ISTITUTO UNIVERSITARIO ORIENTALE
DIPARTIMENTO DI STUDI ASIATICI

Series Minor
XLIV

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE STEPPES

METHODS AND STRATEGIES

Papers from the International Symposium held in Naples 9 - 12 November 1992

edited by

BRUNO GENITO

NAPOLI 1994

ESTRATTO

Originalveröffentlichung in: Genito, Bruno (Hrsg.) The Archaeology of the Steppes Methods and Strategies. Papers from the International Symposium held in Naples 9-12 November 1992, Neapel 1994, S. 3-15

KARL JETTMAR

Body-painting and the Roots of the Scytho-Siberian Animal Style

Today it is clear that among the many gifted Russian scholars who devoted their work to the problem of the genesis of the so-called "Animal Style" of the Northern Nomads, Grjaznov was the genius who gave inspiration and incentives to a large community of scholars. Recently a "Festschrift" was published for him encompassing 90 articles, using as a pretext the commemoration of his 90th birthday (Masson 1992). Due to the stressed conditions of the country, no foreigners were invited to participate.

I want to express my admiration and gratitude to this outstanding man by exposing my conclusions which he stimulated during our meeting in 1977. I was happy when I saw that his essential observations became part of his last article, printed in 1984, the year when he died.

In discussions with Novgorodova who had brought us together and acted as an interpreter during the more difficult parts of our talk, Grjaznov tried in vain to convince her of his own chronological classification. Among the petroglyphs decorating the so-called stag-stones, erected on or near the graves of warriors during the initial phase of the Scytho-Siberian cultures (between the 9th and the 7th Century BC), Grjaznov considered those which are "wrapped around" the stone pillar as the most archaic (Fig.1), regardless of the sharp edges which are peculiar for such "stones". They are in fact menhirs, made from large slabs with two broad and two narrow sides. This "wrapping around" reveals the prototype, namely treetrunks decorated by paintings! In the text of his article, Grjaznov (1984, p.81) wrote as follows:

> "In case that my proposal is right, namely that the sculptures of the Early Nomads, which we call stag-stones, were originally made

from round wooden trunks, and that the figures on them were made by painting, and that later on, after the transition to stone-steles, the images in all detail were drawn in colour and only afterwards chiselled out as a deepened relief (as a silhouette or in contours), then it is self-evident that this transformation resulted in the emergence of specific stylistic and compositional traits in the figurative art during the initial phase of the Scytho-Siberian cultures in the steppes of Asia. These peculiarities were later on extended to other artistic fields". [Translation: Jettmar.] As other "fields" Grjaznov mentioned rock-art and bronze-casting.

This last message of a great scholar means a radical overturn of a long established concept: so far we had been convinced that the typical scheme of the "Animal Style" was evolved by carving pieces of a bone, horn or wood (mostly of limited size) for personal ornaments, or for the decoration of arms and horsegear. The technique so applied was called "Schrägschnitt". Using this technique, elegant curves resulted, meeting each other in sharp angles (Jettmar 1967, p.36).

Instead, we now have to assume the existence of large "monumental" paintings (Grjaznov's own term), used for the decoration of treetrunks, which were later on replaced by menhirs. Here we are immediately confronted with a problem: is it reasonable to imagine wooden pillars, decorated by paintings, as part of the artistic inventory of nomadic tribes? Are not such monuments the privilege of sedentary cultures?

Perhaps the painted pillars were replacements of something else? Certainly they were embodiments of warriors. We can discern the head - with two or three strokes on one cheek, two earrings (with a pendant in some cases), a line separating the head from the body, and a necklace. Under the *torso* there was a belt used for fixing the usual weapons - pickaxe, dagger, whetstone and *gorythos*. The double-hook (maybe a "ritual derivation" from a tool used by the drivers of chariots) and the shield are also drawn in some cases. The decorations by figures of stags or other animals announcing the future "Animal Style" are concentrated between neck and girdle, sometimes such figures are visible below the belt, i.e. on the thighs.

