

Arabic inscriptions from the Ur-Maral region (Talas Province) in Kyrgyzstan

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Turkic rock art,
Kyrgyzstan,
Province of Talas,
Arabic inscriptions,
tamgas, 19th-
20th centuries,
pastoralism, history
of Kyrgyzstan,
Islam, epitaph..

IRSTI 03.41.91

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.32523/2664-5157-2025-4-170-195>

ABSTRACT

In the Ur-Maral region in the south of the province of Talas in Kyrgyzstan, 17 Arabic inscriptions were inventoried and documented at six different locations. However, 11 of these inscriptions were found at only two different sites (in Chiim-Tash and Zhaltyrak-Tash). While 13 of the inscriptions were deeply pecked into the rock and are clearly visible, the other four were faintly engraved and very small. These inscriptions, which are mainly names of men (three of whom are referred to as mullahs), are located between 2,700 and 3,700 metres above sea level. In two or three cases, the written names were those of deceased people, and the inscriptions were epitaphs, as evidenced by the use of the words “yadqar qildi” (“memorized and remembered”). The others were most probably inscribed by shepherds during the summer pasturing season or after crossing a pass. Only one inscription has a religious character, referring to pilgrims (“hajlary”), whereas the others are simply the shepherds’ names, sometimes including their fathers’ names. In these cases, the text is usually written in the Middle Turkic literary language as evidenced by the use of the word “oglu” (“son”). One inscription was dated to the 18th century or early 19th century based on the specific features of the lettering. The others were written in the late 19th or early 20th century, as evidenced by the presence of three dates, two following the Hijra calendar (in 1900 and 1909) and

one following the Gregorian calendar (1919), which is the most recent. Four inscriptions were associated with a tamga. The presence of 17 Arabic inscriptions at high altitude, most likely created by shepherds, sheds new light on the literacy of the Kyrgyz population during the 19th century, before the Sovietization of the country. Arabographic inscriptions found in rock art contexts should be systematically documented, analyzed and published to provide further information about the history of nomadic populations in Central Asia.

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Қырғызстанның Талас облысы Үр-Марал аймағындағы арабграфикалық жазулар

Аннотация. Қырғызстанның Талас облысы оңтүстігіндегі Үр-Марал аймағында алты түрлі жерде 17 арабграфикалық мәтін анықталып тіркелді, олар толық құжатталды. Жартаста қашалып жазылған мәтіндердің фотосуреттері алынды, барлығының қолсыз-балары жасалды, өлшемдері анықталды. Әрбір ескерткіштің орналасқан жері GPS нүктелері немесе тахиметр арқылы жасалған жалпы карта көмегімен белгіленеді.

Received 30 September 2025. Revised 30 October 2025. Accepted 02 December 2025. Available online 30 December 2025.



For citation: L. Hermann, N. Bazylkhan, G. Soronkulov, L. Delwiche, A. Asein Uulu Arabic Inscriptions from the Ur-Maral region (Province of Talas) in Kyrgyzstan // *Turkic Studies Journal*. 2025. T. 7. № 4. P. 170-195. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.32523/2664-5157-2025-4-170-195>

Сондай-ақ олардың өлшемдері масштаб қойылған фотосуреттер арқылы анықталды. Сонымен қатар, арабграфикалық мәтіндер орналасқан өзге де археологиялық нысандар – қоныстар, қорымдар сияқты ескерткіштер де тіркелді. Ежелгі эпиграфикалық мәтіндерді зерттеуде мәтіндер транслитерацияланып, аударылды. Мәтін жазулардың мерзімі анықталды. Әсіресе мәтінде мерзімі көрсетілген нақты жылдары ескерілді. Сонымен қоса, мәтіндегі арабграфикалық жазба дәстүрдің тілдік ерекшеліктеріне, қаріп түрлеріне ерекше назар аударылды. Мәтін жазудың мазмұны ескерілді, мәтінмен тікелей байланысты таңбалар немесе жануар бейнелері болса, олар да қатар қарастырылады. Аталмыш мәтіндердің 11-і екі бөлек жерде қашалған (Шиім-Таш пен Жалтырақ-Таш). Ал басқа 13 мәтіні жартасқа терең ойылып қашалған әрі анық көрінеді, қалған 4 мәтін аздап ойылып жазылған және өте кішкентай өлшемді. Мәтіндер теңіз деңгейінен 2700-3700 метр биіктікте орналасқан. Бұл жазуларда негізінен тек ер адам есімдері (оның үшеуі молдаға қатысты) кездеседі. Екі-үш жағдайда марқұмдардың аты-жөні жазылған, ал жазулы мәтіндер эпитафиялық сарынды болғандығы «*yadqar qildi*» («йадқар қылды, естелік етті, еске алдық») деген сөздерден көрініп тұр деуге болады. Сонымен қатар, арабграфикалық мәтіндердің кейбір тұстарында қалғандарын жазғы жайлауда немесе асудан өткеннен кейін малшы, қойшылар жасаған болса керек. Бір ғана жазудың діни сипаты бар, қажыларға қатысты («хажлары»), ал қалғандары жай ғана шопандардың есімдері, кейде әкелерінің атымен қоса анық жазылған. Аталмыш мәтіндер орта түрік әдеби тілінде жазылады деуге келеді, өйткені онда «оглу» («ұл») сөзін қолданған. Бір жазба мәтіндердің хронологиясы XVIII ғасыр -XIX ғасырдың басы болса, басқалары XIX ғасырдың аяғы -XX ғасырдың басында жазылған деп топшылаймыз. Мұнда үш мерзімдік атау кездесіп тұр, оның екеуі хижра күнтізбесі бойынша (1900 және 1909 жылдары). Ең соңғысы Григориан күнтізбесінен кейінгі күн (1919). Төрт жазулы мәтінде таңбалар қатар кездеседі. Тау биігінде малшы, шопандар қашап жасаған 17 арабграфикалық мәтін XIX ғасырға қатысты болуы, елді «советтендіруге» дейінгі қырғыз халқының сауаттылығы туралы жаңа мәліметтер береді. Сонымен қоса, Орталық Азиядағы малшы, жылқышы қауымдастығының тарихы туралы жаңа мәліметтер де айқын болып тұр. Сол себептен жартастағы өнер контексіндегі арабграфиялық жазбаларды жүйелі түрде құжаттау, ғылыми талдау және жариялау қажеттілігі бар.

Кілт сөздер: түркі жартас өнері, Қырғызстан, Талас облысы, арабграфикалы мәтіндер, таңбалар, XIX-XX ғасырлар, мал шаруашылығы, Қырғызстан тарихы, ислам, эпитафия.

