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SECTION 8

ART DU PALÉOLITHIQUE SUPÉRIEUR
ET DU MÉSOLITHIQUE

UPPER PALAEOLITHIC AND MESOLITHIC ART

C 8.1

Art rupestre, métaphysique, idéologie.

Iconographie et mythe du Paléolithique à l'époque actuelle

Coordinateurs / Coordinators: Marcel Otte, Luis Oosterbeek, Dario Seglie,
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C 8.4

Bilan des arts rupestres en Europe

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SACRED ROCKS AND MYTHOLOGY OF SIBERIAN NATIVE PEOPLE

Ekaterina DEVLET & Marianna DEVLET

Abstract: Some Siberian rock art sites may be interpreted as sacred places or prehistoric sanctuaries thanks to their surroundings and landscapes, archaeological context and very special repertoire of rock art motifs. Rock engravings were considered by native people as reservoirs for spirits. Rock outcrops with images often coexist with special places that can be used for ceremonial activity during seasonal feasts, initiations, etc. These interpretations find support in Siberian ethnological records.

Résumé : Quelques lieux avec l'art de Sibérie, à cause des particularités de leurs emplacements de l'environnement, du matériel archéologique et de l'originalité des images artistiques peuvent être interprétés en qualité des sanctuaires. Les images rupestres pouvaient être perçues comme des récipients des esprits. Près des sorties du rocher on y trouvent souvent des terrains, utiles pour l'exécution des cérémonies pendant les fêtes de saison, initiation et autres activités rituelles. Les matériaux ethnographiques confirment cette interprétation.

From the ancient times man created carvings and paintings on rock surfaces all over the world. Rock art function and semantics varied in different periods. In archaic times the mythology was the cornerstone of the world understanding, mythology formed a system of beliefs about nature and social world, it was a uniform step of human consciousness preceded to scientific world-view. Images of wild animals prevailed in the Stone Age rock art. Flourishing of myths creation is reflected in Epipalaeolithic and the Bronze Age rock art motifs.

Basic mythological ideas rooted into the rock art, the turn of the era and the early first millennium AD gave place to a man, a hero of epic legends, instead for mythical creatures. Heroic epic plots as well as particular events of the medieval history might be carved on rock surfaces. Images could as well have a memorial function that may be confirmed by inscriptions, which sometime are just near the petroglyphs. In the Late Middle Ages rock art in Siberia was not so popular that may resulted from the evolution of rites. Some recent rock art images may be connected with shamanic cults, although there were paintings and petroglyphs were related with other themes (Davlet M., 1980; Devlet E., 2000, 2001; Devlet E. & Devlet M., 2000).

Many rock art sites retained their sacred function up to our days. For local populations sacred places with rock art until recently were a reminiscent of ancient tradition of rock worship. Renovation of rock art in some cases may be considered as a proof for living rock art tradition. Excavation near rocks with engravings demonstrated their role of a cult centres for sacrifices and other ceremonies. Different offerings were revealed in the excavations and in rock cracks, they vary from flint arrows and other ancient stone tools to gun cartridges, coins, buttons, and textile bands (Okladnikov A. & Zaporozhskaja V., 1972; Okladnikov A. & Mazin A. 1976).

Paintings and engravings may cover a single boulder or their groups, vertical, and horizontal as well as inclined rock

outcrops; rock art panels are known in mountains or at the riverside, and always demonstrate ties with natural environment. Rock art sanctuaries are usually marked by outstanding natural characteristics, by very special landscape. Some sanctuaries with the rock art are on vertical rock outcrops, in front of them there are often places where people could perform their ceremonies.

Usually sanctuaries were used during a long time span. Places and material objects of special importance for local people ethnologists explain as spheres of ancestors or spirits activity, areas of their inhabitancy. Even without images, rock and stones could be perceived by aboriginal people as incarnations or symbolic representations of mythic or real ancestors, as patrons of patrimonial units, as containers for various spirits, including spirits-ancestors and souls of alive people. Primitive man may perceived an image, carved on a surface of sacred rock, as container for a soul, the source for its revival. Now we can't give unequivocal explanation for the initial function of rock art site and motifs. In each particular case this problem should receive special consideration. Integration of the ethnographic sources and mythology (with priority given for materials of ethnic groups, historically connected with the area) has paramount importance for understanding of the rock art semantics, for reconstruction of ancient population ideological views, and ceremonial activity that was reflected in rock art.