Grjaznov has already ingeniously determined the meaning of the animal decorations (Grjaznov 1984, p.76).

"Neither do the animal figures on the stag-stones render bronze-

plaques or drawings or applications on the clothings, as presumed by some scholars. They depict - and that is more plausible - tattoos on the body of the warrior, similar to the tattoos of the chieftain from Pazyryk in the Altaj". [Translation Jettmar] (Fig.2)

Now I suggest a small but essential correction: since the affects of tattooing are longlasting, even stigmatizing, tattoos were mostly performed by experienced persons able to make complicated compositions - as visible on the body found in the burial chamber of Pazyryk II. However, as we see in the schematic drawings added to Grjaznov's article, more and more elements, mostly single curved strokes, were added according to strict rules, resulting in images of stags in different positions, either standing on tiptoe (Fig.3), or close to each other with a muzzle like the beak of a lapwing (Fig.4). The boar as motif was treated accordingly. Such formalistic prescriptions were necessary, because the work had to done repeatedly and quickly, and not necessarily by trained artists. Similar procedures are still applied in workshops manufacturing decorated pottery. Therefore I assume that the animal decorations meant body paint, we might also say "warpaint", evoking protecting spirits in their theriomorphic shape. Such decorations were reserved for special occasions, and worn before entering the war-path or during funerals.

The same painters had decorated the memorial pillars as well, maybe they were re-painted during mourning ceremonies. When the pillars were replaced by menhirs covered with engravings, that would certainly not exclude or spare additional painting on certain occasions.

Body painting has a long tradition in Central Asia. It is already attested by coloured images on the slabs forming stone-cists of the cemetery at Karakol in the High Altaj region (Fig.5). According to Kubarev (1988 p.169), most of the burials belong to the 3rd Millennium BC. This tradition persisted in some regions of Siberia almost to the present day - and it is well attested by paintings on funeral masks, rendering the features of dead persons (Fig. 6). They were found in the graves of the Taštyk-Culture, between the 2nd Century BC and the 4th Century AD (Kiselev 1951, pp.446-459).

We may say that body painting, i.e. the decoration of the acting person, is complementory to the tendency of the roaming hunters to embellish caves and other sanctuaries with animal figures. Paintings or rock carvings were usually made in such places.

Evidently, during the Scythian period not all tribes used tattooing. In the Pazyryk cemetery only the chief buried in kurgan II (maybe a foreigner who had married into the local dynasty) showed this adornment (Fig.2). Tattooing was the artistically perfect sophistication of a long tradition.

We may assume that the importance of body-painting was greatly reduced when the battledress of the Northern Nomads came into general use. It was in some respects similar to the uniform of a parachutist closely fitting to the body, all weapons firmly tied to the girdle or the thighs, allowing jumps on or from the horse (without stirrups). Initially only a sort of riding breeches was used - as visible on a famous seal, found at Syalk (Fig.7), and in one of the reliefs of Assurnasirpal II (883-859 BC) (Jettmar 1967, pp.212-213). Before the transition to mounted warfare, the men in the deserts of Central Asia wore only girdles or loinclothes (Fig.8), the women had fringed aprons covering hips and breasts (Fig.9). In the night, heavy blankets or ponchos were used, adapted to the extreme changes in temperature which are typical for a continental climate (Fig.10). Still today there goes a saying: silk in daytime, furs in the evening.

My thesis would explain the preference for animals, and the avoidance of human figures (they would have been a reduplication, since the human body was the canvas), but not the abundant use of curves, spirals, inverted spirals, spiral hooks and volutes as structuring elements. In my book "Art of the Steppes" I stressed the fact that at that time the derivation of this factor was an unsolved problem. Neither in East-Europe nor in the western steppe-lands could one track down the roots - certainly not in the territory of the Andronovo-Culture, supposedly the cradle of the Iranian peoples.

