

## The Anthropomorphism Sun God: Cultic Representations in Kazakhstan

*Jeannine Davis-Kimball, Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>*

Humankind's infinite relationship with the sun must have sprung spontaneously from the psyche, as mortals became aware of their insignificance within a powerful and threatening universe. As conscious intellect brightened they gradually focused on the crisis of their being and the quandary of their society. Even the uncertainties of nature itself were overwhelming. From the embryonic cultic beliefs practiced by the early tribal communities we may envisage the development of formalized religious canons, which became an integral part of many subsequent societies. In the boundless steppe lands of southern Russia, east through Kazakhstan, Central Asia, into Southern Siberia and Mongolia, Bronze Age Indo-Europeans, Early Iron Age nomads, and Turkic speaking tribes worshiped their gods.

During the second millennium B.C., Indo-European peoples, known archaeologically as the Andronovo culture, entered the region known today as the Sernirechiye, or Seven Rivers, in Southern Kazakhstan. The fertile valleys stretching into the vast steppe lands were, and still are, watered by the abundant rivers. Because they did not leave written texts we have little direct knowledge of their religious and cultic beliefs. Yet, they bequeathed a rich repository of petroglyphs carved into stone cliffs at their cultic centers. In this paper we look briefly at the various manifestations of the anthropomorphic sun deity represented in the petroglyphs.

Petroglyphs are particularly difficult to date as the stone outcroppings themselves have stood for millennia before being carved upon. However, in some areas clues help date the petroglyphs. For example, Bronze Age stone cyst graves, completely cultic in nature, have been excavated at the base of some petroglyphs at Tamgaly in southern Kazakhstan. The slate slabs used for the walls of the grave often have carvings similar to those in situ on the outcroppings. Moreover, the technique used to carve the pictographs assists in the dating process.

If we judge by the abundance of solar representations found in southern Kazakhstan, and the complexity of their iconography, we must assume that the cult of the sun was especially powerful in this region. These images were also certainly a fundamental component of a cultic religion practiced from approximately 1500 B.C. And interestingly, this locale is still the scene of cultic offerings today.

---

1. University of California, Berkeley CA; Director, Kazakh / American Research Project, Inc.

One of the most important of all cultic sites is Tamgaly; a slate outcropping located about 160 kilometers south-west of Alma-Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan. The second site is found in the Eshkiol'mes Mountains, east of Alma Ata in Taldy Kurgan oblast. Abstract sun symbols, such as the spoke wheel and the swastika, were carved at these sites. However, it is the anthropomorphic sun god that is particularly unique. In the Eshkiol'mes Mountains the solar god, fine rays emanating from his head, is depicted in plastic form and seems to display the shamans' accoutrements hanging from his waist.

In ancient mythology the numbers three and seven always had special mystical significance. For the ancients three times seven must have had infinite power, for at the cultic site of Tamgaly twenty-one anthropomorphic sun gods are represented on the slate cliffs. Local scholars feel that in ancient times these solar deities may have been the focus of a religious procession which wound through the rock outcroppings as, adjacent to the solar deities, footprints were carved as if to mark the processional route. Above the images on the crest of the same cliffs, a solar sign was etched into the stone. The symbol is indicated by three-crossed lines with dots at the end of each of these lines. Evidence seems to indicate the sign was used to predict the solstice.

At Tamgaly, solar attributes given to the anthropomorphic images were represented by a number of guises. The most common were concentric circles, or nucleated circles, or solid disks with emanating rays. Multiple dots were often placed in association with the circles. Each of the circular motifs was given a body, executed in a primitive style.

There also seems to have existed a special relationship between the anthropomorphic sun god and the zoomorphic sun god. There is not enough time to discuss the iconography of the latter group except to note that the portrayal of the deity was often in the guise of a bull, horse or Kulan (wild ass). In some cases the anthropomorphic god was conveyed through the heavens on the mythical bull.

The cult of the solar deity is known around the world. However, it may be that human representation of this god carved on the slate cliff in southern Kazakhstan was among the very earliest of such representations.