

# Stone Shamans and Flying Deer of Northern Mongolia: Deer Goddess of Siberia or Chimera of the Steppe?

William W. Fitzhugh

*Abstract.* Mongolia's Bronze Age deer stones are one of the most striking expressions of early monumental art in Central Asia, yet their age, origins, relationships, and meaning remain obscure. Speculation about Scythian connections has stimulated recent research in Mongolia that has begun to peel away their mysteries and reveals connections to Scytho-Siberian and northern art. Radiocarbon-dated horse skulls indicate pre-Scythian ages of "classic Mongolian" deer stones as well as firm association with the Late Bronze Age *khirigsuur* [kurgan] burial mound complex.

## Introduction

Sixty years of excavations in Alaska and a growing body of new data in East and Northeast Asia and northern Russia have not succeeded in identifying the source or sources of the eastward Eurasian impulses or migrations that contributed to the famous Ipiutak and Old Bering Sea cultures of Bering Strait. In 1948 Larsen and Rainey pointed toward the Bronze and Iron Age cultures of the Yamal and Uralic region of Western Siberia where a rich collection of bone, ivory, and bronze finds from the large ceremonial site of Ust-Polui at Salekhard, near the mouth of the Ob River, had been found. Ust-Polui's large collection of animal effigy forms, harpoons, dog harness parts, and ornamented needle cases, spoons, and combs seemed to suggest the presence of a maritime-adapted Eskimo-like culture. These authors also noted similarities with Han China, southern Siberia, and the Scytho-Siberian animal style art of that region. Carl Schuster (1951) further developed these ideas by suggesting specific motifs and concepts shared

by Scytho-Siberian art, Ipiutak, Old Bering Sea, and ethnographic Yup'ik art. Later Henry Collins (1971) noted the similarities between composite Ipiutak burial masks and the masking tradition of the Shang and Chou dynasties. But since then, little progress has been made in defining these connections in more precise terms. It remains to be seen where these influences upon early Alaskan Eskimo art came from and how they were transmitted into the North Pacific and Bering Sea region (Fitzhugh 1998).

In this paper I present information from northern Mongolia that relates to the general problem of animal-style art in Eurasia. The new data come from an old source. Although long known for their artistic merit, deer stone monuments have been eclipsed by the spectacular discoveries from the frozen tombs excavated by Gryaznov (1950) and Rudenko (1970) at Pazyryk in the Russian Altai. More recent excavations at Arzhan (Gryaznov 1980) and other early Scythian mound burials (Polosmak 2000; Polosmak and Molodin 2000), with

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finds dating as early as 2700 B.P., have amplified earlier discoveries and provide the first clear Scythian link to Mongolian deer stone art. Compared with these treasures Mongolia's deer stones increasingly began to be seen as a derivative style dating to the late period of Scythian art.

In the following discussion I describe new work on the Mongolian Deer Stone-Khirigsuur (DSK) complex and the implications of its revised dating on discussions regarding the origins of Scythian art and ritual life (Fitzhugh 2005; Fitzhugh, Bayarsaikhan, and Marsh 2005). Because deer stone art illustrates many features of the lives and technology of these late Bronze Age peoples, analysis sheds light on the question of animal style art and its links with shamanism, ceremonialism, reindeer breeding, hunting, animal-human transformation, ritual sight, and other features characteristic of circumpolar art and culture.

### **Mongolia: Crossroads of Inner Asia**

Deer stones (Fig. 1) have been previously studied from a stylistic point of view by Russian archaeologists beginning with A. P. Okladnikov and

N. Dikov (Fitzhugh, in press a); Jacobson-Tepfer 2001), but were unknown in the West. Unlike the Karasuk and Tagar cultures in which mounds and stelae are associated with dwelling sites and long lists of artifact types, Mongolia's deer stones floated in a chronological and cultural void. In the following decades, a large literature developed as Russian scholars described deer stones and *khirigsuur* mounds and offered various interpretations. Esther Jacobson has presented many of these details in her magnum opus, *The Deer Goddess of Ancient Siberia: A Study in the Ecology of Belief* (1993), and in other publications (e.g., Jacobson-Tepfer 2001).

Landlocked, horse-ridden, full of sheep and goats, and decidedly southern in latitude, Mongolia at first seemed an unlikely place to search for polar connections, but its relevance quickly became obvious. High elevation, cold winters, and a need to package one's assets within a nomadic life-style have created similarities to peoples of circumpolar regions. Inner Asia was the original source of the seventh to eighth century Turkic expansion that resulted in its languages, culture, and peoples spreading from the Altai across western



**Figure 1.** The Ushkin Uver deer stone site near Muren, Khovsgol aimag, northern Mongolia, has fourteen deer stones positioned in two north-south alignments. A fifteenth stone was recently recovered after having been stolen from the site.

Asia and into eastern and northern Siberia, and it seems likely that Mongolia was the source for expansion of Mongoloid peoples into the Far East, Northeast Asia, and Alaska in the early Holocene. Anyone familiar with Eskimo/Inuit culture, character, humor, and outlook is astonished to discover these same characteristics in Mongol people. At present, however, information on Inner Asian connections with the north lies primarily in language and genetic distributions (Zerjal et al. 2002; Zerjal et al. 2003), unsecured by chronology or mechanisms of transfer.

One of the goals in elucidating Mongolia's circumpolar connections was to test another aspect of Mongolia's northern connections: S. I. Vainshtein's (1980, 1981) theory about the origins of reindeer breeding. Based on models developed from contemporary and historical reindeer husbandry, he reasoned that reindeer domestication began along the steppe/taiga ecotone where forest reindeer-hunters applied husbandry techniques they had observed being practiced on sheep, goats, bovids, camels, and horses by neighboring Neolithic peoples on the steppes to the south. Contemporary Dukha reindeer pastoralism in northern Mongolia and southern Tuva is especially cogent to this model as it represents the still-persisting ethnographic example of an intermediate stage in Vainshtein's proposed developmental sequence: 1) tethered and hobbled reindeer used to lure wild reindeer, 2) pack animals for transporting equipment and people, 3) a supplemental source of food, milk, antler, and fur (the current Mongolian Dukha practice), and—most familiar to northern scholars and the public, 4), moderate and intensive migratory reindeer herding of the Saami and North Siberian variety. The Dukha follow a pastoral adaptation that involves shifting animals over short distances up and down mountain slopes between the forests in winter and the more insect-free mountain tundra pastures in summer. Mongol herders use a similar seasonal pattern for sheep and goats on the steppe rather than the mountain zone, and this settlement system seems to have persisted with only minor changes for at least the past 3,500–4,000 years, supplemented by fishing and forest hunting.