Mugur-Sargol and Aldy-Mozaga in Sayan canyon are situated on the opposite sides of the Upper Yenisei river (Davlet M., 1980, 1998). This rock art sites should be introduced as ancient sanctuaries, where mythological ideas found representation in rock art. One may suppose that in ancient times initiation rites took place at Mugur-Sargol and Aldy-Mozaga near boulders and rock outcrops with petroglyphs. Probably, initiations were accompanied by creation of new rock art motifs, which could have a ceremonial function, serve as some kind of "visual aids", rendering ideas and concepts in symbolic way. During these

ceremonies young men took acquaintance with customs, rules of moral, were told legends.

Analysis of the spatial distribution of the rock art motifs on the rock provides a reconstruction of the world as seen by the ancient inhabitants of the Upper Yenisei. A good illustration of spatial structure of the universe comes from the Bronze Age sanctuary Mugur-Sargol in Tuva. An ancient artists presented contemporary view of the universe in those remote time of pre-shamanic and shamanic concepts, which later were recorded by ethnologists. According to ethnological source among Siberian indigenous peoples common members of the community comprehended the universe as three-levelled structure. The upper celestial world is the world of light powers, the middle world is the intermediate sphere inhabited by living, and the lower world is one of death and evil powers.

The main panel (so called "altar") of the Mugur-Sargol rock art site and ancient sanctuary is totally covered with petroglyphs (Figure 1). Artists used fissures as natural frames which separate different levels and enclosed additional spheres of the universe with its upper world inhabited by spirits-ancestors on the top and the middle world inhabited by common people at the bottom. The lower world of the evil powers was never depicted but quite rare marked by special symbols.

In the top of the main surface the celestial world is represented by various mysterious creatures: creators of the universe, mythical primogenitors, etc. Masks with anthropomorphic and fantastic features are pecked much larger than human figures on the same surface, their symbolic importance and domination are enhanced in this way. Two largest masks may personify two creators and reflect the myth of the two creators of the universe – the divine and the evil. The largest facial mask looks like a figure in bas-relief and its prominent nose follows the curves of the rock surface, it probably depicts the Lord of the upperworld. The second-largest mask of supreme evil, the Lord of the underworld, is also given extra emphasis when compared with the surrounding supernatural creatures of secondary importance by its size and terrible expression (Fig. 2.1-2). The range of spirit was conveyed in rock art by the complication of details, of facial features, and particular head dress with horns and central antenna. The comparative analysis of northern Buddhism-Lamaism cult materials and rock carvings from the Upper Yenisei River allows shaping a plan primitive rituals' reconstruction, which later were included in Lamaistic ceremonial system and became a prototype of Cham-dance mystery. Among rock art mask-faces from Mugur-Sargol rock art site one may recognize prototypes of real Dokshid masks and, first of all, the masks of the Cham central personage – Dokshid Choidzal (Davlet M., 1980, 1997).

In the long run the system of initiations brought to life a secret men unions puberty youth joined them after certain ceremonies. Traced and described by ethnologists for different areas of Europe and Asia, Africa, Australia and America secret unions are well known and closely examined

in Melanesia and Western Africa. Mythical ancestors were initiators and patrons of the unions; they often had an animal appearance or retained some animal features. During ceremonies participants frequently used various frightening masks and creation of rock art motifs, particularly with pecking of mask-faces.

Mythical ancestors were patrons of Tuvan shamans who may perform ceremonies on Mugur-Sargol Bronze Age sanctuary aiming to obtain protection of mythical ancestors. Being pecked on the rock during the ceremonies smaller masks with diverse details may embodied generalised sacred images of mythical ancestors, who linked people with their mythological primogenitors and deified dead relatives. Ties of blood with ancestors were of special importance for Tuvan shamans, since the gift of shamanizing was inherited and the most powerful shamans had to had a chain of shamans-ancestors.

Looking at the panel it is well to bear in mind that according to traditional view of the world there were a lot of different additional spheres and levels of the tripartite universe. So one may discuss the composition in the centre of the surface with strange anthropomorphs and zoomorphic figures among dwellings with adjoining pens as the depiction of a celestial settlement inhabited by dead and deified ancestors. A view of the other spheres as reflection, copy of the terrestrial world is common for traditional Siberian cultures. People believe that inhabitants of the upper world retain material forms and customs of terrestrial life. "In the sky you will be as if among the living", - says ancient Turic inscription. There is also another existing example: the mother of a local archaeological team participant died and the old relatives organized the funeral rites according to pre-lamaistic rituals. The expedition leader asked the son about the funeral and was told that "Everything is all right. She established herself comfortably and works as a seamstress, as she had worked before the death". It later turned out that a local shaman participated in the funeral and told the family that she found a job in the world of the deceased. Petroglyphs in the bottom part on the panel show inhabitants of the middle terrestrial world. There are compositions of common humane life. Images show people and domestic animals, a hunter with a bow shooting a goat and surrounded by dogs.

