 2001b, 2004: 73-80). As I stressed at the beginning of this chapter, however, even if we are able to acknowledge the identification of trance experience in art, we cannot be sure whether such experience should be associated with shamanism only. An example of the problem in central Asia is the ecstatic context of the Indo-Iranian culture (Rozwadowski 2003). Scholars dealing with Indo-Iranian culture have no doubts that some of the important rituals of the Aryans implied trance experiences. If part of the central Asian rock art of the Bronze Age was created in the cultural context of the Indo-Iranians (which cannot be excluded), then the possible graphic expressions of visionary states in rock art of the period may be a result of such ritual context, which does not have to be referred to *sensu stricto* as

shamanism<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, we cannot expect to find a copy of historic shamanism in prehistoric art. Nevertheless, at least a suggestion concerning recognition of trance experience is also a specific trace, since it may indicate that trance practices were known at the given moment in time, and could stimulate the shaping of certain cultural forms concurrent with shamanism. This art of shamanistic features found in central Asia is mostly associated with the Bronze Age. It is interesting, however, that in the earlier rock art of the area we do not find analogous imagery evoking associations with shamanism. If we acknowledge this path as evidence of the existence of a certain configuration of symbols important at a later date for the tradition of shamanism, then taking into consideration the historical dynamics of central Asia (which I mentioned earlier) may provide an explanation of the situation. The arrival of numerous new systems of beliefs to the area of central Asia as early as in the second millennium BC might have caused a break in the development of shamanistic traditions. Ethnographic studies suggest that practices with clearly shamanistic characteristics can be found in various regions of central Asia (Basilov 1992), but they function only in a syncretic form. One can observe their syncretism with aspects of Zoroastrianism and Islam, just to refer to two symbolic systems of particular importance in the history of central Asia.

The first signs of shamanistic symbolism can thus be found in the rock art of the Bronze Age, both in the south of Central Asia and in the north, which can otherwise be called southern Siberia. I have already referred to engravings from this period located in southern Siberia, which can be placed in the symbolic context of shamanism. However, at this point it is not possible to omit one of the most spectacular complexes of southern Siberian prehistoric art, namely the art of burials (paintings and engravings on burial slabs) discovered in Karakol, Altai, dating back to the beginning of the second millennium BC (Kubarev 1988). They present a number of key features consistent with shamanistic symbolism: human-animal metamorphosis, including bird symbolism and human-bird metamorphosis common in Siberian shamanism; human heads are adorned with plumed headdresses (which are known to be used by southern Siberian shamans in historical times) and hands and feet are frequently replaced with talons. The body is

covered with feathers or pelage. Some of the therianthropics figures hold objects resembling animal tails, an element which I have mentioned with respect to the engravings from Altai. Tails are also characteristic for the Bronze Age art, where other features with shamanistic connotations can also be observed (for example at Tamgaly). It should be added that in southern Siberia there are more examples of art similar to that of Karakol, originating from the same time-frame. In the local archaeology the whole complex is referred to as the Okunevo culture (see Savinov & Podolskiy 1997; Leontev and colleagues 2006).

## DISCUSSION

The identification of shamanism through rock art is not an easy task. However, it is not a subject that should be avoided or which can be omitted, since nobody can deny that shamanism has existed and exists in central Asia. Recent critical voices against the interpretation of Asian rock art from the perspective of shamanism (Frankfor and colleagues 2004) on the one hand rightly criticise the too frequent use of the term and the sometimes arbitrary definition of a given example of rock art as shamanistic, but on the other hand, it is difficult to understand why they argue (Frankfor and colleagues 2004: 68-69) for giving up the search for shamanistic meaning in the rock art. If shamanism has been part of the culture of central Asian peoples, who created rock art over the centuries, then we cannot ignore such symbolic context. It is difficult to determine today to what degree shamanism constituted a context for rock art. Moreover, nobody has ever claimed that all rock art in central Asia or Siberia was created in this paradigm, even if the shamanistic context of a given example of rock art is likely. Undoubtedly, when looking at all sites of rock art in this part of Asia, images which can be associated in various ways with shamanism are not large in number. It is also obvious that one cannot expect to have examples of purely shamanistic rock art, since the dynamism of this tradition in Siberia always imposes its syncretic character – in historic times in southern Siberia this concerned interaction of shamanism with Buddhism (Devlet 1980: 244-259; Humphrey 1980), Burkhanism, or less organised cults such as Altai ‘white faith’ Ak-Jang (Halemba

2000, 2003). Shamanism was frequently an element of a wider cultural context, such as ceremonies of burial, initiation, healing, birth or even war, therefore it should be included in a wider symbolic discourse (Pentikäinen 1998; Demattè 2004). I would like to stress once again that the intention of this chapter is confined to outline or suggest possible interpretative traces, and in no way to offer ‘target’ interpretations. I am convinced the subject of the shamanistic context of rock art requires research and studies, and not only criticisms, to which some scholars (Francfort 2001) have recently limited themselves.

