



E-ISSN: 2976-2421 (Online)
CODEN: JRAOCQ

JOURNAL OF ROCK ART (JRA)

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.7508/jra.01.2024.37.43>



REVIEW ARTICLE

MANDALAY MOUNTAIN ROCK ART INVESTIGATION IN BADAIN JARAN DESERT OF INNER MONGOLIA OF CHINA

Jiaxin Zhang

Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, 100089,

*Corresponding Author E-mail: 2801514899@qq.com

This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License CC BY 4.0, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History:

Received 5 February 2024
Accepted 1 March 2024
Available online 6 April 2024

ABSTRACT

Situated at the Menggensumu (village) of Alxa Right Banner, which is the deep in Alxa gobi of Inner Mongolia, Mandalay Mountain is 14 km from southwest Sumu, with the area of 3km from east to west, and 5km from north to south. High and steep in terrain, gobi and desert grassland surrounded the mountain. The massif composed by granite and basalt is highlighted on the top of the wasteland. According to the historical data, early at the Neolithic age, there were people lived and multiplied on Mandalay Mountain. Mongolia, Xianbei, Xiongnu, Tangut and other northern minorities lived and nomadized here one after another. At present, in total 4,234 rock arts are found on this mountain, and they are mostly located at the elevation of about 1,500m–1,750m. Mainly based on animal, Mandalay Mountain rock art involves horse, cow, goat, donkey, mule, camel, hound dog, leopard, wolf, fox, megaloceros, argali, ibex, turtle, birds and so on, meanwhile, it covers hunting, large-scale hunting, riding, beating on battle, fighting, going out, grazing, sexual intercourse, Western Xia letter, religious activities and other scenes. The producing of Mandalay Mountain rock art almost started from the late Old Stone Age, experienced the Neolithic Age, the Bronze Age, and then the early-stage Iron Age (which is equivalent to Shang and Zhou Dynasties in our Central China—Qin and Han Dynasties), until all historical periods in ancient China.

KEY WORDS:

Badain Jaran Desert, Mandalay Mountain, Rock Art, Nomadic People, Characteristic and Style, Historical Stages and Classifications

1. NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AND CULTURAL HISTORY OF ALXA LEAGUE

As a league under the jurisdiction of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, Alxa League is located at the westernmost point of Inner Mongolia. Its geographical coordinates are 97°10′–106°52′ E and 37°21′–42°47′ N. The Alxa Left Banner, Alxa Right Banner, and Ejina are under the jurisdiction of Alxa League, which covers an area of 270,000 square kilometers. The territory is a vast but thinly populated area, with an arid climate; the Badain Jaran Desert, Tengger Desert and Ulan Buhe Desert are distributed in the territory. As one of the richest collections of rock art in China, Alxa League's rock art is mainly consisted of rock carvings, and a small number of coloreds handprinted rock art are distributed in the Elesen Hutler area of Yabulai Mountain in Alxa Right Banner. Under the jurisdiction of Alxa League, the Badain Jaran Desert covers an area of 47,000 square kilometers and is the fourth largest desert in the world. Its altitude ranges from 1,200 to 1,700 meters, and the relative height of sand mountains can reach over 500 meters. *Yongtai City Inscription*, which was written in the Ming Dynasty, stated that: "this area is vast and boundless, with Lujing Lake to the east, Zhuangliang to the west, bordered by the desert to the north, and Lingong to the south. In this area, towering mountains overshadow the sky, forests cover the views of eyes, and flowers and fruits are as abundant as grass. The people can

be totally self-sufficient in food and clothes, the mountains and forests are rich in natural resources, with everything available." It can be seen that the ecological environment at that time was suitable for people's lives, which also provided the possibility for the once prosperous land and rich rock art relics on it. Tracing to its source, traces of human activities have been left in this place since the Paleolithic Age. "The earliest tribes engaged in hunting and herding in the Badain Jaran Desert were primitive clans. During the Spring and Autumn Period, it was a pastoral area of Beidi, and from the Warring States period to the Qin Dynasty, Rouzhi resided in the area; during the Western Han Dynasty, it was the pastoral area of Youxian King of the Huns. The Qiang, Wuhuan, Xianbei, Huns and other ethnic groups also engaged in herding in the area from the Eastern Han to the Three Kingdoms period. During the Western Jin Dynasty, Tufa and Xianbei moved about in search of pastures in the northwest of Alxa. After the Northern Dynasty, nomadic people such as Rouran, Turkic, Tubo, Huihe, and Tangut arrived in quick succession and then left one after another. The area became a nomadic land for the Mongolian people from the Yuan Dynasty. During the Ming Dynasty, the Mongolian tribes such as Yibula, Huoshai, Rouzhi, Zhulitu and Zhahan Hudun occupied this area successively. In the Qing Dynasty, the Elute and Shuote tribes of Mongolia lived here. Since ancient times, the Mandalay Mountain has been a place where various nomadic people appeared alternatively. (Gai, 1999)