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Арабографические надписи из Ур-Маральского района (Таласская область) в Киргизии

Аннотация. В южной части Таласской области Кыргызстана, в районе Ур-Марал, было выявлено и зарегистрировано 17 арабографических надписей, расположенных на шести различных участках. Все надписи были полностью задокументированы: произведена фотосъёмка текстов, высеченных на скалах, выполнены их графические копии и определены размеры. Местоположение каждого объекта фиксировалось с помощью GPS-координат или наносилось на общую карту, составленную с использованием тахеометра. При интерпретации учитывалось содержание текста, а также сопутствующие элементы – такие, как тамги или изображения животных, если они имели непосредственную связь с надписью. 11 из них были сосредоточены только в двух разных местах (в Чийм-Таше и Жалтырак-Таше). Если 13 надписей были глубоко выбиты в скале и хорошо видны, то четыре другие надписи были едва заметны и очень маленького размера. Надписи расположены в основном на высоте от 2700 до 3700 метров над уровнем моря. Эти надписи представляют собой имена людей, причём только мужчин (три из них относятся к мулле). В двух-трёх случаях были написаны имена умерших, а надписи представляли собой эпитафии, о чём свидетельствует использование слов «йадкар кылды» («вспомним»). Остальные надписи, скорее всего, были сделаны пастухами во время летнего выпаса или после перехода через перевал. Только одна надпись носит религиозный характер и относится к паломникам («хаджлары»), тогда как остальные представляют собой просто имена пастухов, иногда с точностью до имён их отцов. В этих случаях текст обычно написан на среднетюркском литературном языке, о чём свидетельствует использование слова «оглу» («сын»). Если одна надпись из-за особенностей письма относится к XVIII или началу XIX века, то остальные относятся к концу XIX или началу XX века, о чём также свидетельствует наличие трёх дат, две из которых относятся к календарю хиджры (1900 и 1909 гг.). Дата по григорианскому календарю является самой поздней (1919 г.). Четыре надписи были связаны с тамгой. Наличие 17 арабских надписей на большой высоте, выполненных, скорее всего, пастухами, даёт новую информацию о грамотности кыргызского населения в XIX веке, до советизации страны. Арабографические надписи в контексте наскального искусства необходимо систематически документировать, анализировать и публиковать для получения новой информации об истории пастухов в Центральной Азии.

Ключевые слова: тюркское наскальное искусство, Кыргызстан, Таласская область, арабские надписи, тамги, 19-20 века, скотоводство, история Кыргызстана, ислам, эпитафия.

Introduction

Ur-Maral is a nature reserve located in northwestern Kyrgyzstan, thirty kilometres southwest of Talas, and named after the river that flows through it (Fig. 1). The river is approximately 70 kilometres long and originates from the confluence of the Tabylgaty and Chiim-Tash rivers. These rivers both rise from glaciers that form the southern boundary of the Ur-Maral region. This mountainous area contains several petroglyph sites, with the first written records dating back to 1897. These sites were only partially documented in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Gaponenko, 1963: 101–110). The best known and most extensively studied of these sites are Zhaltyrak-Tash, at 2,700 metres above sea level, and Chiim-Tash, at 3,100 metres (see the research materials section below). Additional groups of petroglyphs were found in the Ur-Maral region and published in the beginning of the 21st century (Hermann, 2017).

In July 2025, Luc Hermann used GPS to document new Arabic inscriptions during a project supervised by Azamat Asein Uulu, director of the Manas Ordo memorial in Talas. Preliminary prospections of this area, conducted by Laurence Delwiche and Gamal Soronkulov from the environmental public foundation Eco-Ayan, which is based in Talas, were previously carried out in order to localise new Arabic inscriptions.



Fig. 1. A. Location of Ur-Maral (UM) in Kyrgyzstan. B. Location of the Arabic inscriptions: 1. Agynai-Tor (AT I-II); 2. Zhaltyrak-Tash (ZhT I-VIII); 3. Chiim-Tash (CT I-V); 4. UM I; 5. UM II-III; 6. UM IV. (© Google Earth).

1-сур. А. Қырғызстандағы Үр-Маралдың (ҮМ) орналасқан жері. В. Араб жазуларының орналасқан жері: 1. Ағынай-Топ (АТ I-II); 2. Жалтырақ-Таш (ЖТ I-VIII); 3. Чиим-Таш (СТ I-V); 4. ҮМ I; 5. ҮМ II-III; 6. ҮМ IV. (© Google Earth).

Рис. 1. А. Местоположение Ур-Марала (УМ) в Кыргызстане. Б. Местоположение арабских надписей: 1. Агынай-Топ (АТ I-II); 2. Жалтырак-Таш (ЖТ I-VIII); 3. Чиим-Таш (СТ I-V); 4. УМ I; 5. УМ II-III; 6. УМ IV. (© Google Earth).

Research background

Arabic inscriptions have previously been recorded in this region, specifically at Chiim-Tash (Amanbaeva et al., 2011: 48), although they have never been published. More broadly, numerous Arabic inscriptions have been found at rock art sites across Central Asia. For instance, over 67 such inscriptions have been documented at Kara-Too in Kyrgyzstan (Hermann, 2019: 20). However, these inscriptions remain untranslated, unanalyzed and unpublished.

Research on Arabic epigraphy in Central Asia has so far mainly focused on funerary contexts, such as inscriptions on mausoleums and tombstones (Dzhumagulov, 1987; Muminov, Duisenov, 2023). Studies dedicated specifically to Arabic inscriptions among petroglyphs have only recently begun to appear and remain scarce: they are about sites in Kazakhstan, viz. Kulzhabasy (Bazilkhan et al., 2013), Akkainar and Tamgaly (Zheleznyakov et al., 2019) and Eshkiolmes (Hermann, Bazilkhan, 2023), about sites in Kyrgyzstan, viz. Kuldak (Tabaldiev, 2012: 56; Tabaldiev et al., 2008), Kara-Say (Hermann et al., 2025a: 368) and Sandyk-Tash (Hermann et al., 2025b: 58-59), and also about the site of Karatash in Uzbekistan, at the border with Kazakhstan (Kashchey, 2020: 41-42).

The published Arabic inscriptions as petroglyphs are usually names, probably of shepherds (Bazilkhan et al., 2013; Zheleznyakov et al., 2019), sometimes of a mullah (Hermann et al., 2025b: 58) but can also be epitaphs for deceased people (Hermann et al., 2025a: 370) or have a religious meaning (Hermann et al., 2025a: 372).

Methodology and research materials

A comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach is required to study a rock art site. The entire area must be systematically surveyed in order to document all engravings and record their locations within the landscape using GPS points or a general map produced with a tachymeter. It is also essential to capture their orientation and dimensions through scaled photographs. It is also essential to document any other archaeological features present at the site, such as settlements or graves, in order to analyze the petroglyphs in relation to one another and within their broader contextual reality.

The study of ancient epigraphy involves several steps. First, inscriptions must be transliterated and translated. Secondly, they must be dated, either through an explicit date provided by the author, or by examining specific linguistic features or distinctive letter forms. Thirdly, the content and meaning of the inscription must be analyzed, ideally in conjunction with associated elements, such as tamgas or animal depictions, when these are directly related to the text. Finally, a broader regional assessment of all inscriptions is necessary to identify common features and distinct local developments.

Seventeen Arabic inscriptions were identified at six different locations (Fig. 1). The sites are presented below in order from east to west and from south to north. Each inscription is designated by the name of the site where it was found, followed by a Roman numeral.

However, the general designation 'Ur-Maral' has been adopted for four Arabic inscriptions located at three different sites not associated with other rock art depictions.