Now this riddle seems to be solved. The nomadic and seminomadic tribes in the eastern part of the steppes, the "Saka", used "Animal Style" for the decoration of their weapons, but some of them had inherited from their ancestors a pottery decorated by painting in different styles, several of them using spirals, whirls and volutes (Fig.11). That became evident already for outsiders by illustrations added to Debaine-Francfort's articles (1988; 1989). I dare not say what was the ancestral group (Walabai, or Kageqiake, or Alagou?). In the whole eastern area a general trend towards

spirals and volutes was striking. So the missing links might have existed somewhere in Xinjiang. Owing to this tendency, the "Animal Style" took its "swing", which did certainly not derive from the earlier artistic production of the western steppes.

Grjaznov had started by the assumption that large-size animal figures painted (or tattooed) on the bodies of warriors were among the first popular motifs of the emerging "Animal Style". It was easy to apply them to the bare skin.

It is not difficult to explain why the animal figures, previously covering almost the whole body, were later on concentrated on a few accessories of dress, and equipment. As we know from numerous Greek depictions (including vase-paintings), the clothings of the nomads, covering the whole body, were embellished in a different way, maybe according to traditions borne by the women who were weaving the fabrics. Only the saddle-cloth, decorated with felt appliqués, and maybe tent-covers as well, did not need figures reduced in size.

There are exceptions to the rule, e.g. garments found during the excavation of kurgans at Ulandryk in the Altaj (Fig.12). There, clothing decorated with applications made from leather or birchbark were discovered by Kubarev (1987, pp.84-90). They were too delicate for daily use and made for the funeral only. In most cases felt appliqués decorating the saddle, and long hangings leading down from the saddle had the same limited range of application (Fig.13).

Instead, the "Animal Style" in daily use was restricted to a few *paraphernalia*, namely to the weapons, the ornaments, the belt buckle and the horse-trappings of the warrior. The production of these objects, however, was the task of various specialists working in bronze, silver, and gold, or wood and bone. The result was that the dashing elegance of the paintings entered the artistic spectrum of these craftsmen. This was a creative meeting between strong and independent traditions, in a broad belt at the fringe of the Taiga. On the one hand, the "Seïma-Turbino phenomenon" had stimulated the formation of metallurgical centres, on the other hand, the hunters had not lost their artistic heritage - the art of carving wood and bone (Černyh & Kuz'minyh 1989).

Recently, an additional element in this fascinating fusion of artistic trends was identified by Sher (1992, pp.12-14). Techniques derived from the Okunevo Culture, e.g. the structuring of the

animal body by parallel zigzagging lines, are present in the easternmost variants of nomadic art. But they were restricted to some secondary centres, namely to the so-called Sauromatian complex, and (together with other far eastern elements) to the Aral region.

Most of these threads, interwoven in the pattern of the "Animal Style", were always seen - or at least postulated - by the scholars, but the original Central Asiatic root, arising from areas today belonging to Xinjiang, can only be identified by following the footsteps of Grjaznov.

It should be stressed that all processes of fusion took place at a time when the political centre in Tuva, documented by the Aržan-Kurgan (745 ±40 BC, according to Savinov 1992) was involved in the raids which caused the decline of the Western Zhou dynasty.