Quick Response Code



Access this article online

Website
www.jora.org.my/

DOI:
[10.7508/jra.03.2024.37.43](http://doi.org/10.7508/jra.03.2024.37.43)

2. ROCK ART DISCOVER AND INVESTIGATION IN THE ALXA LEAGUE

The Mandalay Mountain Rock Art discussed in this paper is located in one of the richest rock art areas in the Badain Jaran Desert; the Mandalay Mountain is located in the Alxa Right Banner of Alxa League, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, China, on the eastern edge of the Badain Jaran Desert in Alxa Right Banner (Figure 1). The mountain is 205 kilometers away from the city center of Alxa League in a straight line; its straight-line distance from Yinchuan City is 262 kilometers. The geographical coordinates are: N39°54.0632'; E103°46.6387'; the altitude is 1,736 meters. On the Mandalay Mountain, "rock art are distributed on black basalt veins that are 3 kilometers long from east to west and 6 kilometers long from north to south, with a total of 4,236 rock paintings discovered". (Fan Rongnan and Fan Yonglong, 2014.) The Mandalay Mountain Rock Art was first discovered by the Alxa Right Banner Cultural Relics Management Station and Alxa League Cultural Relics Station during their first investigation of Mandalay Mountain in 1986; in 1987, Gai Shanlin et al. recorded and photographed the Mandalay Mountain Rock Art and drew on the basis of it; in 1996, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region designated the Mandalay Mountain Rock Art as a provincial-level cultural relic protection site. In 2013, the Mandalay Mountain Rock Art was listed as one of the Seventh Batch of National Key Cultural Relic Protection Sites.

Figure 1A: Geographical location of Mandalay Mountain Rock Art in China

Figure 1B: Map of Alxa League in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region; from west to east, they are: Ejina Banner, Alxa Right Banner, and Alxa Left Banner;

Figure 1C: Topographic map of the surrounding area of Mandalay Mountain Rock Art; among them, Bayanzhuor City, Wuhai City, and Yinchuan City all have collections of rock carvings and rock art.

After driving through the desert for 5 hours from the city center of the Left Banner of Alxa League, we arrived at the Mandalay Mountain which we have long for. As the Mandalay Mountain belongs to the Alxa Land

Block in terms of geological structure, its terrain is smooth and flat and is mainly composed of eroded low hills, valleys and intermountain depressions. Quaternary sediments cover the surface generally, forming the gobi and desert landscape (Figure 2); the terrain of Mandalay Mountain is high and steep, surrounded by gobi and desert grasslands. The mountain body, which is composed of granite and basalt, protrudes from the wilderness. Viewed from a distance, the huge mountain body is brown in color. When observed closer, it can be found that the mountain rocks are mostly white sandstone, filled with holes formed by wind erosion, water erosion, or ice erosion. This also makes the landscape here particularly unique. At a glance, various strange rocks scatter among the mountains. Around the towering Mandalay Mountain, endless earthy yellow land stretches as far as the eye can see; the land here receives excessive sunlight, which is strong and dry; there is almost no green around except for some low and unknown drought resistant plants; sometimes there is a plant called "sand onion" on the roadside, which is often picked and eaten by local people. However, "five to six thousand years ago, there was mild climate, abundant rainfall, lush growth of trees and grass in the area, with relatively plenty of water and lush grass"; (Wang, 2005) the land is not as uninhabitable as it is today.

Figure 2A: A stone tablet written in both Chinese and Mongolian at the entrance of the Mandalay Mountain Rock Art Scenic Area in Alxa League, Inner Mongolia; the text reads: "National Key Cultural Relics Protection Site, Mandalay Mountain Rock Art Group, announced by the State Council of the People's Republic of China on March 5, 2013"

Figure 2B: The natural environment of Mandalay Mountain in Alxa League, Inner Mongolia and the guide who guards the Mandalay Mountain Rock Art

Figure 2C: Boardwalk built in the Mandalay Mountain Rock Art Scenic Area, Alxa League, Inner Mongolia

Figure 2D: In situ protection of Mandalay Mountain Rock Art in Alxa League, Inner Mongolia: iron fence erected around stones carved with rock art

