
Rediscovered Mesolithic rock art collection from Kamyana Mohyla complex in Eastern Ukraine

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Abstract

Among all the variety of Ukrainian pre-Historic art types and styles, ancient rock art is probably the least studied and presented for the community worldwide. However, the biggest rock art complex in Ukraine - Kamyana Mohyla - attracts the attention of both scholars and wide audience by its unique parameters. It is located in the South-Eastern Ukraine, close to the Eurasian Steppe Belt borderline on the bank of picturesque Molochnaya River. The rock art instances from there were known since the end of XIX century. Some of them were studied and interpreted during Soviet period; however, most of this interpretation remains obsolete, barely proven and misrepresented to the archaeological community worldwide. Meanwhile the site still contains the unique collection of different traces created by numerous cultural groups. The oldest petroglyphs and rock art instances here are possibly Pleistocene and the newest one belongs to XIX century.

The parietal rock art collection from Kamyana Mohyla, located in the numerous sandstone grottoes, as well as portable rock art one from the site and its surroundings contain some artifacts that reflect the beliefs and habitation style of Late Mesolithic population of the region. They were found and published years ago; however, the finds, methods and archaeological data require recontextualization in the frame of our current understanding of Mesolithic societies of the region. One of the most intriguing archaeological contexts for the Mesolithic art of Kamyana Mohyla is provided by a multilayered settlement nearby that consists of numerous Mesolithic and Neolithic cultural levels, containing also some later ones. The radiocarbon analysis provides the earliest date of at least IX millennia BC. This data is also connected to the portable rock art instances that were found here during the field works in 2016. These figures reveal both the Mesolithic beliefs of the settlement habitants and their direct connection to the rock art complex due to their geological nature.

The sufficient contextualization and understanding of these instances became possible because of the advantages of Structure-for-Motion photogrammetry, microscopic examination and precise interpretation of engravings through the means of 3D models surface analysis. Using the advantages of digital tools it is possible to literally rediscover some artifacts and provide a new, qualified and comprehensive look on the Mesolithic art of Kamyana Mohyla complex.

Besides the contextualized and stratigraphically attributed artifacts, Kamyana Mohyla also contains a portable rock art collection that was found out of any cultural context inside the grottoes of the complex. It was first discovered and briefly described by V. Danilenko in

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1973-1986. His brief explanation and schematic drawings do not allow providing a comprehensive interpretation or contextualization of these finds, although some of his assumptions seem to be quite reasonable. Large part of this collection was found in so-called "Churingas grotto". More than 40 instances from there were interpreted as different fish sculptures. Considering fishing has been proven to be more important than hunting or gathering for the Mesolithic of Ukrainian Steppe, one should consider the rediscovery of portable rock art instances collection. The context for such rediscovery is really promising, since it includes numerous fishing tools, decorated fish bones and Late Mesolithic settlements close to the river bank. However, the collection of portable art of this age is quite important and unusual for Ukraine as well as for European prehistory in general. The closest analogy to such collection belongs to the Mesolithic of Danube River banks, namely Lipenskiy Vir settlement in the region of Iron Gates.

The complex of Mesolithic rock art at Kamyana Mohyla consists not only from portable instances. While a few scenes that were considered to be Mesolithic require reconsidering their obviously wrong interpretation, some of sculptures and panels appeared to be older than it was thought before. So called "Vishap" (Bronze Age Dragon), for instance, turned out to be a multileveled panel of a Stone Age origin. All these rock art instances form the unique complex of Late Mesolithic art that reveals the beliefs of fishing societies in their recognizable artistic tradition. However, such enormous collection in Ukrainian Steppe raises the question of ancient society's development and enhances the discussion with new important facts. Perhaps, these societies were much more complex and capable of artistic actions? Perhaps, we should have a closer look at the cultural processes that influenced the Ukrainian Steppe during Late Mesolithic Age?

Keywords: Mesolithic, Ukraine, Kamyana Mohyla, fishing societies, portable art