Initially it seemed that studies of Dukha herding might shed light on deer stones and the history of reindeer husbandry, but we were unable to find early sites with large samples of reindeer bones to test for signs of domestication. We also investigated the possibility that oral history and ethnography might provide information for interpreting deer stone distribution and function. Neither the Dukha nor the Mongols, however, have any oral history relating specifically to deer stones. Nevertheless, surveys demonstrated that deer stone monuments and *khirigsuurs* are linked

with the open steppe environment, the habitat of Mongol herders today; they are never found in the taiga and mountain tundra zones and in this respect have no discernable connection with Dukha or other Siberian peoples and cultures as they are known in the present. Similarly, study of deer stone imagery established that the central deer motif is that of the Asian elk (*Cervus canadensis sibiricus*), also known as the Altai maral, not the reindeer (*Rangifer*) or moose (*Alces*), although these animals also appear as supplementary images on some Mongolian, Altai, and Siberian deer stones and rock art. Given archaeological evidence for continuity in house types (use of the felt *ger* or yurt) and the nomadic-based steppe herding system, the present subsistence-settlement system employed by Mongol steppe-dwellers may extend back to late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age times.

### Bronze Age DSK Complex

Our principal focus has been on Mongolia's Bronze Age monuments, especially deer stones. I was particularly struck by their beauty and potential for investigating the putative Scytho-Siberian connection in early Eskimo art. Since the 1960s, when Soviet scholars began working collaboratively with Mongolian archaeologists, the large *khirigsuur* burial complexes and deer stone sites were early targets of research. Researchers quickly recognized that the two were often associated at the same sites, were distributed in the same areas of the central and western Mongolian steppe, were probably burial monuments, and it seemed that deer stones represented belted warriors covered with carvings of a specific form of iconic deer motif and other mysterious images and symbols. But when excavations revealed that neither *khirigsuurs* nor deer stones produced artifacts, archaeological work shifted to more productive sites. Nevertheless, a major product of these early efforts was a detailed inventory of deer stone sites conducted by V. V. Volkov, whose descriptions and sketches of some 350 Mongolian stones (Volkov 1981) provided a research baseline, established a preliminary typology, and linked the deer image stylistically with Scythian art from the Altai and southern Tuva (Volkov and Novgorodova 1975). His distribution map (Fig. 2) also showed that while deer stones are found beyond the boundaries of Mongolia they are concentrated in the most productive, well-watered region of the northern Mongolian steppe that has been the core area for Mongolian cultural development during the past four thousand years.

Until recently, Mongolia's *khirigsuurs* have been seen through the prism of Russian scholarship and were considered mortuary features related to the Karasuk and other cultures of South

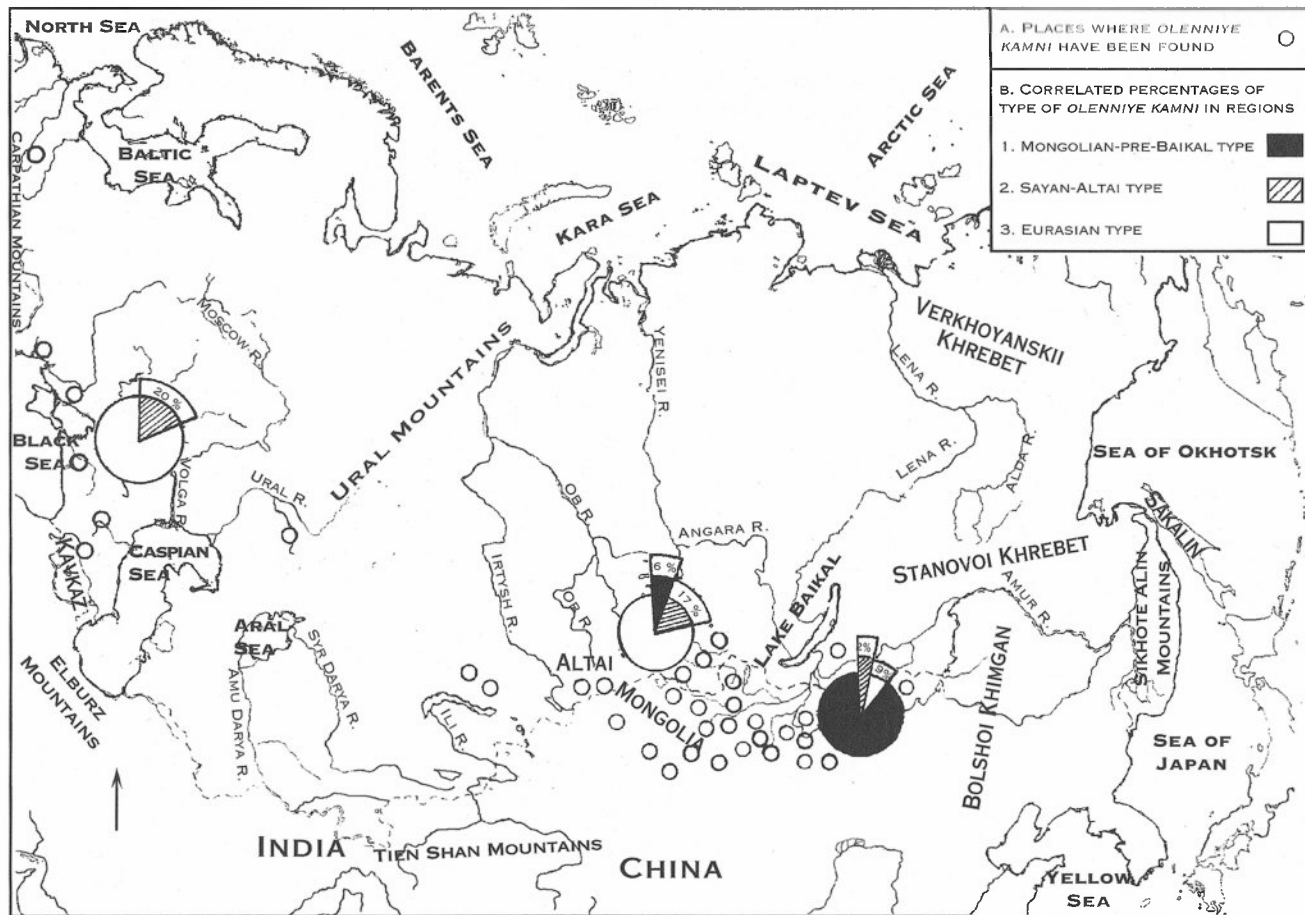


Figure 2. Distribution of deer stone types from central Mongolia to Eastern Europe, from Volkov’s 1981 monograph *Deer Stones of Mongolia* (in Russian), Map 19. The Russian term *olenniye kamni* translates as “deer stones.”