3. ALXA LEAGUE ROCK ART IMAGE ANALYSIS

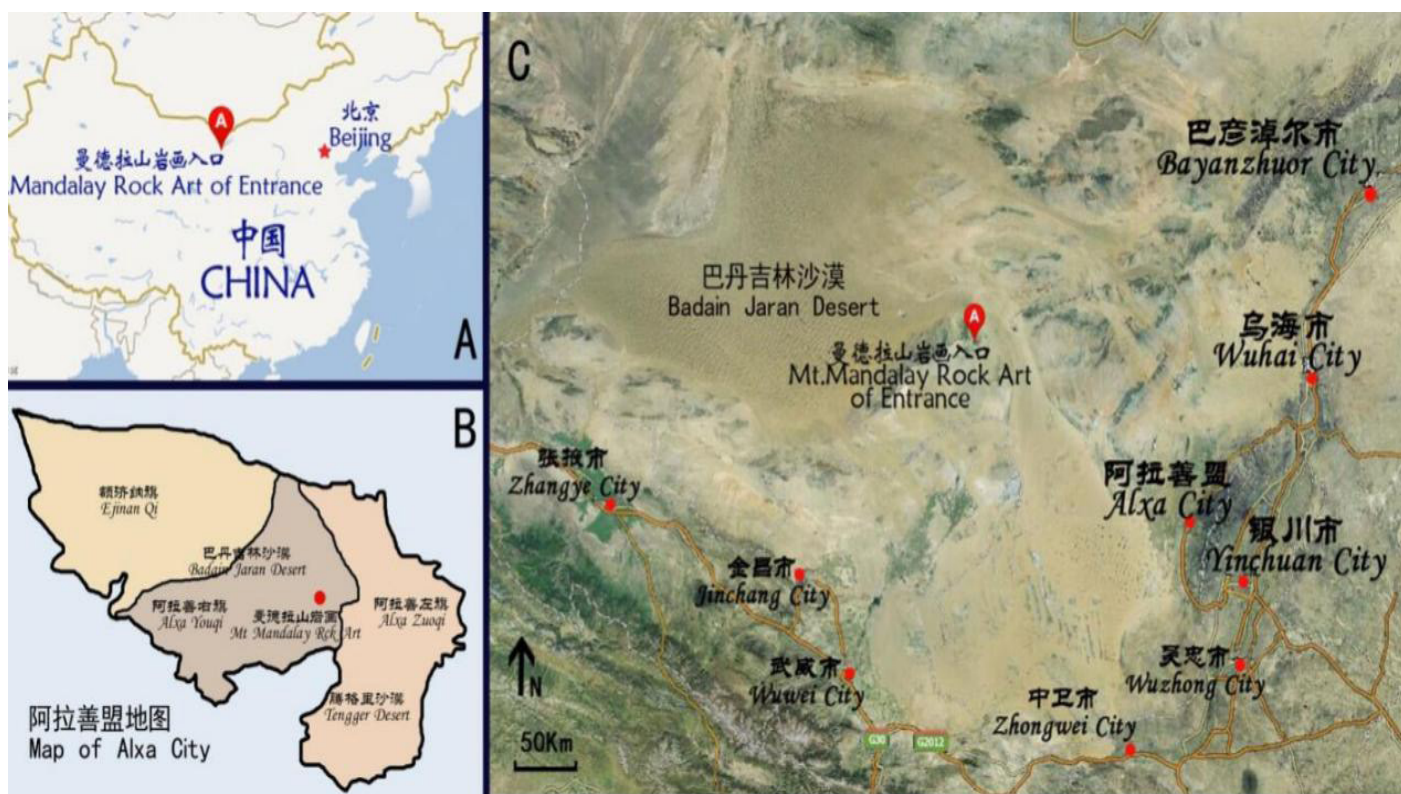


Figure 1: The location of Mandalay Mountain Rock Art

Thousands of rock art in the harsh environment of Mandalay Mountain demonstrate the beliefs and social life that once existed in this place. Unlike the Yinshan Mountain and Helan Mountain, the rock art of Mandalay Mountain is not carved on high cliffs for people to worship, but on the relatively smooth surface of scattered black stones in the mountains (both on flat and vertical faces). The art is mostly carved on the south or west side of the mountain range. The Mandalay Mountain Rock Art is mainly carved by hammering and vertical chiseling, and the chiseled points sometimes fall outside the painting; the pictures are vivid with a strong sense of life. The Mandalay Mountain Rock Art mainly depicts the hunting life of the nomadic people, with various animals and hunting as the main scenes; in addition, there are scenes depicting social life and various buildings such as towers and tents; characters are often combined with specific scenes, with fewer individual characters; it is almost difficult to find the human face figures which are extremely common in northern grassland rock art. Due to the limitations of investigation and archaeology caused by the desert in the Alxa League, at present, there has not been a comprehensive investigation and statistics on the archaeological remains of rock art as well as their surrounding areas within the Alxa League; in this paper, the author sorts out and analyses several common themes such as camels, sheep, human figures, riding and archery, and scenes based on the author's on-site investigation of Mandalay Mountain Rock Art.