Information on seasonal ceremonies and rituals related with human and animal reproduction, with natural fertility has a paramount importance for the rock art interpretation. Basins on Siberian ethnography one may assume that the most important shamanic ceremonies were dated for the periods of intensive solar activity, they reconstructed mythological times of cosmos organization in the first people appearance. Praying near rock art panels could also be connected with initiation rites, when deities and spirits of ancestors as if returned back to the world of their alive relatives. The cycle character, of ceremonies, their duplication maintained unity of alive and dead: initiation rites perceived as neophyte death and rebirth. Passing initiation, youth changed his status and became an adult, competent member of a community. Acquiring new position a person, as though, died for this former social status and then revived to a new life.

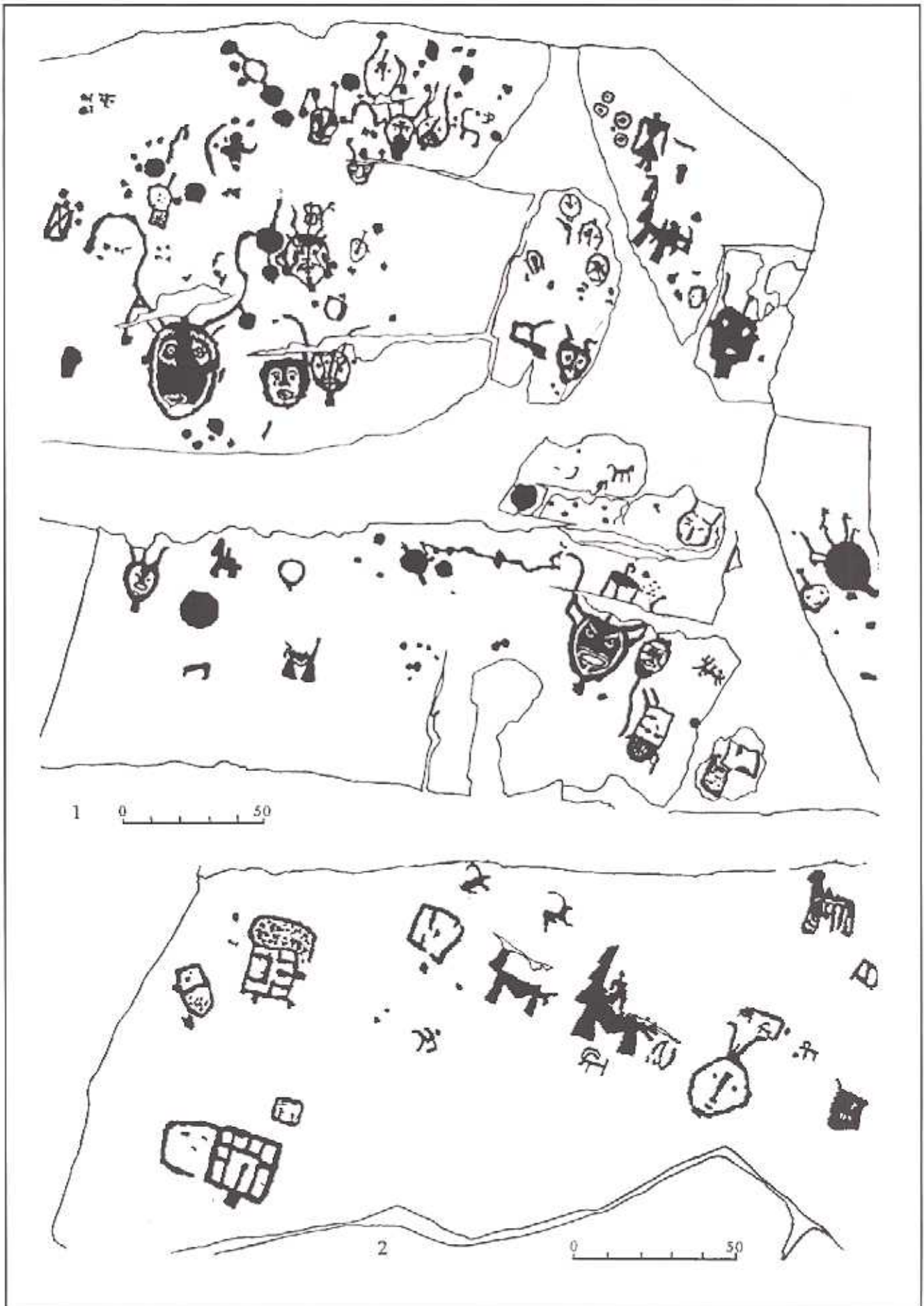


Figure 1. Central rock outcrop from Mugar-Sargol in Tuva. Fragments of the upper and central parts of the main panel with the upper world of spirits and spaces inhabited by celestials (from Devlet).