Siberia from the Altai to Baikal. Despite superficial similarities to Russian kurgans, the Mongolian mounds are distinctive, having complex architecture that includes a central mound of boulders, a rock-paved plaza or inner space enclosed by a rectangular or circular stone fence, with smaller satellite boulder mounds at regularly spaced intervals immediately east of the fence, and beyond that an array of small hearths encircled by cobblestones (Fig. 3). *Khirigsuurs* always “face” east, and sometimes have a stone pavement that extends east from the central mound to the stone fence and usually have satellite mounds located only on the eastern side of the *khirigsuur*. Excavations have shown conclusively that the central mounds covered human burials, even though human remains were usually missing or poorly preserved, having been placed in shallow sub-mound pits or stone coffins that did not favor organic preservation. A distinctive feature of *khirigsuur* burials is the absence of grave deposits.

When deer stones were also found lacking artifact inclusions, attention focused on their sculp-

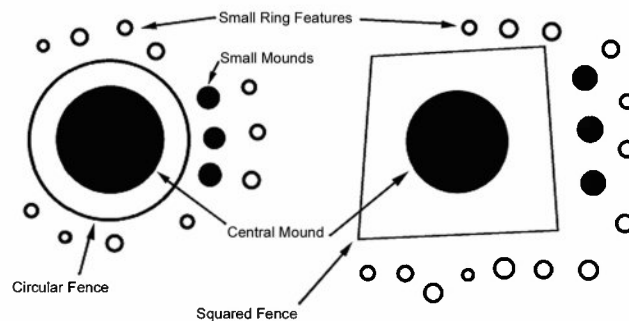


Figure 3. Diagram of square and round-fenced *khirigsuurs*. The meaning of these different shapes, which occur in approximately equal numbers, has not been determined.

tural qualities (Jacobson 1993:143; Okladnikov 1954). Made of granite plinths in northern Mongolia, and more often of greywacke and slate in Western Mongolia and the Altai, deer stones occur in a variety of sizes, shapes, and artistic forms. All are identified as stylized human figures by an

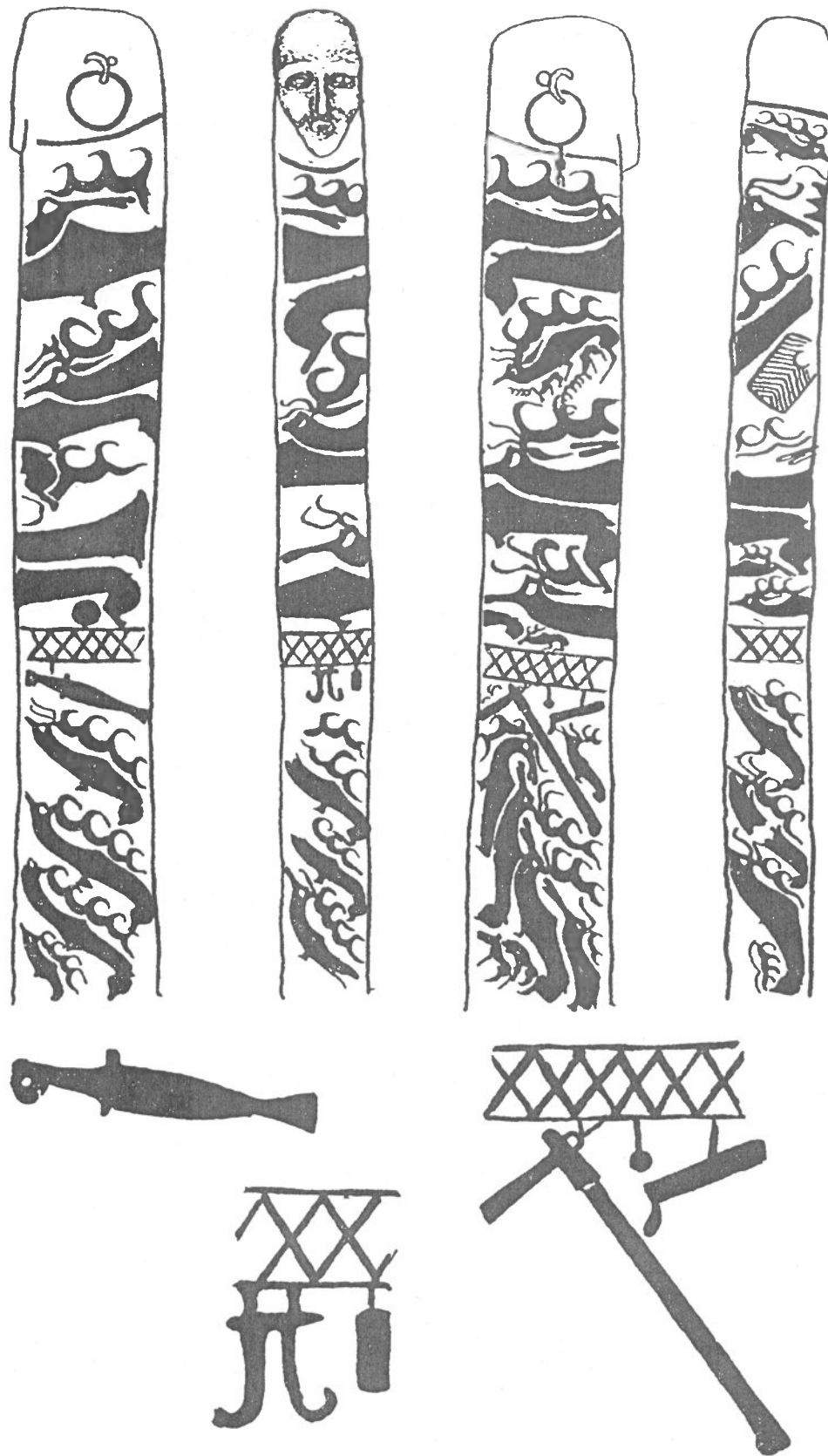


Figure 4. Volkov's illustration in his 1981 monograph *Deer Stones of Mongolia* of Ushkin Uver Deer Stone 14, which is unusual in having a full rendition of a human face, perhaps a shaman, shown with lips pursed as though singing or blowing.

anthropomorphic formula including a head, torso, and waist through use of certain iconographic conventions (Fig. 4). Most stones are square or rectangular in cross-section and are from 0.5 m to 3.5 m high. Their tops may be rounded or flat but more frequently angle up toward the east. Features are pecked or ground into the surface of the stone. In rare instances the head area shows a full human face which always faces east toward the rising sun, but often is signified only by two or three slash marks (//, ///) and is separated from the torso by an arcing series of shallow pits representing a beaded necklace. Ears are indicated on the south and north sides of the stone by circular hoops with dangling ornaments apparently depicting a common Late Bronze Age ear-ring style. The torso section is usually carved with images of the Asian maral in identical shapes, shown springing with legs flexed tightly under its body, a prominent peaked crest at the withers, and a large wave-like rack of antlers sweeping back along the spine. Rather than a deer or elk head, the artist carved the rounded head of a bird with an enlarged round eye, a bird's bulging throat, and a long bill with its bulbous end slightly parted as if emitting a call or cry. The torso usually carries a series of identical deer images displayed in ascending ranks with their bodies angled upwards. The waist area of the stone is indicated by a belt (Fig. 5), often textured in various geometric patterns, from which hang tools, weapons, and recognizable Bronze Age implement types such as swords, daggers, knives, fire-starters, chariot rein hooks, quivers, and other objects. Because no two deer stones show exactly the same types and sizes of tool types or arrangement of deer motifs, deer stones probably are representations of real individuals whose warrior belts and weapons were known to their followers.