The aim of this paper is to contribute new material to the study of Arabic epigraphy by translating and analyzing all Arabic inscriptions identified to date at rock art sites in the Ur-Maral region of Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, by examining all inscriptions from a single region for the first time, we intend to identify the major trends and determine common features.

Agynai-Tor is located in the south-eastern part of the Ur-Maral region, approximately 2,200 m southwest of Zhaltyrak-Tash, at an altitude of 3,100 m above sea level. An initial survey of the site conducted by Gamal Soronkulov in August 2022, revealed two Arabic inscriptions, designated Agynai-Tor (AT) I and II. The site has not previously been scientifically documented, and no publications concerning it exist.

Zhaltyrak-Tash is located in the south-eastern part of the Ur-Maral region, along the Tabylgaty River, at an altitude of 2,700 m above sea level. It was first discovered by archaeologists in 1956 (Gaponenko, 1963: 102), and yielded not only drawings in the Saka-Siberian artistic tradition, but also numerous Old Turkic graffiti. The site, particularly the Saka petroglyphs, was subsequently documented by a Russian-Kazakh team (Sher et al., 1987) and later by a Franco-Kyrgyz archaeological mission (Tashbaeva, Francfort, 2005).

During a prospection in 2025, we documented eight inscriptions, designated Zhaltyrak-Tash (ZhT) I to VIII. All of these inscriptions are located on the vertical section of the site and are numbered from east to west. These include one Sogdian inscription (ZhT IV), one Runic inscription (ZhT V), and six Arabic inscriptions (ZhT I–III and VI–VIII). There are also numerous Cyrillic inscriptions at the site, which have been documented but not yet been assigned a numbering system. They will receive their own numbering system at a later stage of the research project.

Chiim-Tash is located in the southwestern part of the Ur-Maral region, at an altitude of 3,100 m, at the foot of a mountain pass situated at 3,600 m. The site consists of a large rock formation approximately 10 m high and 80 m wide. At its base lies a broad flat area that could have been used for temporary encampments before or after crossing the pass. Today, this space is used by shepherds as a cattle pen.

The first publication concerning this site reports that there are more than 1,000 drawings, including medieval tamgas, Arabic inscriptions, and chariots, although the information provided is extremely limited (Amanbaeva et al., 2011: 48). In 2016, Luc Hermann documented the site, identifying 1,098 petroglyphs, including 150 engravings dating from the 18th century to the early 20th century (Hermann, 2018). Five Arabic inscriptions were recorded, which we have designated Chiim-Tash (CT) I to V. We also documented 36 Cyrillic inscriptions from the second half of the 20th century were documented, though we have not yet assigned them a number.

The Ur-Maral region contains several small groups of petroglyphs scattered across different locations. Four Arabic inscriptions were documented at three separate locations on the left bank of the Chiim-Tash River. To distinguish these inscriptions from those belonging to the Chiim-Tash site itself, we have been designated them Ur-Maral (UM) I to IV.

Analyses

Arabic inscriptions from Agynai-Tor: (transliteration and translation by Napil Bazylkhan) Agynai-Tor I

Location and description (fig.2A): The inscription is on a flat rock and has two lines. A tamga was depicted on the left part of the inscription after the second line. The letters are well visible and without patina.

Transcription: 1. Aybay Äšuw; 2. Timqa

Translation: Agbay Ashu Timkha

Dating: It most probably dates to the 19th century.

Analysis: It is the name of a person. The tamga is the symbol of the Shapyrashty (Castagné, 1921: 44) and was also found at Chiim-Tash (Hermann, 2020: 188).

Agynai-Tor II

Location and description (fig.2B): The inscription is on a very large rock without any other petroglyph, on a flat surface slightly oriented to the southwest. The four letters are well visible and without patina.

Transcription: Juma Baz[Bay?] Nihim

Translation: Zhuma Baz[Bay?] Nikhim

Dating: Most probably late 19th century.

Analysis: It is the name of a person.



Fig.2. A. Agynai-Tor I; B. Agynai-Tor II (Pictures: Gamal Soronkulov).

2-сур. А. Агынай-Тор I; Б. Агынай-Тор II (Суреттер: Гамал Соронкулов).

Рис.2. А. Агынай-Тор I; Б. Агынай-Тор II (Фотографии: Гамал Соронкулов).

Arabic inscriptions from Zhaltyrak-Tash

Zhaltryak-Tash I

Location and description (fig.3A): The inscription is on the main vertical rock of the site, on a north-oriented panel at an altitude of 2676 m. It measures 89x22 cm. The letters were deeply pecked in the rock and are well visible despite a light patina and the presence of lichen.

Transcription: [Z]ekirov 1919

Translation: Zhekirov 1919

Dating: 1919.

Analysis: It is the name of a person. The date is given by the author of the text. It should be noted that this date was written following the Gregorian calendar and not after the Hijri.

Zhaltryak-Tash II

Location and description (fig.4A): The inscription is on the main vertical rock of the site, on a west-oriented panel at an altitude of 2673 m. It only measures 6x2 cm. The letters were slightly engraved in the rock and are almost not visible. The inscription is on the upper part of the panel. The Arabic inscription ZhT III and the Sogdian inscription ZhT IV are on the same panel, which is also fully covered by other petroglyphs, mainly by Old Turkic graffiti, such as riders. The inscription is only visible in raking light. This panel is 17 meters west of the inscription ZhT I.

Transcription: 1. Mulla Myrza jan oglu Syrsalaya oglu; 2. Hajlary ushbu harurym [?]

Translation: 1. Mollah Mirzazhan, son of Syrsalaya; 2. The pilgrims, namely these ones / those (?)

Dating: It most probably dates to the 19th century, because the graphics and language of this inscription are written close to the Kyrgyz phonology.

Analysis: The text is written in the Middle Turkic, a literary language, as indicated by the use of the word 'oglu' ("son"). The term 'Hajlary' refers directly to a pilgrimage (Hajj). However, it is unclear whether this inscription is intended as a memorial to a Mollah who is said to have traveled with other pilgrims to Mecca. Alternatively, the pilgrimage may have been to the Zhaltyrak-Tash rock art site itself, which is still considered sacred by Kyrgyz shepherds in the Ur-Maral region (as reported to the authors by their Kyrgyz guides). In this case, the inscription may commemorate a pilgrimage made by a group of people, accompanied by Mollah Mirzazhan, to Zhaltyrak-Tash.

Zhaltryak-Tash III

Location and description (fig. 4B): The inscription is located on the main vertical rock face of the site, on a west-oriented panel at an altitude of 2,673 m. It measures only 9 × 7 cm. The letters are lightly engraved and are barely visible. This inscription appears on the lower part of the same panel as inscriptions ZhT II and IV and can be seen only under raking light.

Transcription: Yadam [Hadam?]

Translation: Yadam [Hadam?]

Dating: It most probably dates to the late 19th or early 20th century.

Analysis: It is the name of a person.

Zhaltryak-Tash VI

Location and description (fig. 3B): The inscription is located on the main vertical rock face of the site, on a southeast-oriented panel at an altitude of 2,671 m. It measures 41 × 12 cm. The letters are deeply pecked into the rock and are well visible. The initial letters partially

cover the depiction of an Iron Age goat. This panel lies six meters west of inscriptions ZhT II–III and eleven meters east of inscriptions ZhT VII–VIII.