The camel farming industry in northern China can be traced back to the Yin and Shang Dynasties. According to records in *The Book of Han-Huns Biography*: "the majority of its livestock are horses, cows and sheep, and its rare animals are camels, donkeys, mules, hinnies, and pangolins." Among them, refers to camels; the Badain Jaran Desert is located at the northern end of the Silk Road. In this vast desert of yellow sand, camels play an important role in daily life, transportation, and commerce. Camels are one of the common themes in the Mandalay Mountain Rock Art (Figure 3); and they are mainly bactrian camels. Based on the carvings on the rock surface, the camels, of both static and dynamic states, are hammered and chiseled; there are three forms of expression:

silhouette style, line style, and a combination of the two.

"The rise and fall of Turkic can only be seen from its sheep and horses"; sheep is one of the most common animal rock arts in Inner Mongolia. Fossils of sheep bones have been excavated from the "Hetao Man" site in Dagouwan, Wushen Banner, which means that wild sheep existed as early as the Paleolithic period in Inner Mongolia. "The time when sheep appeared in Badain Jaran is roughly equivalent to the appearance of sheep in the Gansu&Qinghai region of the upper reaches of the Yellow River, which is roughly the Hongshan Culture period." (Gai,1998) Similar to camels, sheep in Mandalay Mountain Rock Art are also chiseled, with both static and dynamic states; there are three forms of expression: silhouette style, line style, and a combination of the two. Unlike the expression method of camels, we can see that camels present a perspective angle of 3/4 sides; while the depiction of sheep is mostly full sided. In the depiction of sheep, there are many changes in their horns and tails.

Compared with Helan Mountain Rock Art and Yinshan Mountain Rock Art, there are not many rich and diverse human figures in the Mandalay Mountain Rock Art, but there are various highly refined and summarized human figures in various shapes, which are often found in specific scenes: riding, shooting, and hunting scenes combined with bows, arrows, or animals; scenes of social life combined with buildings; in terms of the specific movements of the human figures, they are of the knee-tuck type, sexual intercourse type, cross sitting type, and shooting with arrows; among them, human figures of the knee-tuck type and shooting with arrows often appear in the scenes; the cross sitting type is often located within a tower or tent.

Riding and archery are one of the main themes commonly seen in the Mandalay Mountain Rock Art. According to records in *The Book of Han-Huns Biography*: "the nomadic people migrate in search of water and grass, they do not have a fixed place to reside in and engage in farming, but each nomadic people have its own territory. They do not have