In the absence of artifacts and human remains, early deer stone studies centered on the interpretation of their carvings and styles (Fitzhugh in press a, in press b; Novgorodova 1989). Shield-like motifs resembling military "sergeant's stripes" often found on the torso sections have been likened variously to military shields, animal roof palates, and skeletal designs on shaman drum beaters. The rare depictions of human faces are usually seen with rounded, open mouths—as though singing or chanting—and seem likely to represent shamanistic power or séance. The deer-bird image also suggests spiritual transformation experienced in shamanic flight in the passage from earth to sky, or the passage of the soul of a deer stone personage from earthly life to the heavens after death. It seems likely that these images replicate deer-bird images tattooed on the torsos of the real warriors who were represented by the deer stones, perhaps giving them protection from dangerous forces, spirits, or events. A similar interpretation seems



**Figure 5.** Belt detail of Ushkin Uver Deer Stone 9 showing recurved bow, quiver, shaman's mirror, axe, knife, and whetstone hanging from a patterned belt.

likely for the elaborate animal-styled tattoos found on the bodies of the frozen warriors recovered from the Pazyryk tombs.

Now estimated to number more than one thousand (when including fallen and minimally carved examples), deer stones probably represent prominent individuals who were leaders and warriors. The absence of any sign of human remains confirms that deer stones are not grave stones; most probably they are cenotaph monuments for dead leaders lost or buried elsewhere. Nevertheless our excavations show that deer stones are not the only features at these sites. Encircling Ulaan Tolgoi DS4 a few meters from the base of stone were a series of 2–3 m diameter stone mounds covering bundled deposits of horse heads, cervical vertebrae, and hooves (Fig. 6). Such horse head burials always have the muzzle facing east or southeast (Fig. 7). Radiocarbon dates on horse teeth produce dates of cal. 2800–3200 B.P. (Table 1). At Ulaan Tolgoi and more than 30 other sites we have excavated in northern Mongolia, horses were sacrificed and their heads, vertebrae, and hooves were buried as part of the ritual related to erecting the stone. Contemporaneity between the deer stones and the horse head burials has been established by three criteria: pattern conformity in the circular arrangement of horse head burials around the base of deer stones; stratigraphy showing deer stone and horse head burial pits originating from the same buried soil horizon; and the presence of pecking stones found around the base of the deer stones and inside horse burial features. Often the pecked corners of these stones

closely match the concave pecked grooves of the deer-bird figures and other motifs displayed in deer stone art. It is probable that these pecking stones were used only for smoothing rather than producing the grooved cuts of deer stone images since it would have been impossible for stone tools to have produced the deep cuts, often with right-angled bottom corners, seen on many deer stones. Beyond the circle of deer stones and horse head burials one finds circular stone hearth rings containing burned bones of sheep, goats, and other species too fragmented to identify, including large mammals like bovids or more likely, remains of the sacrificed horses.

We have also conducted excavations at the satellite horse mounds and hearths at *khirigsuur* sites. The small boulder mounds, always located on the eastern sides of *khirigsuurs*, contain east-facing horse head packages identical to those at deer stones and date to the same period. Small *khirigsuurs* may have one or a few satellite horse mounds; large *khirigsuurs* may have hundreds;

and at the huge mound at Urt Bulagiin (Fig. 8) in the Khanuy Valley, there are more than 1,700 individual horse mounds (Allard and Erdenebaatar 2005). Identical radiocarbon dates on the innermost and outermost ranks of these horse burials (Table 1), indicate that even large mounds may have been built during a “radiocarbon” instant in time rather than sequentially over long periods of time. Both deer stones and *khirigsuurs* have identical types of horse burials as well as circular feasting hearths as their outermost ring of features. Excavations of circular hearths surrounding deer stones and *khirigsuurs* show identical structure and each contain the same types of calcined food remains. Dating and structural correspondence between the two site types establish that *khirigsuurs* and deer stones are integral components of a single ceremonial system central to the definition of the DSK complex. A large series of radiocarbon dates show these features dating 300 to 500 years earlier than Arzhan and other early Scythian phase sites.