Transcription: [H]aday bah

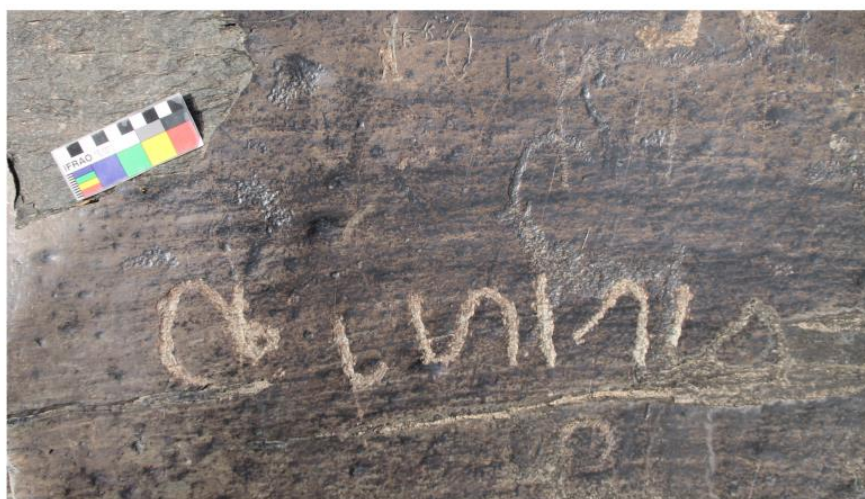
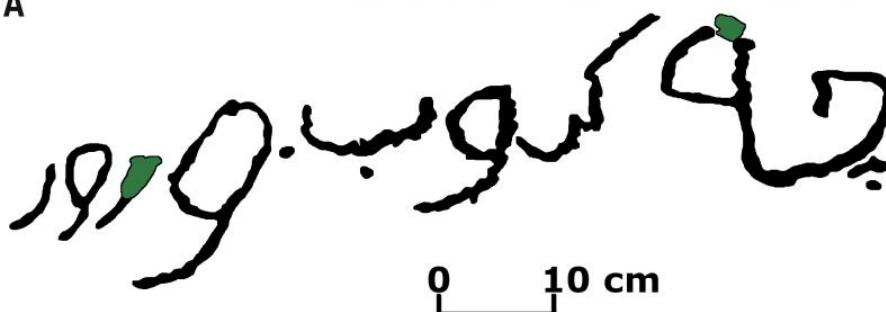
Translation: Khadaybakh

Dating: It most probably dates to the late 19th or early 20th century.

Analysis: It is the name of a person.



A



B

Fig. 3. A. Zhaltyrak-Tash I; B. Zhaltyrak-Tash VI (Pictures and drawing: Luc Hermann).

З-сур. А. Жалтырақ-Таш I; Б. Жалтырақ-Таш VI (Суреттер мен қолсызбалар: Люк Херманн).

Рис. 3. А. Жалтырақ-Таш I; Б. Жалтырақ-Таш VI (Фотографии и прорисовка: Люк Херманн).

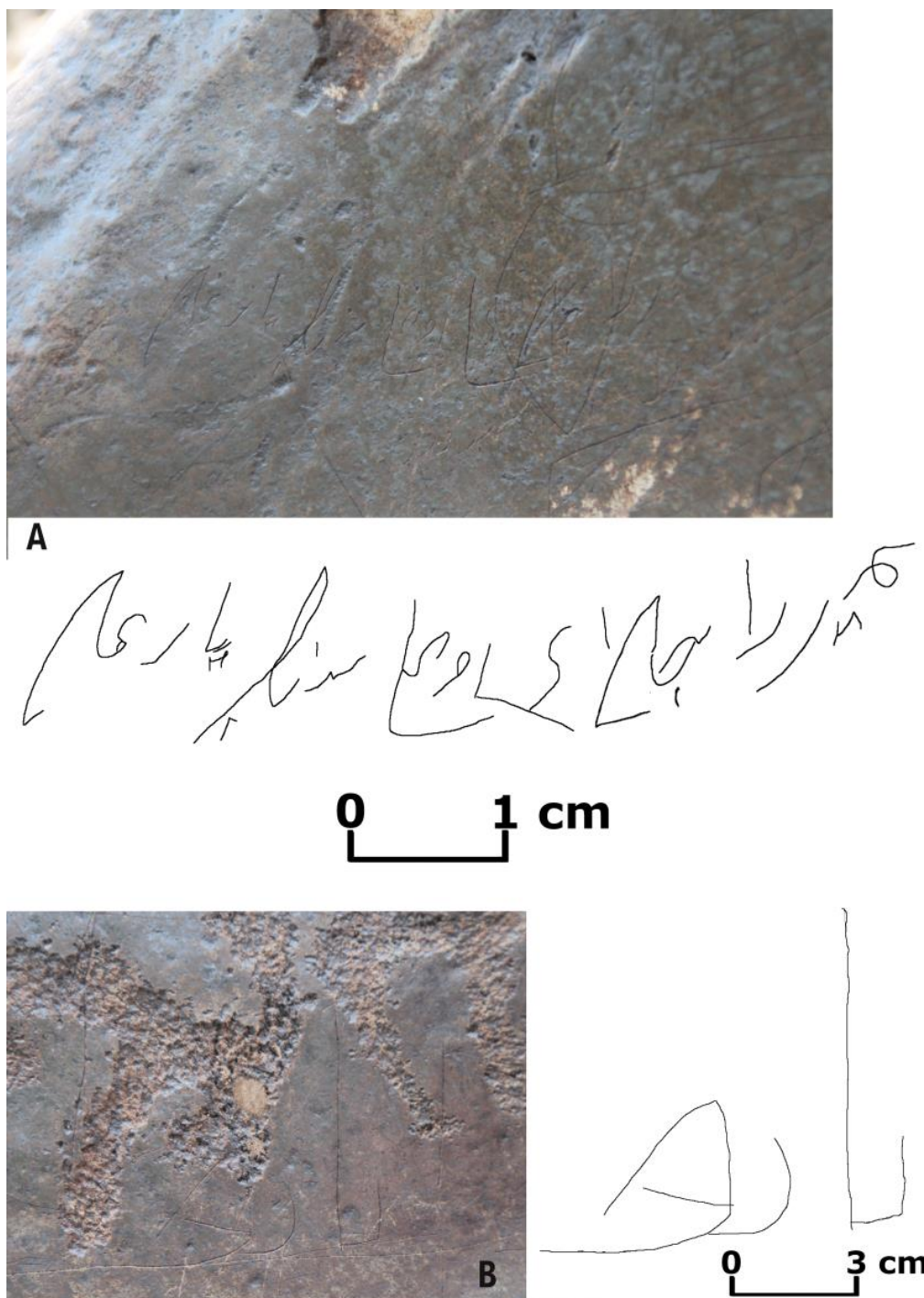


Fig. 4. A. Zhaltyrak-Tash II; B. Zhaltyrak-Tash III (Pictures and drawings: Luc Hermann).
 4-сур. А. Жалтырақ-Таш II; В. Жалтырақ-Таш III (Суреттер мен қолсызбалар: Люк Херманн).
 Рис. 4. А. Жалтырақ-Таш II; В. Жалтырақ-Таш III (Фотографии и прорисовка: Люк Херманн).