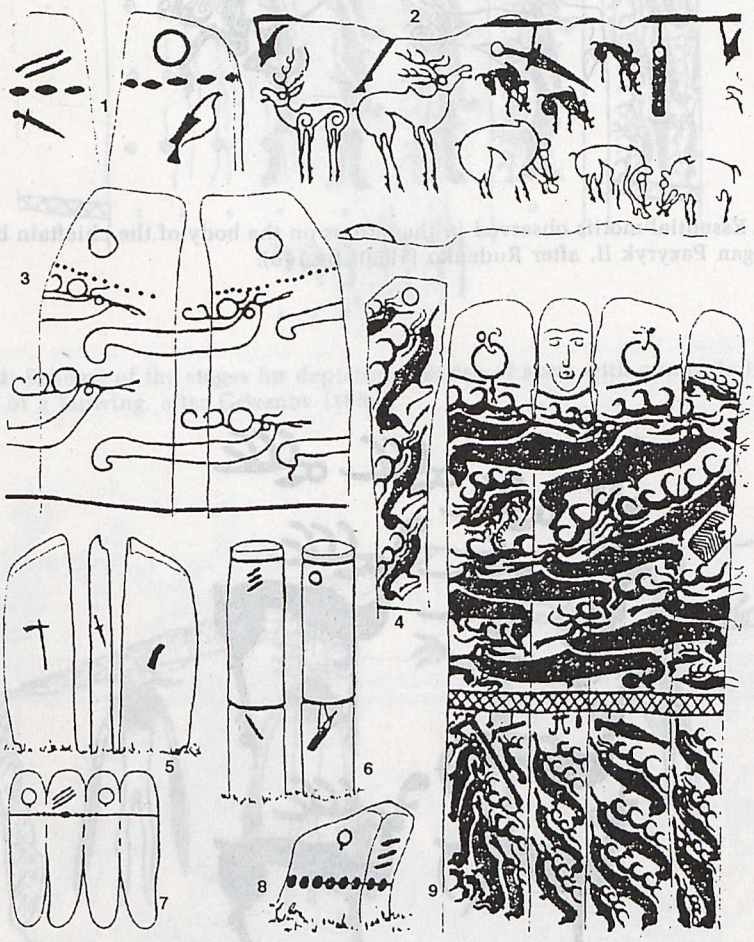

FIG. 1: Stag stones from Mongolia and the Sajan-Altaj region. The "wrapping around" of the decoration (in the tradition of wooden pillars) is visible in the drawings 3, 6 and 9, after Grjaznov (1984).

FIG. 2: Essential motifs observed in the tattoos on the body of the chieftain buried in kurgan Pazyryk II, after Rudenko (1960, fig.148).

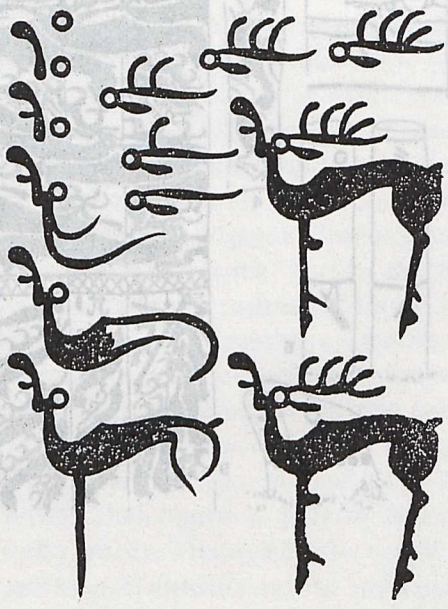

FIG. 3: Scheme used "to build up" the image of a stag standing on tiptoes, after Grjaznov (1984).

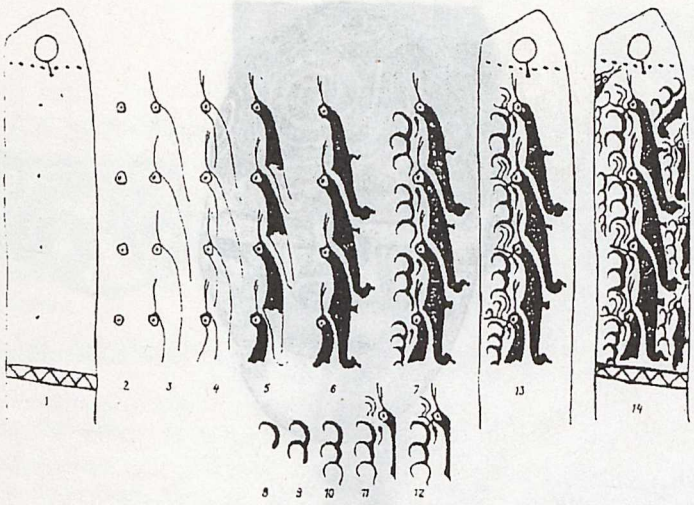

FIG. 4: Scheme of the stages for depicting a series of stags with a muzzle like the beak of a lapwing, after Grjaznov (1984).