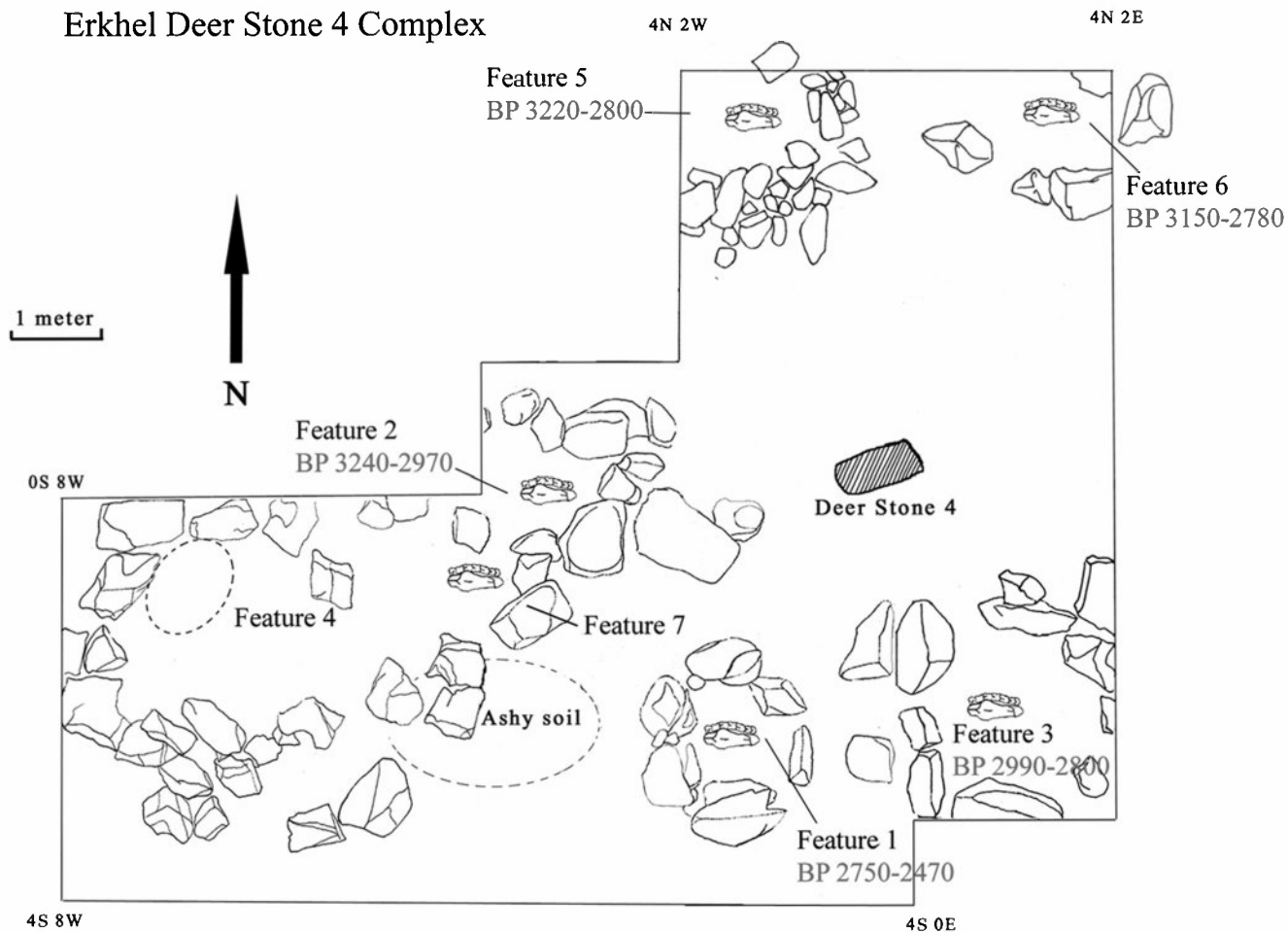


Figure 6. Excavation map of burial features encircling the base of Ulaan Tolgoi Deer Stone 4, each containing buried horse heads, neck vertebrae, and hooves.



**Figure 7.** A typical package of horse remains from the Area 3, Feature 3 at Khuushuutiin Gol, Tsagaan Uul sum, Khovsgol aimag, northern Mongolia. Horse heads always face east or southeast and usually are accompanied by seven neck vertebrae and four hooves.

The early deer stone dates from Khovsgol province raise interesting questions about their origins and their impacts on later cultural developments, including the development of Scythian culture and art, for which the earliest dates at present come from the large mound complex west of the Mongolian border at Arzhan in Kazakhstan (Gryaznov 1980). Deer stone art, particularly representations of the deer motif, has been frequently cited for its Scythian-related style. The Mongolian deer stones, now dated securely for the first time, establish that deer stone art is pre- and possibly proto-Scythian rather than Scythian-related or Scythian derived.

### Connections and Interactions

The new data on the DSK complex sheds light on Mongolia's Bronze Age connections in two directions: west and north. At present, connections to

the east that are crucial to understanding cultural development in Northeast Asia and the North Pacific remain unknown.

### DSK and Slab Burials

Interactions between the Slab Burial people SB, seen as part of Tagar Culture (Cybiktarov 2003), and the DSK complex provide perspectives bearing on DSK contacts further west. Until a few years ago these two burial types were thought to be synchronous components of the South Siberian Karasuk tradition (Jacobson 1993:145). Slab burials (also known in Mongolia as Square Burials and in Russia as Stone Slab Tombs) are 1–2 meters deep and were placed without covering mounds within a square or rectangular arrangement of vertical stone slabs (Fig. 9). In contrast to DSK sites, SB sites have copious artifact and faunal deposits, but like DSK sites their human remains are often



Table 1. Radiocarbon Dates from Deer Stone and Khirigsuur Sites in Khovsgol and Arkhangai Aimags.

Site/Feature	Location/Year	Sample No.	Material	Uncorrected	Calib (2-sig)
Ulaan Tolgoi DS4 S-17	Erkhel/2003	B-182958 AMS	charcoal	2170 ± 40 B.P.	B.P. 2320–2050
Ulaan Tolgoi DS4 S-7	Erkhel/2003	B-182959 AMS	charcoal	2930 ± 40 B.P.	B.P. 3220–2950
Ulaan Tolgoi DS4 F1	Erkhel/2004	B-193738 AMS	bone coll.	2530 ± 40 B.P.	B.P. 2750–2470
Ulaan Tolgoi DS4 F2	Erkhel/2004	B-193739 AMS	bone coll.	2950 ± 40 B.P.	B.P. 3240–2970
Ulaan Tolgoi DS4 F3	Erkhel/2004	B-193740 AMS	bone coll.	2810 ± 40 B.P.	B.P. 2990–2800
Ulaan Tolgoi DS4, F5	Erkhel/2005	B-207205 RAD	bone coll.	2790 ± 70 B.P.	B.P. 3220–2800
Ulaan Tolgoi DS4, F6	Erkhel/2005	B-207206 RAD	bone coll.	2740 ± 70 B.P.	B.P. 3150–2780
Ulaan Tolgoi DS5, T1	Erkhel/2002	B-169296 AMS	charcoal	2090 ± 40 B.P.	B.P. 2150–1960
Ulaan Tolgoi DS5, F1	Erkhel/2005	B-215694 AMS	tooth coll.	2800 ± 40 B.P.	B.P. 2980–2790
Ulaan Tolgoi DS5, F2	Erkhel/2006	B-222535 AMS	tooth coll.	2830 ± 40 B.P.	B.P. 3050–2850
Ulaan Tolgoi M1, F1	Erkhel/2005	B-207209 AMS	bone coll.	1880 ± 40 B.P.	B.P. 1900–1720
Ulaan Tolgoi M1, F2	Erkhel/2005	B-215692 AMS	tooth coll.	2860 ± 40 B.P.	B.P. 3080–2870
Ulaan Tolgoi M1, F2	Erkhel/2005	B-215644 AMS	charcoal	2980 ± 40 B.P.	B.P. 3310–3000
Ulaan Tolgoi M1, F3	Erkhel/2005	B-215693 AMS	tooth coll.	2950 ± 60 B.P.	B.P. 3320–2940
Nukhtiin Am DS1/2, F1	Galt/2006	B-222534 AMS	tooth coll.	2830 ± 40 B.P.	B.P. 3050–2850
Evdtd 2 DS 2 Circ. feat.	Evdtd Valley	B-215643 AMS	charcoal	3030 ± 40 B.P.	B.P. 3350–3090
Tsatstain Kh DS1, F1	Tsaagan/2005	B-207208 AMS	tooth coll.	2920 ± 40 B.P.	B.P. 3160–2920
Tsatstain Kh DS1, F2	Tsaagan/2005	B-207207 AMS	tooth coll.	3000 ± 40 B.P.	B.P. 3330–3060
Urt Bulagyn KYR1–21	Khanuy/2006	B-222532 AMS	tooth coll.	2780 ± 50 B.P.	B.P. 2980–2770
Urt Bulagyn KYR1–22	Khanuy/2006	B-222533 AMS	tooth coll.	2790 ± 40 B.P.	B.P. 2970–2780
Hort Azuur DS2, F3	Erkhel/2006	B-240691 AMS	charcoal	2690 ± 40 B.P.	B.P. 2870–2750

poorly preserved. Deer stones scavenged from DSK sites were often used as retaining walls and corner posts in slab burials and were sometimes inserted upside-down, showing little respect for DSK traditions. In many cases slab burials are found on the outer edges of DSK complexes, positioned beyond the last-constructed horse mounds. It appears that the purpose was to both mine DSK sites for building materials as well as to incorporate some element of DSK sacred power and prestige, perhaps to gain favor among a resident local population. At a minimum, architectural incorporation suggests a rapid shift to a new burial system that did not require vast expenditures of public effort as was the case in the construction of *khirigsuurs*. The shift from elaborate circular (*ger/yurt*-like) megalithic DSK constructions with celestial symbolism and simple burials without grave offerings, to SB burials in rectangular (log-house type) graves with deep burial chambers and an abundance of animal

and artifact offerings represents a revolutionary change in social, political, and religious views.