Zhaltryak-Tash VII

Location and description (fig.5A): The inscription is located on the main vertical rock face of the site, on an east-oriented panel at an altitude of 2,675 m. It measures 21 × 5 cm. The letters are lightly engraved and difficult to discern. The inscription appears on the upper part of the same panel as inscription ZhT VIII.

Transcription: Ormaral Askerining oglu

Translation: Ormaral, Asker's son

Dating: It most probably dates to the late 19th or early 20th century.

Analysis: The inscription records the name of a person. The text is written in the Middle Turkic literary language, as indicated by the use of the word *oglu* (“son”). The individual’s name, Ormaral, corresponds to the name of the region, which would be typical for a shepherd who adopted the name of the area in which he lived as a family name.

Zhaltryak-Tash VIII

Location and description (fig.5B): The inscription is located on the main vertical rock face of the site, on an east-oriented panel at an altitude of 2,675 m. It measures 11 × 4 cm. The letters are lightly engraved and difficult to discern. Additionally, they are partially overlain by a more recent Cyrillic inscription. ZhT VIII was engraved directly below inscription ZhT VII.

Transcription: 1. Pyrytar [?] Birun Pal Timur oglu; 2. Qolum qoydum

Translation: 1. Pyritar Birun, Paltimur’s son; 2. I wrote my hand.

Dating: It most probably dates to the late 19th century, because the graphics and language of this inscription are written close to the Kyrgyz phonology.

Analysis: The text is written in the Middle Turkic literary language, as indicated by the use of the word ‘*oglu*’ (“son”). It records the name of a person who explicitly stated that he wrote the text himself. This detail provides important context for understanding other Arabic inscriptions: it indicates that the text refers to a living individual rather than a deceased one. Arabic inscriptions as petroglyphs were sometimes used as epitaphs to remember deceased people (Hermann et al., 2025: 370). In this case, the author clarified with the phrase ‘*Qolum qoydum*’ that he was still alive, confirming that the inscription is not an epitaph.



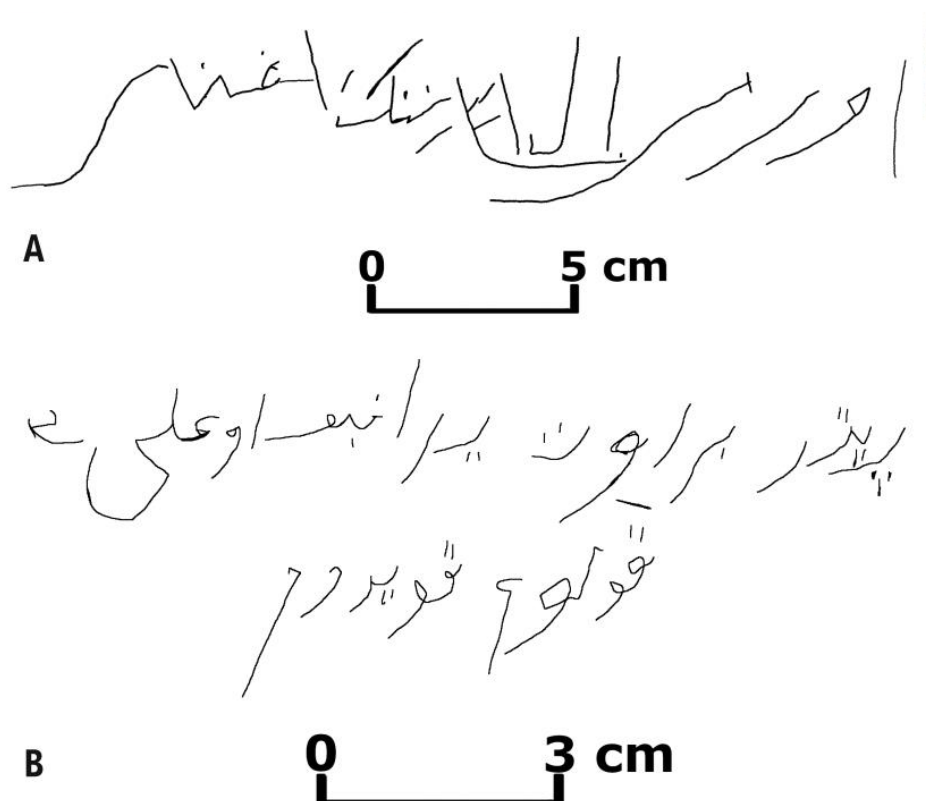


Fig.5. A. Zhaltyrak-Tash VII; B. Zhaltyrak-Tash VIII (Picture and drawings: Luc Hermann).

5-сур. А. Жалтырақ-Таш VII; В. Жалтырақ-Таш VIII (Сурет және қолсызбалар: Люк Херманн).

Рис.5. А. Жалтырақ-Таш VII; В. Жалтырақ-Таш VIII (Фотографии и прорисовка: Люк Херманн).

Arabic inscriptions from Chiim-Tash

Chiim-Tash I

Location and description (fig.6A): This inscription is located on a north-east-oriented panel on the upper part of the main rock. It measures 52x12 cm and is carved on the same panel as the inscription CT II. A Tarak tamga (the symbol of the Kazakh Khans, known as the Tore) is associated with the inscription on its left side.

Transcription: Bu čiyinlar 1327 jilda

Translation: These are the Chiyins in 1327 [1909].

Dating: 1909 (Gregorian calendar); 1327 (after the Hijri)

Analysis: It is the name of several people. The plural form is used to indicate members of the same family. With the word 'bu', the author clarified that they are alive; therefore, the text is not an epitaph. The date was written according to the Islamic Hijri calendar.

Chiim-Tash II

Location and description (fig.6B): This inscription is located on a north-east-oriented panel on the upper part of the main rock. It measures 48x13 cm. and is carved on the same panel as the inscription CT I. A tamga is associated with the inscription on its right side.

Transcription: Bu Čiyin

Translation: This is Chiyin

Dating: It most probably dates to the late 19th century.

Analysis: It is the name of a person. With the word “bu”, Chiman clarified that he was the author of the text and that he was alive, therefore, the text is not an epitaph. The tamga is similar in appearance to the Arabic numeral 7. Tamgas of this kind are not known to have existed in Kyrgyzstan until now (Hermann, 2020: 189).