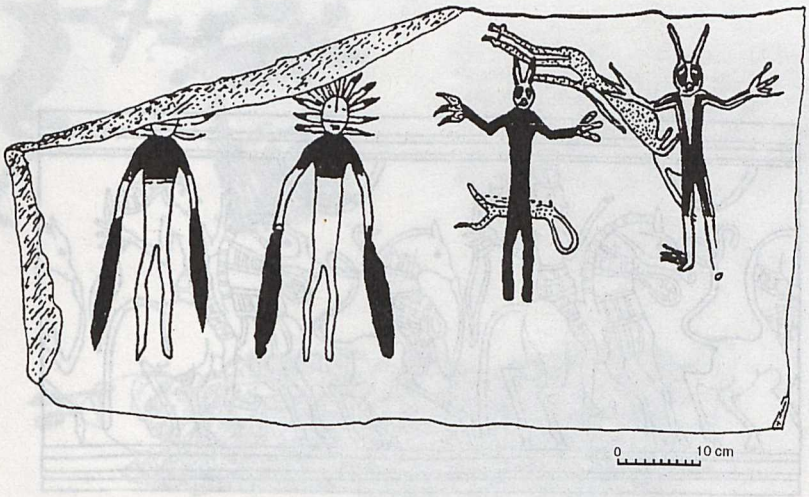

FIG. 5: Dancing figures depicted on a slab used for the construction of the cist in Karakol, kurgan II, grave 1. The dancers wear masks, but body painting is indicated as well, after Kubarev (1988, fig. 18).

FIG. 6: Mummified head with a funerary mask, indicating the pattern used for body paintings as well. Oglakhty, burial ground VI, 1st Century BC, after Artamonov (1974).

FIG. 7: In the early period of mounted warfare the riders wore trousers or loincloths but no upper garment, as visible in a seal from Syalk.

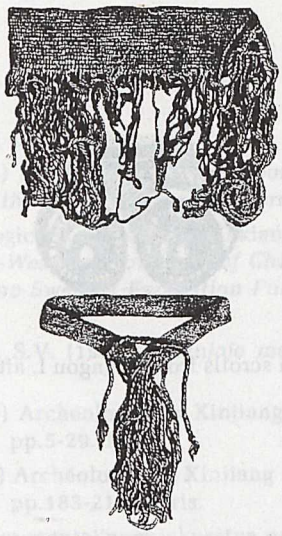

Fig. 8: Only a loincloth or a belt with tassels was worn during daytime in the southern regions of Central Asia, after Bergman (1939, pl. 11/5 and 7).

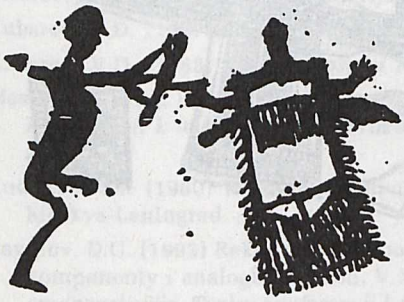

Fig. 9: Similar clothing (with a breast cover) were worn by women in Mongolia during the Bronze Age. To the left, a male figure is visible. (Petroglyphs at Kalbak-Taš), after Kubarev (1988, p.139, fig.81).

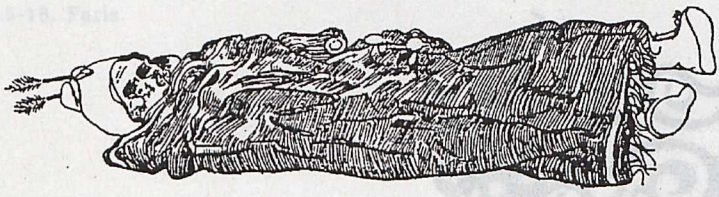

Fig. 10: Dead body preserved in the extremely dry climate of the Lop-nor region. Felt boots and a felt cap were worn plus a heavy coat during the night, after Bergman (1939, p.136, fig.32).