It is tempting to see such a dramatic change as the result of external intervention. In Mongolia square burials begin almost exactly when the use of deer stones and *khirigsuurs* ceases, about cal. 2700 B.P., and continue well into the Scythian period (Honeychurch, personal communication 2008). In Russian Transbaikal, however, dates for the SB complex begin as early as 3300 B.P. As in Mongolia, many of these burials use re-purposed deer stones (Cybiktarov 2003:90). If these dates are accurate and have been calibrated (which is unclear in the author's publication) they indicate earlier dates for deer stones in Transbaikal than in Mongolia, and earlier dates for SBC/KRS interaction or cultural replacement. Both Russian and Mongolian dates suggest that slab burial appearance is time-transgressive northeast-to-southwest, and Russian scholars believe this shift is accompa-

nied by a replacement of Caucasoid by Mongoloid physical types (Cybiktarov 2003:84).

### Broader Horizons

Many scholars have noted a Scythian stylistic element in the Mongolian deer stone image, with its graceful, flowing body lines and wave-like antlers. Except in western Mongolia and the Sayan-Altai region, deer stones rarely depict predator-prey encounters, coiled or twisted animals, or other signature Scythian elements. While a few of these elements are found on Khovsgol deer stones, their frequency increases dramatically in western Mongolia and the Altai. As at Pazyryk, these images show animals in hunting scenes and include predators (mostly felines and boars) and prey (mostly deer, reindeer, ibex, and sheep). Domesticated animals like horses, sheep, goats, camels, and bovines are not depicted. Altai-Sayan deer stones also display weapons more prominently and more frequently in action poses, whereas Khovsgol stones show weapons sheathed, as parts of a warrior's costume. The absence of horse images is interest-

ing, given the prominence of this species in deer stone and *khirigsuur* sacrificial ritual. Deer stones are believed to have spread into the western Asia and the Pontic regions where Scythian groups settled as Saka, Sarmatian, and others described by Herodotus. These deer stones are not the classic Mongolian form with flying deer images and are similar to the simpler Sayan-Altai stones (Fitzhugh, in press b).

Until recently the only way to explore deer stones was through methods using typology and art history. Volkov (1981; Volkov and Novgorodova 1975), and Savinov (1994) recognized three deer stone types: 1) West Asian-European, with belt, ear-ring hoops, face slashes, and pitted necklaces (Fig. 10), 2) Sayan-Altai, with some of the above markings but including free-floating, often straight-legged animals, daggers, and other implements, but few or only crudely carved central deer motifs (Fig. 11), and 3) the classic elegant central Mongolian type (Fig. 12). Various theories have been advanced about whether these types represent regional, chronological, or stylistic variants. Gryaznov (1978;



Figure 8. View of excavation of one of ca. 1,700 sacrificial horse head burials at Urt Bulagiin, Khanuy River Valley.



**Figure 9.** A Square (or Slab) Burial built with re-purposed deer stones as corner posts and wall-retainers at the Burd-nii Ekh site north of Ulziit, northern Mongolia.

cited in Jacobson 1993:152) argued for an origin with the Sayan-Altai type ca. 3200–2900 B.P. with subsequent development into the classic Mongolian type during the Scythian period, ca. 2700–2400 B.P. Kyzlasov (1978) argued for a Scythian date for the Sayan-Altai stones with animals and a later date for the Mongolian type. Quite the contrary, as anticipated by Jacobson, our data show the Mongolian type was being used during the 500 years preceding the Scythian period. At present the Sayan-Altai and Western stones are dated only by their general Scythian association. If the Gryaznov-Kyzlasov view is correct, Scythian art must have developed rapidly from still obscure beginnings. If, however, Mongolian type stones are earlier, as now known, then one must consider an antiquity pre-dating 3500 B.P., before the Slab Burial complex, probably in southern Siberia or Manchuria. My own hypothesis, still without benefit of  $^{14}\text{C}$ -dates from Western Mongolia, is that Western and Sayan-Altai stones developed from the Mongolian type as the DSK complex shifted west under pressure from advancing SB culture groups or influence and merged with an exist-

ing early Scythian Altai tradition, at which time their deer stones lost their unified style and spiritual content. Compared to the “classic” Mongolian stones, the Sayan-Altai stones exude a “post-classic” gestalt that suggests centralized social control over artistic canons had weakened and the power of the central deer-bird deity had faded, giving the western monuments a more secular function. Such a view would support Jettmar’s (1994) proposal that deer stones resulted from a rapid transfer of wood-carved figures to a stone medium due to availability of metal tools. Such a view would also imply a Siberian northern taiga forest connection for deer stone origins.

### Northern Connections

If Mongolian deer stones are part of an earlier pre-Scythian cultural horizon, what role might this third millennium B.P. complex have played in cultural development in the taiga and arctic zones of northern Eurasia? Are there any signs of Mongolian influence in northern Siberia that might have influenced northeast Asia and the North Pacific