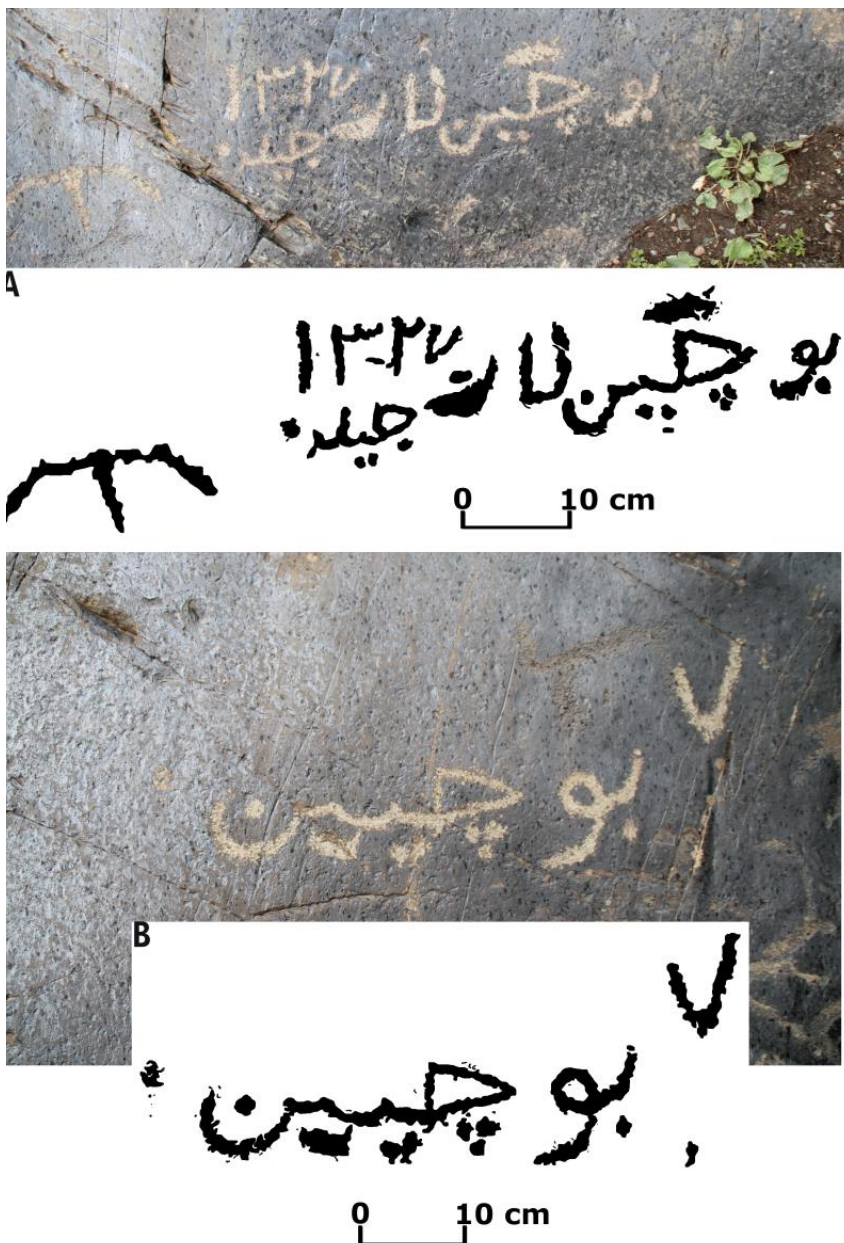


Fig.6. A. Chiim-Tash I; B. Chiim-Tash II (Pictures and drawings: Luc Hermann).
6-сур. А. Чиим-Таш I; Б. Чиим-Таш II (Суреттер мен сызбалар: Люк Херманн).
Рис.6. А. Чиим-Таш I; Б. Чиим-Таш II (Фотографии и прорисовка: Люк Херманн).

Chiim-Tash III

Location and description (fig.7A): This inscription is located on a north-oriented panel on the western side of the main rock. It measures 43x12 cm.

Transcription: Mirza Mahqil [Sarig mahqil ?] Ičilga [Pičilma?]

Translation: Mirza Makhkyl Itshilge

Dating: Perhaps dating from the 18th century or beginning of the 19th century: the form of the last letter's form belongs to the earliest Arabographic Turkic inscriptions in Central Asia (underlined in red on the drawing). Therefore, the inscription may have been carved on the rock in the 18th-19th centuries.

Analysis: It is the name of a person.

Chiim-Tash IV

Location and description (fig.8A): This inscription is located on a northwest-oriented panel on the lower part of the main rock. It measures 51x16 cm.

Transcription: Mola [Molla] Gali čar [Jar] Yazqan Namat 18 jilda

Translation: Written by Namat, Mullah Ghali Tshar [Zhar] in the 18th year

Dating: It most probably dates to the late 19th century or early 20th century, this inscription is written in Kyrgyz phonology, using the graphics and language typical of the time. Was it written in 1900-1901? (see the analysis below).

Analysis: The inscription gives the date as 'the 18th year'. We propose interpreting this as 1318 according to the Islamic Hijri calendar, corresponding to 1900 or 1901 in the Gregorian calendar. This interpretation is supported by the linguistic and graphic features of the text, which suggest a date in the late 19th or early 20th century. The inscription mentions two names. In the first part, a man named Namat claims authorship of the inscription using the word 'Yazqan'. The second part contains the name of a mullah, also written by Namat. We propose that the inscription may serve as an epitaph. Namat wanted to commemorate Mullah Ghali Tshar.

Chiim-Tash V

Location and description (fig.7B): This inscription is located on a north-oriented panel on the lower part of the main rock. It measures 42x9 cm. A tamga is depicted on the right side of the inscription.

Transcription: Borsuqbay Bočuq uli

Translation: Son of Borsukbai Bochuk

Dating: It most probably dates to the 19th century.

Analysis: It is the name of a person. Contrary to other Arabic inscriptions in this region, the word "uli" and not "oglu" was used to mean "son". The tamga appears to be a variant of the tarak tamga of the Tore (Hermann, 2020: 189).