Figure 2: Mandalay Mountain Rock Art Group



Figure 3: Several common camel shapes in Mandalay Mountain Rock Art

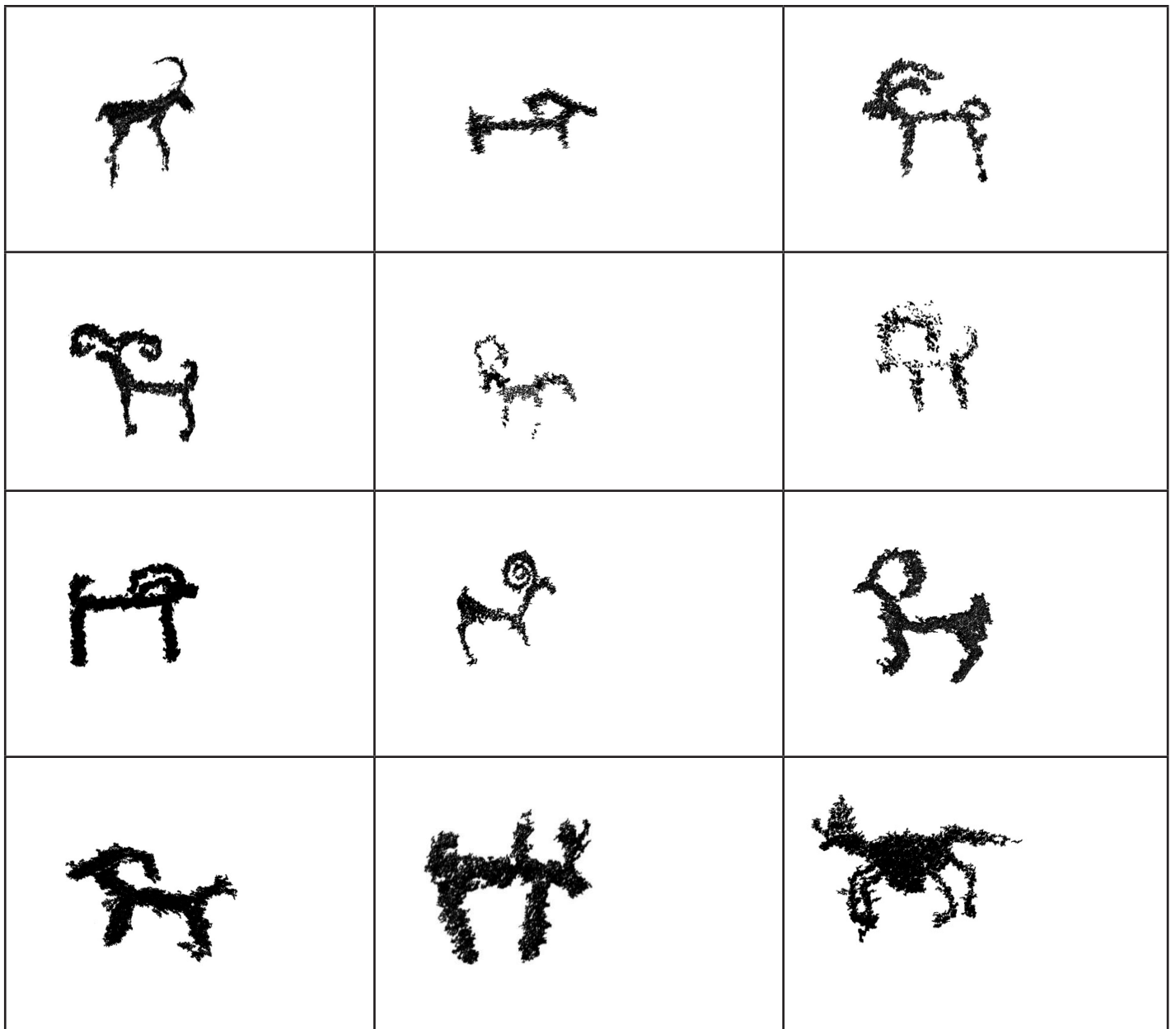


Figure 4: Several common sheep shapes in Mandalay Mountain Rock Art

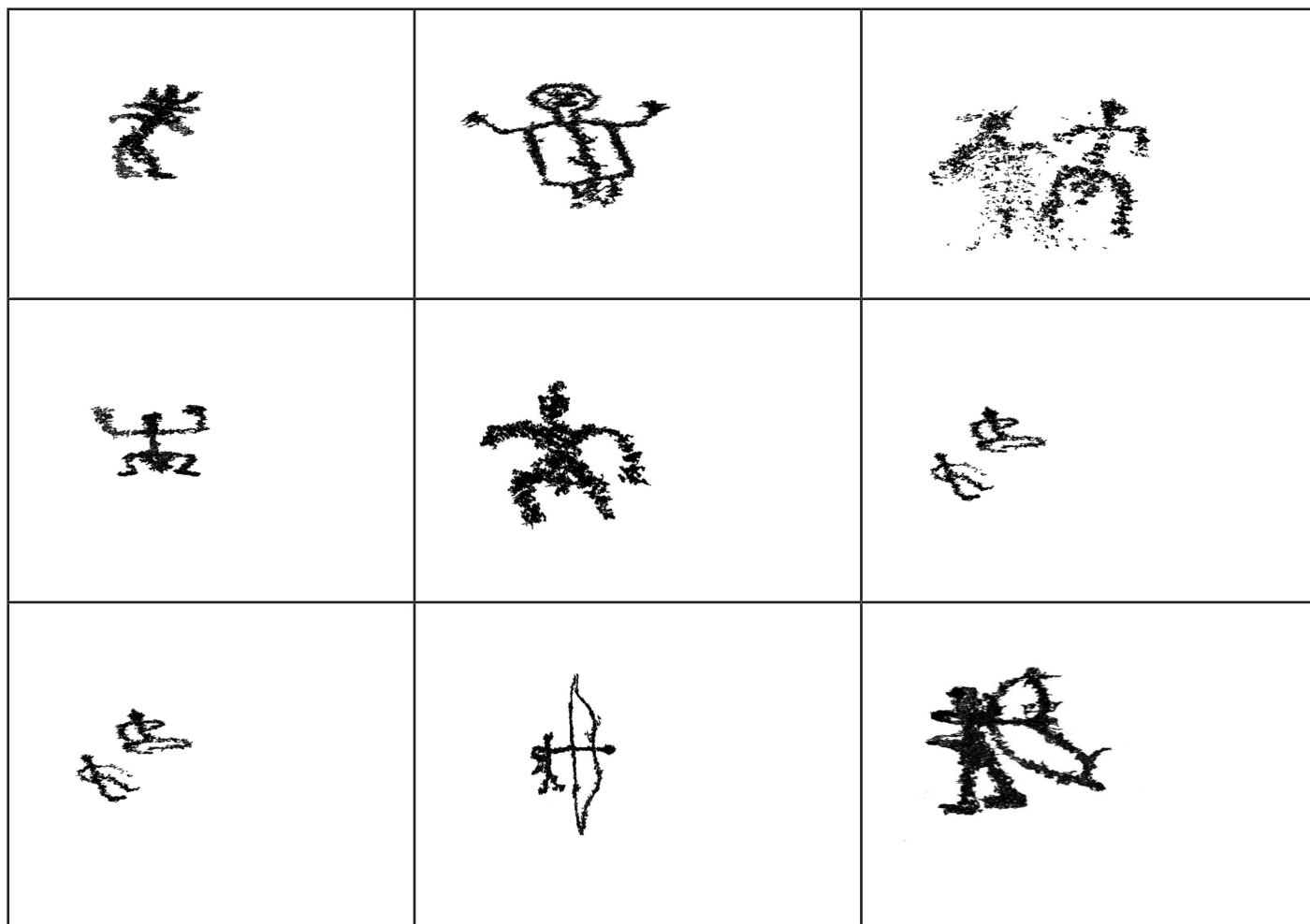


Figure 5: Several common human figures in Mandalay Mountain Rock Art

documents, and their behaviors are regulated by words. Children can ride sheep, and can draw the bow to shoot birds and mice, while young people can shoot foxes and dodders. They eat meat. The men have great strength and can draw bows, and they are all armored riders." Riding and archery are the main part of life of the grassland people. In the Mandalay Mountain Rock Art, horses and sheep are depicted differently. Sheep often appear alone in the form of monomers, carved on a certain rock surface; while horses often appear in scenes or in combination with people in the form of riding or archery; hunters ride horses and shoot animals, drawn bows are ready for shooting, those pictures vividly reproduce historical scenes before our eyes.

The most distinctive feature of Mandalay Mountain Rock Art is the large-scale scenes, encompassing hunting, hunting in an encircled area, and social or religious life scenes. Figures 7 and 8 are both hunting scenes, with symbols such as characters, animals, riding and archery, etc. In Figure 8, dots are distributed around the animal (horse) shapes; this is similar to the early forms of animal rock art in Western Europe. In Figure 9, there are a total of 18 tents on the entire rock, and a human figure is depicted in the middle the tents, with both hands folded in front of the chest. There are also figures standing outside the tents, side by side with decorations. In addition, rock art with riding and archery and animal graphics are carved on the vertical face; among them, the cross lines on the horse's body in the riding and archery figures are chiseled with dots, which have a strong decorative effect. Emmanuel Anati divided rock art into three categories: pictographic images, ideographic symbols, and psychological figures with strong symbolic significance. All three are influenced by social structure, economy, and ecology, thus creating an internal logic between the "form" and "meaning" of the scenes. When referring to the horse figures in rock art, Anati once said, the horses depicted in rock art may be wild horses or domesticated horses, and the horse figures may only represent the horse itself or have other deep meanings. Horses appear simultaneously with bisons, other animals,

bows and arrows or riders in the scenes; when spiral patterns, dots, or other symbolic symbols appear in the same scene, these different symbols imply different language logic and cognitive concepts. As for the rock art scenes in the Mandalay Mountain, we can only further discuss in depth the interpretation of animal figures and scenes within the social and historical environment of that time.