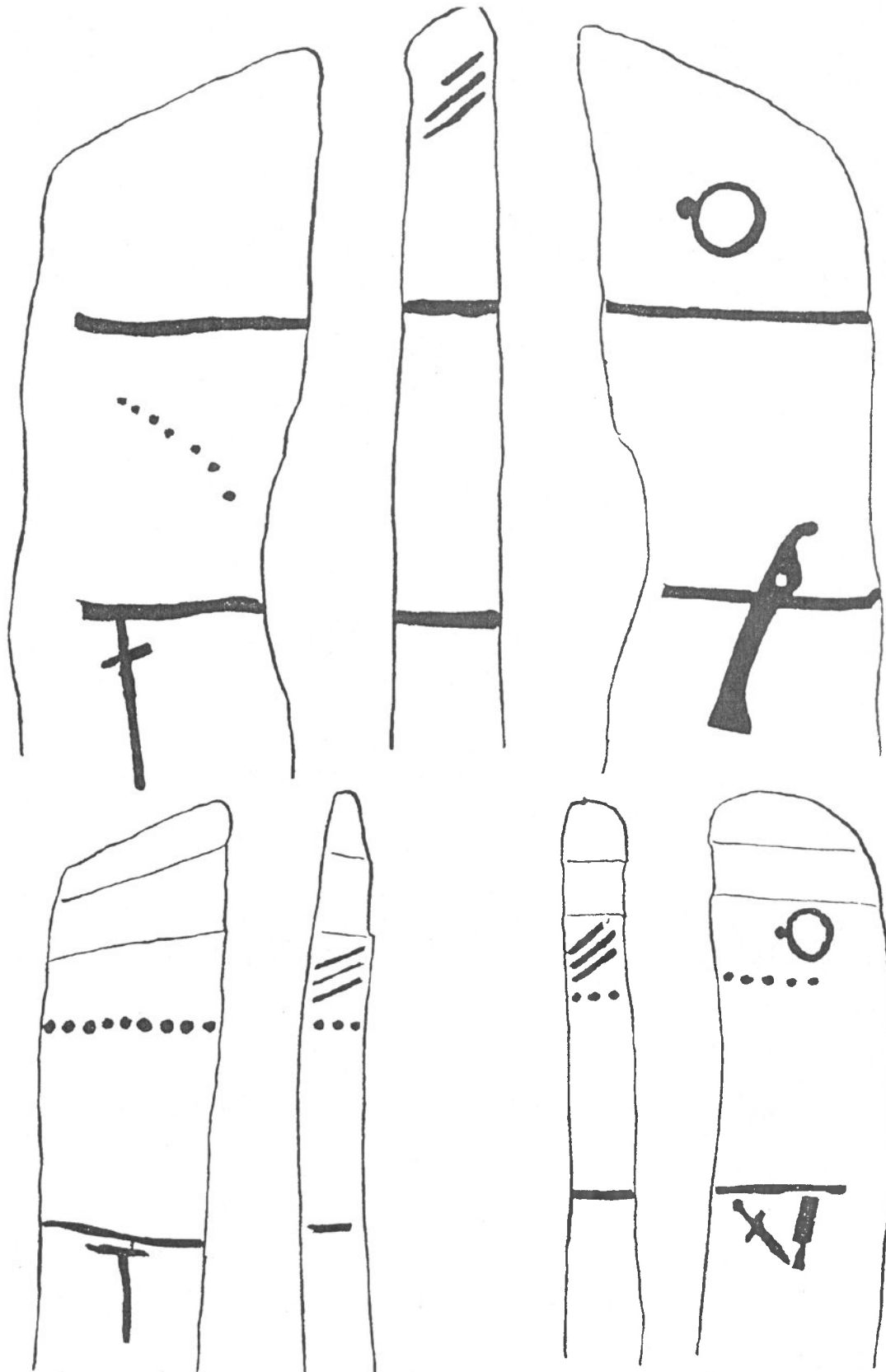


Figure 10. Volkov's West Asian-European deer stone type with a simple belt, ear-ring hoops, face slashes, and necklace pits (from Volkov 1981).

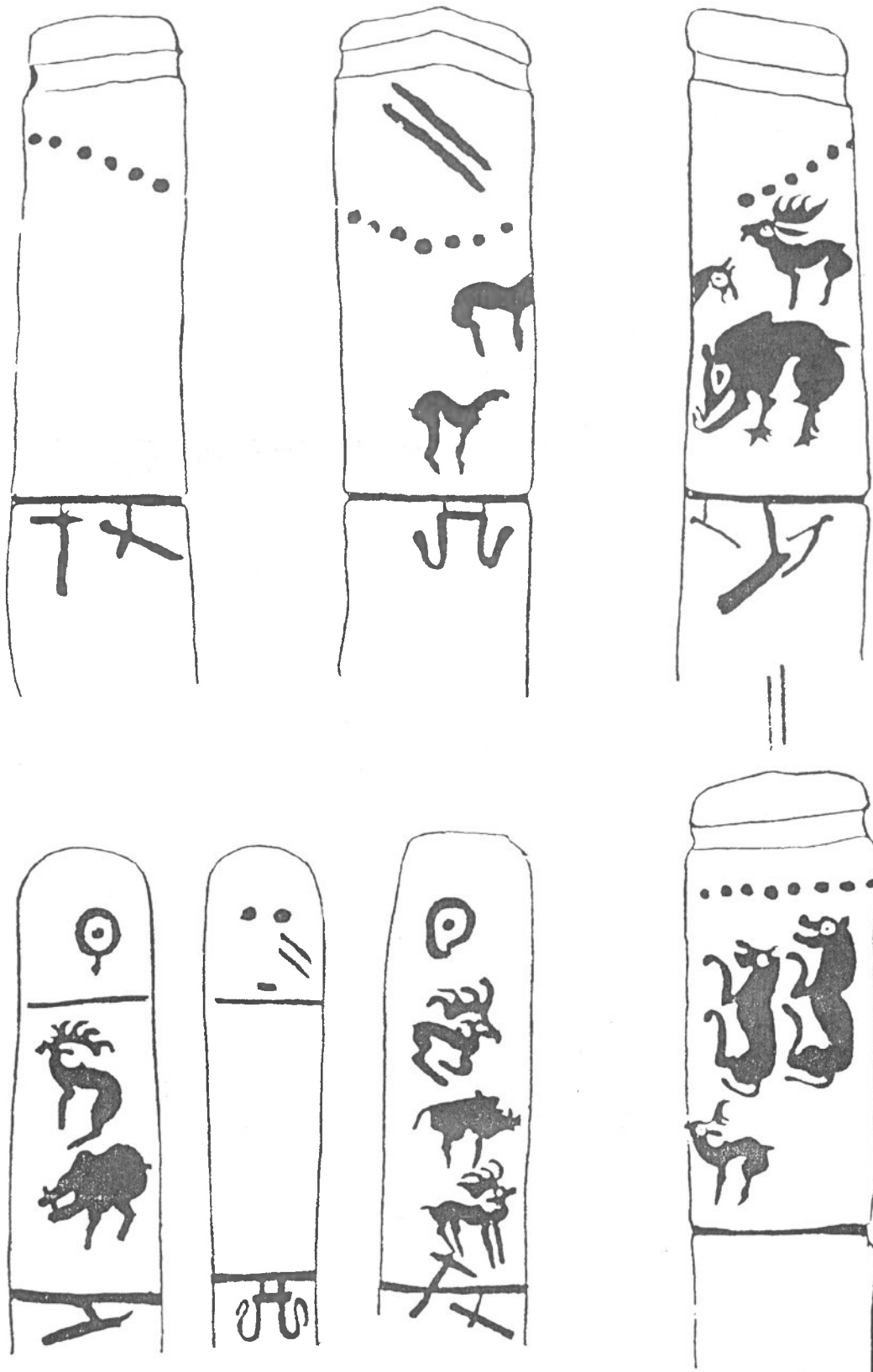


Figure 11. Volkov's Sayan-Altai deer stone type with West Asian-European markings in addition to frequent display of straight-legged animals and implements 'floating' in the torso area of the stone rather than attached to its belt, and rather crudely-carved deer, if present at all (from Volkov 1981).