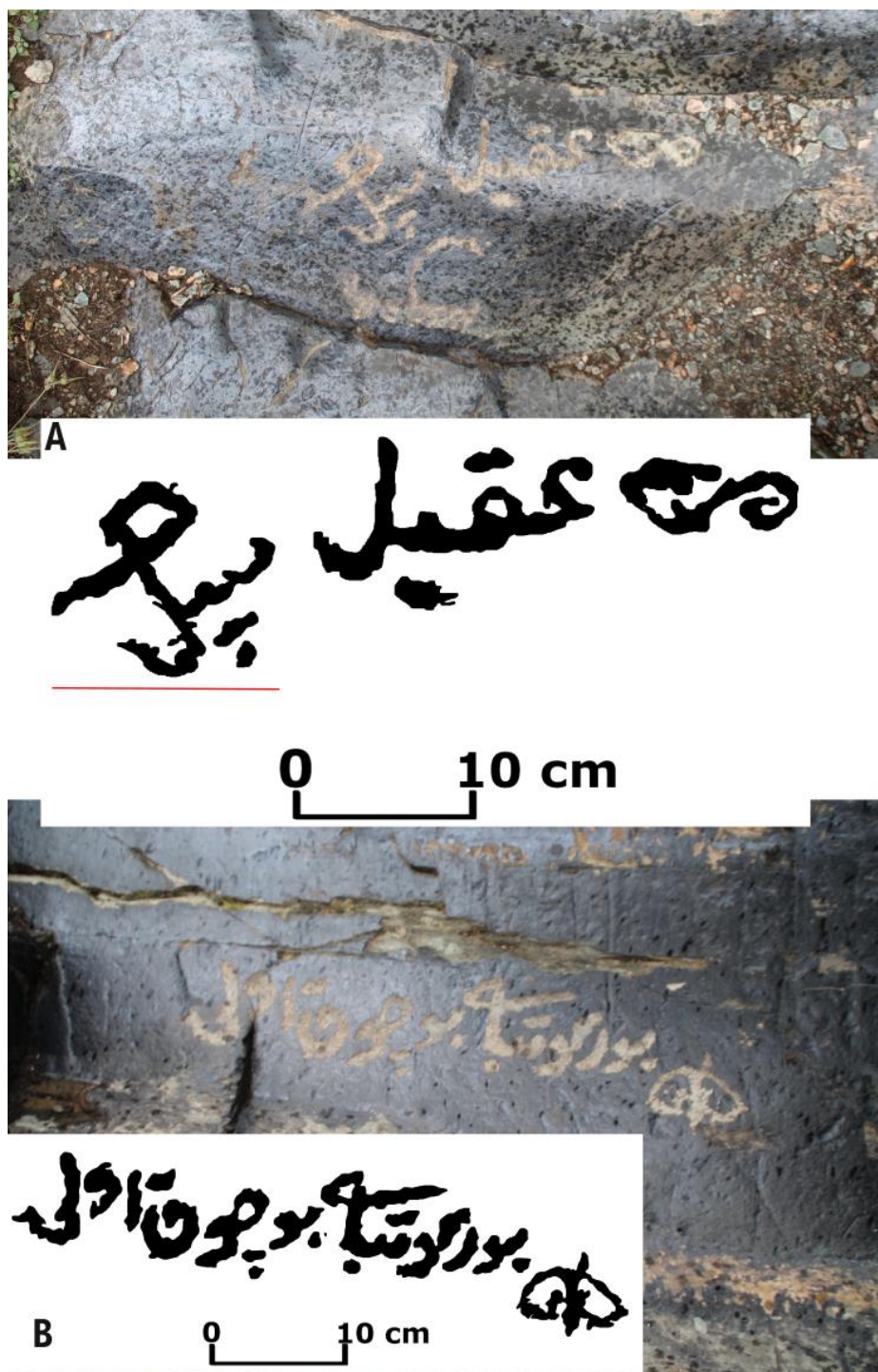


Fig. 7. A. Chiim-Tash III; B. Chiim-Tash V (Pictures and drawings Luc Hermann).
 7-сур. А. Чиим-Таш III; Б. Чиим-Таш V (Суреттер мен сызбалар: Люк Херманн).
 Рис. 7. А. Чиим-Таш III; Б. Чиим-Таш V (Фотографии и прорисовка: Люк Херманн).



Fig.8. A. Chiim-Tash IV; B. Ur-Maral II (Pictures and drawing: Luc Hermann).
 8-сур. А. Чиим-Таш IV; В. Ур-Марал II (Суреттер мен қолсызба: Люк Херманн).
 Рис.8. А. Чиим-Таш IV; Б. Ур-Марал II (Фотографии и прорисовка: Люк Херманн).

Arabic inscriptions along the Chiim-Tash River

Ur-Maral I

Location and description (fig.9A): This inscription is located 7500 meters northeast of the rock art site of Chiim-Tash, around three kilometers before the confluence of the Chiim-Tash and Shorolu rivers, at an altitude of around 2000 m. The inscription is located on a south-oriented rock and measures 55 × 12 cm. Cyrillic inscriptions from the 1970s were also pecked onto this panel.

Transcription: Yebed Hasret [Masre?] Yusuf Manat

Translation: Yebed Hasret [Masre?] Yusuf Manat

Dating: It most probably dates to the late 19th or early 20th century.

Analysis: It is the name of a person.

Ur-Maral II

Location and description (fig.8B): This inscription is located approximately 150 meters north (downstream) of the confluence of the Chiim-Tash and Shorolu rivers, at an altitude of about 1790 m. The inscription is on an east-oriented rock and measures 38x14 cm. Cyrillic inscriptions were also pecked on this panel. The inscription UM III is in its direct vicinity.

Transcription: Manab [Manayib?]

Translation: Manab [Manayib?]

Dating: It most probably dates to the late 19th or early 20th century.

Analysis: It is the name of a person. Manap (Kyrgyz: *манап*, manap) is a representative of the privileged feudal class among the northern Kyrgyz, the opposite of the common people.

Ur-Maral III

Location and description (fig.9B): This inscription is located approximately 150 meters north (downstream) of the confluence of the Chiim-Tash and Shorolu rivers, at an altitude of around 1790 m. The inscription is on an east-oriented rock and measures 48x13 cm. Cyrillic inscriptions from the 1970's were also pecked on this panel. The inscription UM II is in its direct vicinity.

Transcription: [...?] Keñebek buryuf [Kenbek Borsub?]

Translation: Kenebek Buryuf [Kenbek Borsub?]

Dating: It most probably dates to the late 19th or early 20th century.

Analysis: It is the name of a person.

Ur-Maral IV

Location and description (fig.10): This inscription is located on a flat rock on the shore of the Chiim-Tash River, between an old settlement and the river itself. The settlement and the inscription are only 50 m north (downstream) of the confluence of the Karagaily and Chiim-Tash rivers, at an altitude of 1532 m. The inscription measures 56x15 cm. The left part of it measures 20x5 cm, and the right part measures 25x13 cm.

Transcription: 1. [Ishbu //Ušbu?] Item [Nitem?] yad / av?/ aldi qildi 2. Molda Ittari yadq[h] ar qildi

Translation: 1. This Item (Nitem?) has been [hunted] memorized and remembered. 2. Mullah Ittari remembered.

Dating: 19th century, because two goats were depicted with(in) this inscription and their style is from the 19th century, which allows us to date it back in that century.

Analysis: The inscription has two parts, both of which are intended to commemorate a person, as is evident from the use of the words “yadw[h]ar qildi”. This inscription is therefore

a double epitaph, even though there are no burial mounds are in the vicinity. Another epitaph was found on a rock art site in Kara-Say (province of Talas, Kyrgyzstan), also without a burial mound nearby (Hermann et al., 2025: 370).