Gai Shanlin inferred that: "The earliest era of rock art carved on Mandalay Mountain can be approximately traced back to the Bronze Age, while the peak period was around the Han and Tang dynasties. The carving of Mandalay Mountain Rock Art continued in the Western Xia, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, lasting for four thousand years. It is really of a distant origin and a long development. The main ethnic groups that created the rock art are Tubo, Tangut, and Mongolian." (Gai, 1999) Geographically speaking, compared to the Qinghai&Tibet and Xinjiang regions, Mandalay Mountain is closer to Helan Mountain and Yinshan Mountain; however, in terms of the correlation in ecological environment and historical culture, the Badain Jaran region has more relationships with Qinghai&Tibet and Xinjiang; this is also reflected in the themes and characteristics of the rock art; there are few human face figures in the Mandalay Mountain, but there are many large-scale hunting and living scenes; while the rock art themes in the Helan Mountain and Yinshan Mountain areas are mostly human face figures and single figures, there are few large-scale scenes. In terms of styles and characteristics, the animal graphics of Mandalay Mountain have a strong dynamic sense, with the shapes of yaks and camels more similar to those of the Gansu&Qinghai region in characteristic. Compared to Helan Mountain Rock art and Yinshan Mountain Rock art, which give people a sense of sacredness and ceremony, the Mandalay Mountain Rock Art is more like a true portrayal and record of the life of people, with a stronger social atmosphere.

REFERENCES

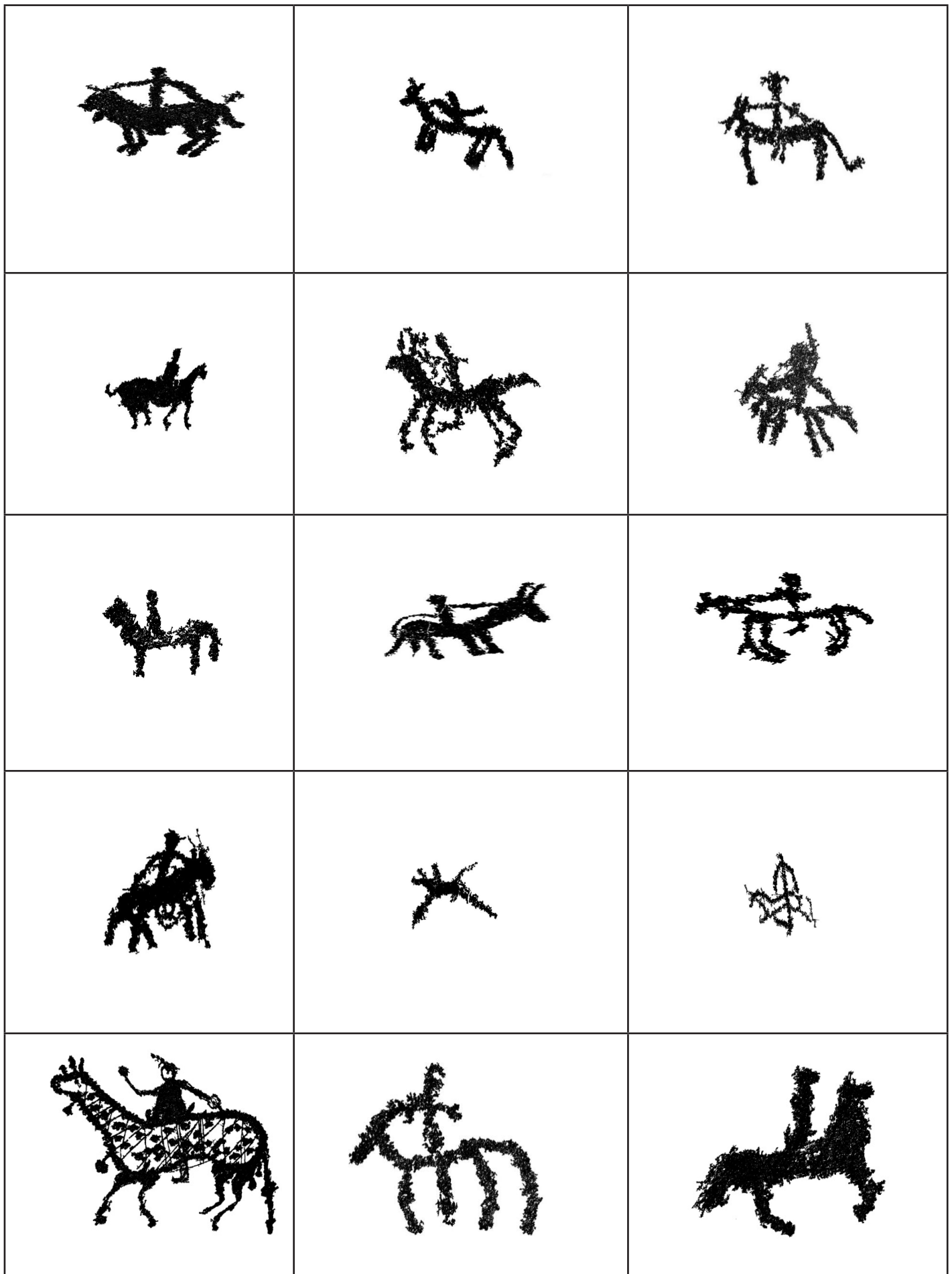


Figure 6: Several common riding and archery figures in Mandalay Mountain Rock Art