**Figure 12.** A “Classic style” deer stone example, Deer Stone 4 from the Ulaan Tolgoi site west of Erkhel nuur (lake) north of Muren. Excavations around this stone uncovered the series of sacrificial horse burials illustrated in Fig. 6.

region? Jacobson, long a student of deer stone art, has believed so for many years (1993):

the general reasoning . . . is straightforward: the animals which dominate the archaic Scytho-Siberia style are all animals of the northern forest or forest-steppe. Furthermore . . . the archaic nature of the early nomadic styles and images indicates not only a tradition of bone and wood carving but also a tradition of zoomorphic representation that goes back as far as the Siberian Neolithic. The particular combination of cervids (deer, elk, reindeer), felines (panthers and tigers), caprids . . . and birds-of-prey, evident in the early art of the Early Nomads and that of their immediate predecessors, depends upon the emergence of an artistic tradition among the hunting-dependent Bronze Age cultures of South Siberia and Mongolia. (Jacobson 1993:31–32)

Unfortunately these questions still do not yet have answers because of the lack of information

from eastern and southern Siberia and the lower Amur basin. We are limited to speculation based on the frozen materials from Pazyryk excavated by Rudenko in the 1950s and Polosmak and others in the 1990s. If these complexes, as I believe, owed part of their artistic and ritual heritage to the Mongolian DSK complex, it is probable that the elaborate sculptural tradition that animated the brilliant gilded foil animal carvings, embroidered felt tapestries and garments, and ritual headdresses of Pazyryk were part of the earlier Mongol and South Siberian traditions also. Indication of a northern orientation is seen not only in the presence of deer stones and *khirigsuurs* in Transbaikalia, but also by rock art images showing the iconic deer figure on a rock art panel from the Chinge River in Tuva (Kilunovskaya and Semenov 1995:fig. 54a). Similar occurrences are known at rock art sites from western (Jacobson 2002; Jacobson-Tepfer 2001) and northern Mongolia (Fig. 13). The use of the deer theme in rock art indicates that the “deity” must have broader import than simply for mortuary and commemorative ritual; apparently it must have been a central deity in the spiritual lives of south Siberian and Mongolian peoples, perhaps serving for several millennia as the “deer goddess” of Bronze Age Siberia, as argued by Jacobson.

### Conclusion: Chimera of the Steppe

Mongolia and South Siberia are slowly yielding information that should clarify the southern dimension that has begun to be crucial to understanding the development of northern cultures. Mongolia’s deer stones promise more surprises as their dates and relationships become known. For the moment, their importance lies in providing insight into a rich tradition of belief based in the forests of southern Siberia, a belief system centered on a deer cult whose powers extended across a wide range of social and religious fields, from protecting the souls of warriors to assisting them in spiritual flight between worlds.

The image of the master deer spirit, however, is clearly more than just a deer. Its form, with a bird’s head and long bill, partially opened as in a cry, represents both spiritual flight and transformation and reaffirms the ability of gods and beings to shift physical forms and states of being. Most often such shifts are embodied in the activities of shamans, and shamanic motifs are also present in deer stone art. Occasionally deer stones show a realistic sculptured rendition of a human face (Fig. 7), and in these cases the face is seen with a rounded open mouth, probably singing or chanting. Similar depictions in Asian and North Pacific petroglyphs are interpreted as illustrating shamanic ritual. The chevron or shield motif often seen on deer stones is also thought to be a shamanic emblem representing the skeleton and finds



Figure 13. The cultic “Mongolian deer” as seen at a rock art site above the Shishged River north of Tsaaganuur, Khovsgol aimag, northern Mongolia.

a close parallel in skeleton-like engravings found on ethnographic shaman drum handles still being used today in Tuva and northern Mongolia. Finally, the circular discs seen on deer stones almost certainly represent bronze mirrors, an implement that has been used for millennia in Asian shamanic tradition.

Although not yet known to be present in deer stone iconic vocabulary, the predator-prey motifs commonly found in Scythian art are an important theme in northern hunting ritual and art, where they served a practical purpose as hunters’ helping spirits. By contrast, Scythian predator-prey images speak more to the philosophical nature of reality rather than as hunters’ helping spirits. Similarly, the master deer spirit seems to have served more as a benign conveyance between worlds, similar to the Siberian shaman’s “horse,” rather than as the demon represented by the ferocious fanged spirit-controller of animals on Old Bering Sea harpoon winged objects which was a competitor to humans as suggested by analogy with Alaskan ethnographic oral history, or the *t’ao t’ieh* were-beast of ancient Chinese art and mythology.

The third geographic dimension long-discussed in terms of early circumpolar art comes from the West Siberian Urals, noted above as Larsen’s and Rainey’s other speculative source for Ipiutak parallels. While preparing the Ipiutak monograph, Larsen became aware of V. S. Adrianov’s salvage excavations in 1935–36 at a ceremonial site named Ust-Polui on the east bank of the Ob River within the present city of Salekhard. Adrianov, only 32 years old, was jailed and executed by the NKVD in late 1936 before he could report his finds. Much of his work was later published and augmented by V. N. Chernetsov and V. I. Mozhinskaya (1974). In the 1990s Natalia Fedorova undertook new excavations and published an important catalog of finds (Fedorova 2003). Inspecting the first century B.C. Ust-Polui collections, one senses the vitality of the Iron Age peoples who lived here at the intersection of the Ob and Arctic Ocean 1500–2000 years ago. Today we would not confuse the artfully crafted bone, ivory, and bronze artifacts of Ust-Polui culture with proto- or early Eskimos; rather, their harpoons, arrows, reindeer and dog harness parts look like part of the

Western Eurasian tradition. However, their effigy spoons for feeding the spirits of animals, the sacrificial nature of the site, their elaborate hair combs with images of beasts, animals, and birds all fit well within the East Asia-North Pacific Native tradition. To one who is now more familiar with Eurasian archaeology, Ust-Polui looks like the fusion of two streams of history: one of the northern forest and arctic coasts that will probably reveal its circumpolar dimension as research in the central Russian Arctic advances, and the other reflecting a southern dimension that connected via the Ob to the central Eurasian heartland with its stylized, stiff human portraits, militaristic costumes, and bronze charms of falcon-bear images that show strong resemblance to West Asian traditions.

Somewhere within the triangle formed by Alaska, East Asia and Mongolia, and northwestern Siberia we will piece together the roots of the traditions and interconnections that produced the unique art and cultures of the early Eurasian/North Pacific culture systems.

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