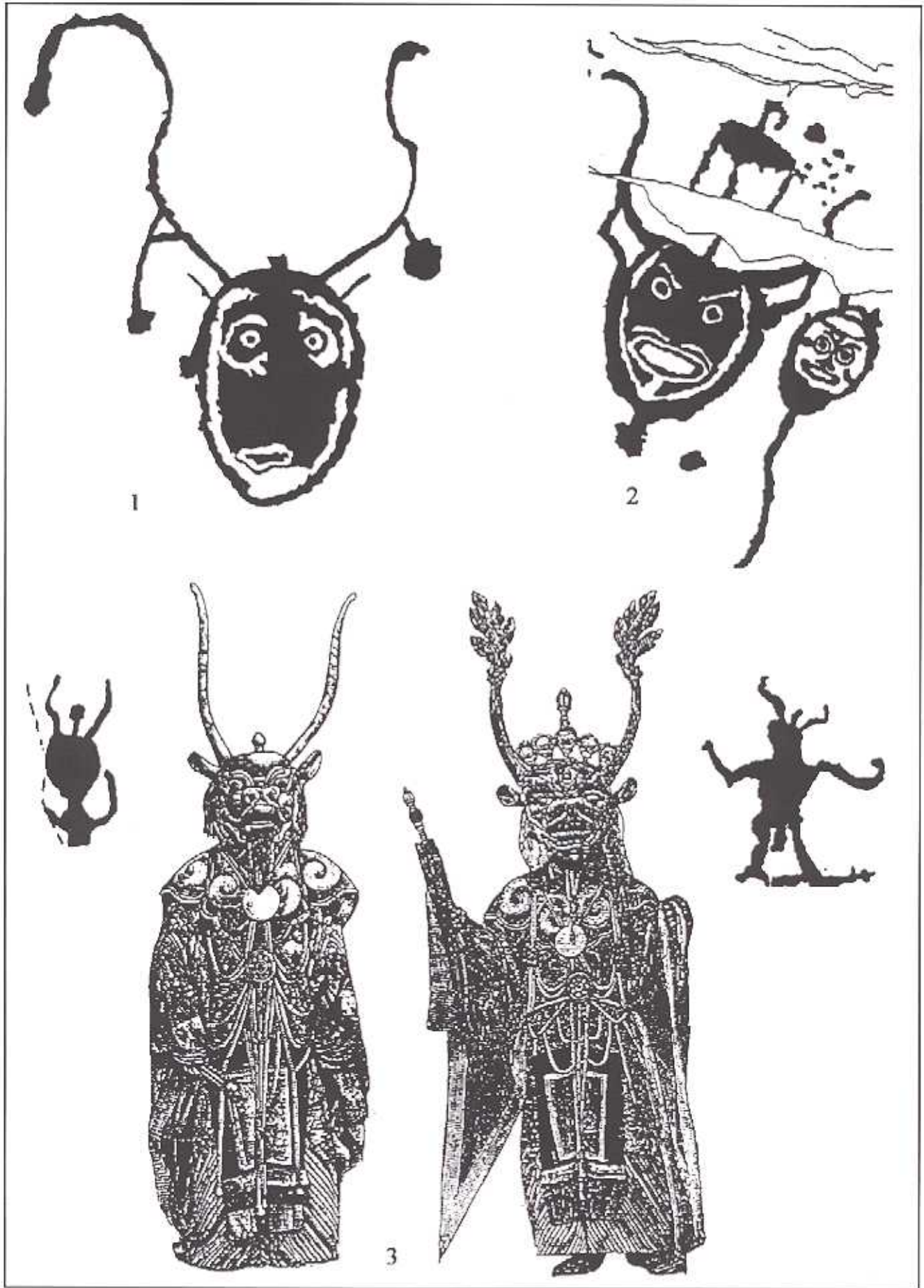


Figure 2. Two largest masks embody two supreme creators – the lord of the celestial sphere and the evil lord of the underworld (1-2). Main figures of the Lamaist Cham-dance ceremony and rock art motifs from Mugar-Sargol (3) (from Devlet).

Prayers and sacrifices at sanctuaries had to ensure prosperity, safety and unity of a primitive community. Rites and myth are closely interconnected. Myths played as stages explained and proved ceremonies. Traditional mysteries were timed to key events in people life; they tied each man with the supernatural creative powers, strengthened community and promoted maintenance of the existing system.

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