The studies of the shamanistic context of rock art in central Asia have their theoretical and ethical implications. The shamanistic context of rock art, which has become a lively subject in the last two or three decades, perceives shamanism in universal terms. It understands shamanism in phenomenological categories. It is not my intention either to criticise, or negate such approaches. My purpose is to underline that at present we are dealing with two approaches to understanding shamanism<sup>4</sup>, as well as to stress some implications of it. Asian shamanism which is commonly deemed to be classical shamanism, does not fit easily into the phenomenological model, since the latter underlines strongly the hunting-gathering context of shamanism. Therefore, one may conclude that shamanistic meanings should be explored in hunting cultures. However, central Asia proves that over a long period shamanism was an important component of *sensu stricto* nomadic cultures, and shamanistic symbolism indicates its strong rooting in this cultural type. Another important issue is the fact that the Bronze Age rock art showing shamanistic features can often be found in the area of a steppe or in its close vicinity. It does not necessarily mean that the origins of the local shamanistic tradition should be looked for in the circles of nomadic and pastoral cultures, but it suggests that this dimension of shamanism should seriously be taken into consideration. The more so, if we agree that the symbolism which can be ‘read’ in the Bronze Age art (as one of potentially many types of symbolisms) contains shamanistic features, it can be significant that the Bronze Age is a period in the history of central Asia when the expansion of the pastoral cultural model took place. Therefore, the ancient shamanism of central Asia does not seem to be a purely hunting-related phenomenon,

and this dimension has been recognised ethnologically (Hamayon 2004b). Moreover, it seems to have a limited chronological framework, since we cannot find explicit indications that the history of shamanistic symbolism can be dated back more than to the third or second millennium BC. I cannot exclude that shamanism might have been practised earlier, but proving it might require either observing new informative elements in the archaeological records or proposing new theoretical solutions.

Finally, there is the ethical question. Shamanistic interpretations of rock art, with which 'shamanism' as a term is most often associated, mostly concern the rock art outside Asia, namely in areas which can be most generally referred to as 'the west'. Because of the phenomenological concept of shamanism promoted by western culture, we create an idea according to which we have constructed a model allowing, potentially, for identifying shamanism in every cultural context. However, this model mainly identifies trance experience. This, in turn, according to some scholars (Nowik 1993), is not of primary importance in Asian shamanism (*cf.* Hamayon 2004a). In Asia, a more important factor is establishing a contact

with the spiritual world, which does not have to imply trance. Furthermore, shamanism in central Asia is regarded in some circles as religion. Particularly today, along with the weakening of the Moscow central government, the local nations, particularly, strive to revive their traditions, and some of them assume shamanism to be the credo of their tradition (Walters 2001; Halemba 2000, 2003; Smyrski 2000; Wszyński 2000). Therefore, any discussion about shamanism has an ethical and emotional dimension. It requires a great ethical sensitivity in archaeology. The shamanism which is usually discussed in the circles of rock art scholars does not correspond to what is understood as shamanism today, at least by some nations or tribes in central Asia or Siberia. Therefore, I feel a need to differentiate the shamanism of central Asia or Siberia from typological shamanism, with which we often deal in rock art studies. While I define the latter as phenomenological shamanism, I suggest that we should refer to the former as historical (but not 'classical') shamanism. And, I believe it is not only the question of using a different term, since these two ways of defining shamanism imply phenomena which are not fully identical.

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## Notes

- 1 The natural permanence of rock art gives more hope for finding shamanistic content in it, contrary to other archaeological sources. Ethnography shows numerous limitations on the possibility of preservation of the material traces of shamans – the placing of shaman's tombs in remote areas, sometimes the construction of a separate burial place for shaman's attributes, also in little known locations, leaving shaman's attributes in taiga (by hanging them on trees) or their destruction upon a shaman's death. The Bronze Age 'Galich treasure' discovered in the basin of the Volga (European territory of Russia), but most possibly originated in the Baikal area, is an interesting finding in this context (Studzitskaya & Kuzminykh 2002).
- 2 Despite several explicit representations of shamans, we are not able to state whether in specific cases we are dealing with shamanic art (created by shamans), or shamanistic (not made by shamans, but related to shamanic beliefs and rituals). Although the differentiation into shamanic and shamanistic is increasingly reflected in rock art studies (Whitley 2005: 98), it should be stressed that the iconography itself is not a sufficient criterion for classifying art into either category. Images of shamans, hypothetically, could be made by persons in opposition to shamanism (for example, Burkhanism, which was an important local ideological and religious movement in Altai in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in its initial phase aimed against shamanism). These images of shamans should then be attributed 'only' to shamanistic art. A shaman, on the other hand, could have made an engraving of an animal representing his guardian spirit, which would qualify as shamanic art, but due to a lack of other indications concerning the shamanic context of such a petroglyph, it cannot be classified either as shamanistic or shamanic art. The usefulness of such a division can also be questioned with an example of painting images on a shaman's drum, which were not made by a shaman (Potapov 1947), but by an ordinary person, although according to a shaman's instructions. Should not images painted on a shaman's drum be classified as shamanic? For these reasons I do not attribute any special meaning to the term shamanistic in this chapter.

- 3 Such was my understanding of the relation between the Indo-Iranian tradition and shamanism when on many occasions (Rozwadowski 2001a, 2002b, 2002c, 2003) I commented on the shamanistic dimension of Indo-Iranian ritualism.
- 4 Therefore the criticism of the shamanistic interpretation of Palaeolithic cave art due to the difficulties in identifying shamanism in the rock art of central Asia (Bahn 2001: 60) is not justified.

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