Figure 7: Hunting scenes



Figure 8 : Hunting scenes

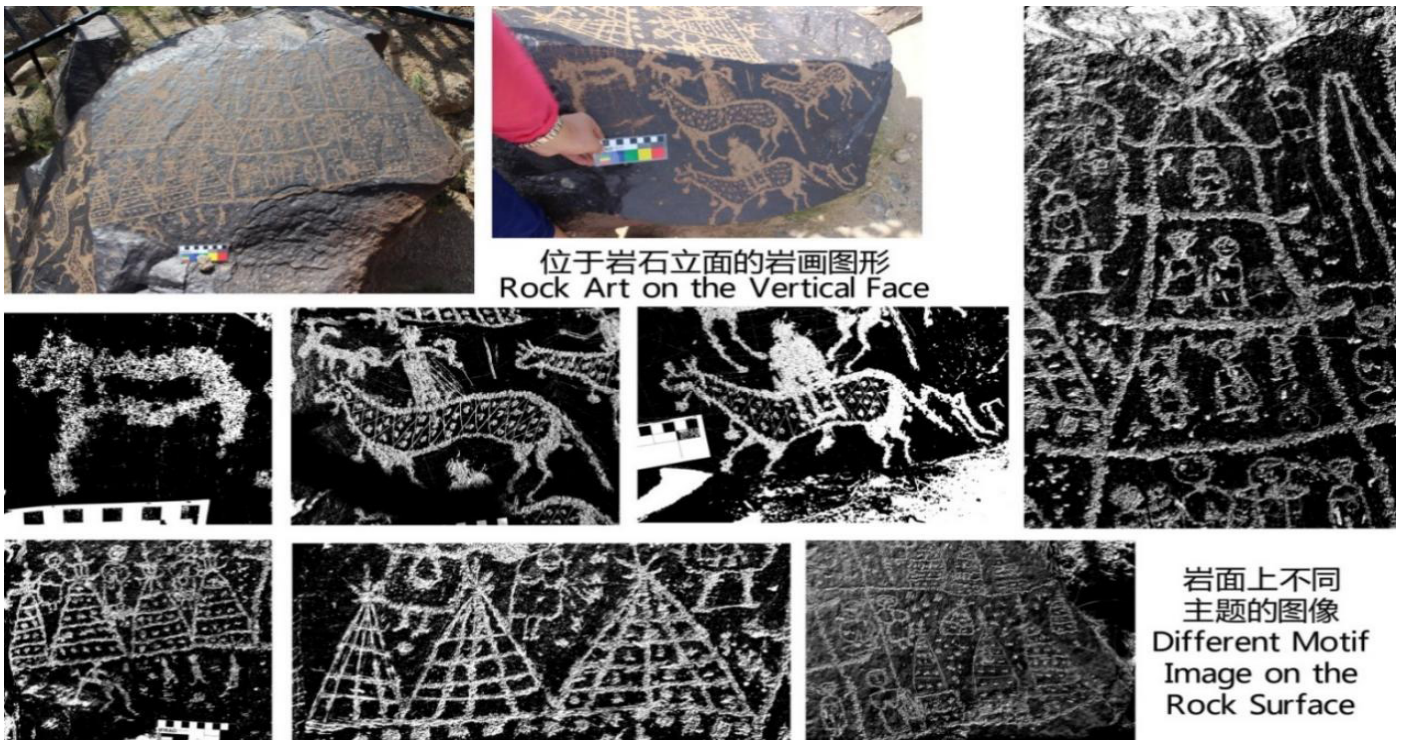


Figure 9: Life scenes

Fan Rongnan, Fan Yonglong, 2014, **Treasures in the Desert: Selected Badain Jaran Petroglyphs**, Beijing: Cultural Relics Press, P23.

Gai Shanlin, 1999. **Seeking My Dream in Mongolia—Record of Inner Mongolia Rock Art Investigation**, Jinan: Shandong Pictorial Publishing House.

Gai Shanlin, 1998, **Rock Art in the Badain Jaran Desert**, Beijing: Beijing Publishing House: P80

Wang Yasheng, 2005, **Mandalay Mountain Rock Art Book**; Lanzhou: Gansu People's Publishing House, P11.