Fig. 11: Pottery painted with scrolls from Alangou I, after Debaine-Francfort (1989).

Fig. 12: In kurgan 2, cemetery Ulandryk, no skeleton was discovered. So it was a cenotaph, apparently for a child, as instead of the body small clothing was found: a decorated blouse and a cap. The boot was without decoration. The applications show cocks arranged into quadrangular fields. They were made of thin and soft leather, only fit for ritual use, after Kubarev (1987, p.85, fig.31).

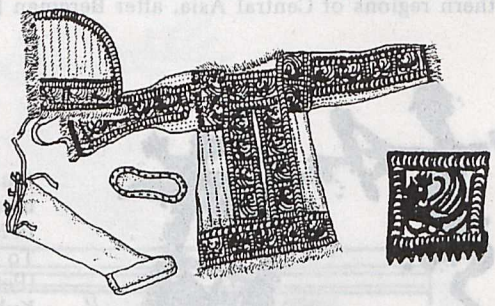

Fig. 13: Lion with antlers. Application made of soft leather, found in Kurgan Tuekta I as decoration of a saddle, after Rudenko (1960, fig.57k).

REFERENCES

Akišev, K.A. (1978) *Kurgan Issyk.* Moskva.

Artamonov, M.I. (ed.) (1974) *The Dawn of Art. Palæolithic, Neolithic Bronze Age and Iron Age Remains of the Soviet Union - The Hermitage Collection.* Leningrad.

Bergman, F. (1939) Archaeological Researches in Sinkiang. *Reports from the Scientific Expedition to the North-Western Provincies of China under the Leadership of Dr. Sven Hedin. The Sino-Swedish Expedition Publication 7, Archaeology.* 1. Stockholm.

Černyh, E.N. & Kuz'minyh, S.V. (1989) *Drevnjaja metallurgija Severnoj Evrazii.* Moskva.

Debaine-Francfort, C. (1988) Archéologie du Xinjiang des origines aux Han. Ière partie. *Paléorient,* 14/1, pp.5-29. Paris.

Debaine-Francfort, C. (1989) Archéologie du Xinjiang des origines aux Han. IIème partie. *Paléorient,* 15/1, pp.183-213. Paris.

Grjaznov, M.P. (1984) O monumental'nom iskusstve na zare skifo-sibirskih kul'tur v stepnoj Azii. *Arheologičeskij Sbornik,* 25, pp.76-82. Leningrad.

Jettmar, K. (1967) *Art of the Steppes. The Eurasian Animal Style. Art of the World.* London.

Kiselev, S.V. (1951) *Drevnjaja istorija Južnoj Sibiri.* Moskva.

Kubarev, V.D. (1987) *Kurgany Ulandryka.* Novosibirsk.

Kubarev, V.D. (1988) *Drevnie rospisi Karakola.* Novosibirsk.

Masson, V.M. (ed.) (1992) *Severnaja Evrazija ot drevnosti do srednevekov'ja. Tezisy konferencii k 90 letiju so dnja roždenija Michaila Petroviča Grjaznova.* Sankt Peterburg.

Rudenko, S.I. (1960) *Kul'tura naselenija central'nogo Altaja v skifskoe vremja.* Moskva-Leningrad.

Savinov, D.G. (1992) Rekonstrukcija pogrebal'nogo kompleksa kurgana Aržan, ego komponenty i analogii, Masson, V.M. (ed.), *Severnaja Evrazija ot drevnosti do srednevekov'ja. Tezisy konferencii k 90 letiju so dnja roždenija Michaila Petroviča Grjaznova,* pp.108-112. Sankt Peterburg.

Sher, Ja.A. (1992). A propos des origines du "style animalier". *Arts Asiatiques,* 47, pp.5-18. Paris.