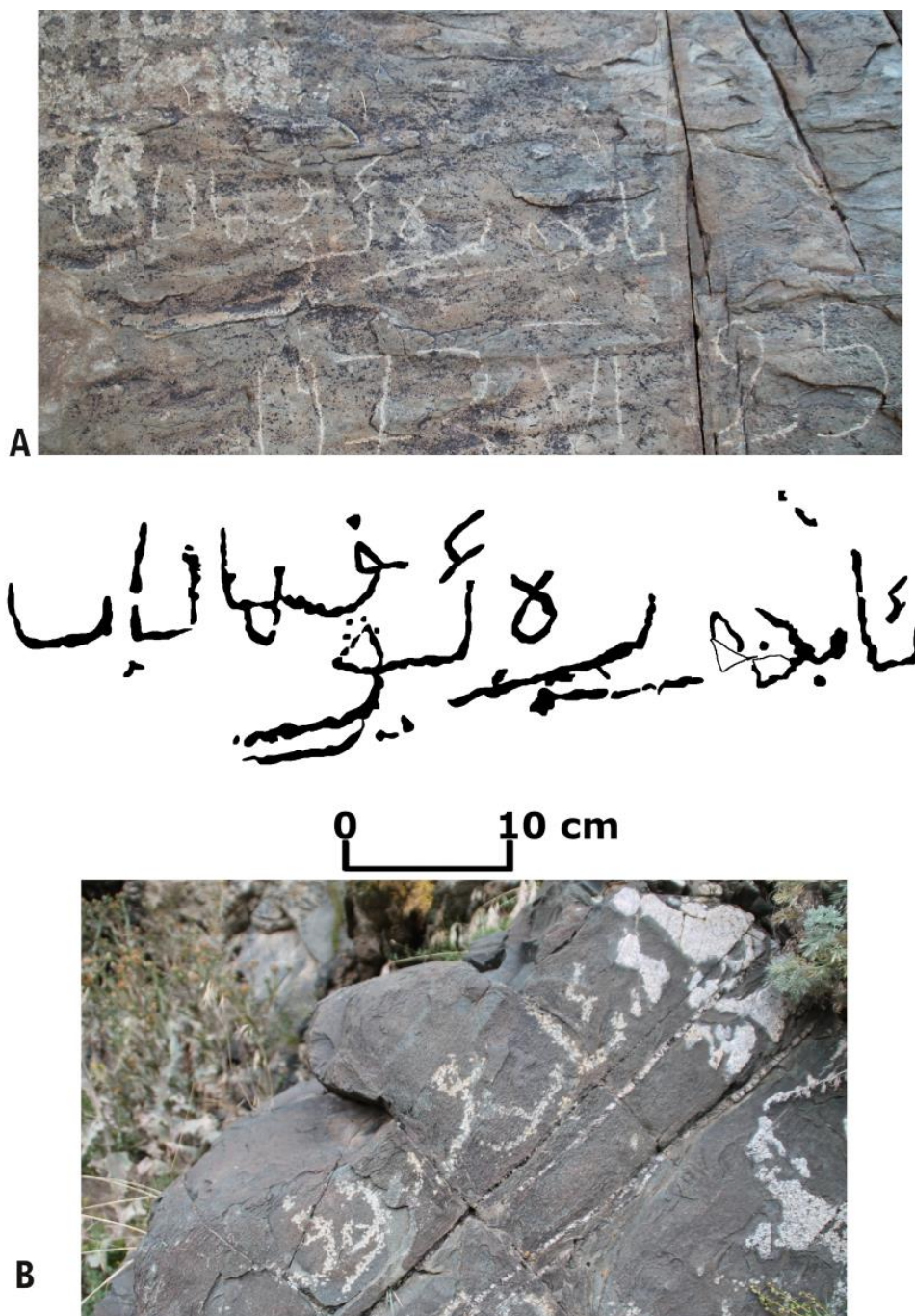


Fig.9. A. Ur-Maral I; B. Ur-Maral III (Pictures and drawing: Luc Hermann).

9-сур. А. Ур-Марал I; В. Ур-Марал III (Суреттер мен қолсызбалар: Люк Херманн).

Рис.9. А. Ур-Марал I; В. Ур-Марал III (Фотографии и прорисовка: Люк Херманн).

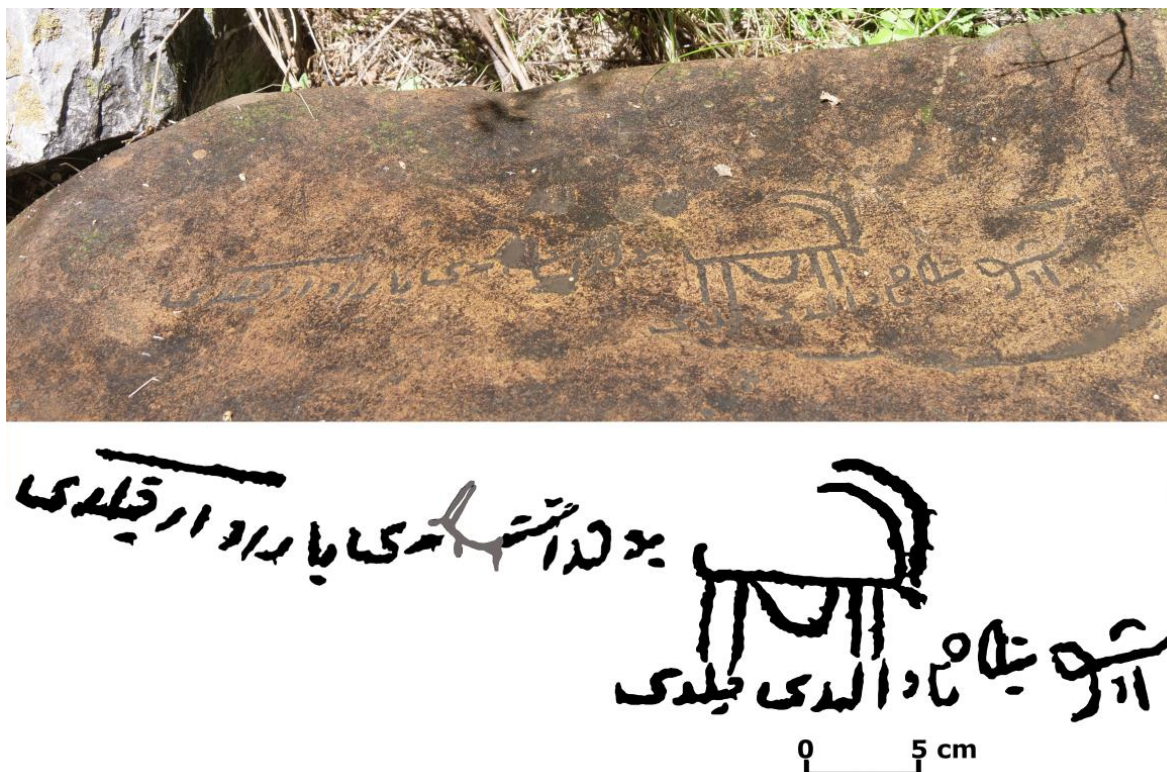


Fig.10. Ur-Maral IV (Picture: Laurence Delwiche; drawing: Luc Hermann).
10-сур. Ур-Марал IV (Сурет: Лоренс Дельвич; қолсызба: Люк Херманн).
Рис.10. Ур-Марал IV (Фото: Лоренс Дельвич; прорисовка: Люк Херманн).

Results

A global analysis of the Arabic inscriptions from Ur-Maral: major trends and common features

In total, 17 Arabic inscriptions were documented in the Ur-Maral region across six different sites. Some general features can be observed in these inscriptions.

About the locations of the inscriptions:

The inscriptions were primarily found in the high mountains. Three of the six sites with a total of 13 inscriptions are at altitudes between 2700 m and 3100 m. The other three sites, with only four inscriptions, lie between 1500 m and 2000 m a.s.l. This indicates that the inscriptions were mainly carved at recurring locations, preferably on plateaus at the top of the valleys. These three high-altitude sites were (and still are) used for summer pastoralism and, in the case of Chiim-Tash, are situated directly at the foot of a mountain pass. Three of the four inscriptions (UM I–III) located further down the valley are positioned along the path to the plateau. The lowest inscription in the valley (UM IV) is situated near a settlement.

About the authors of the inscriptions:

19 different names were documented by the 17 inscriptions. All of the names are of men. Three of them refer to a mullah (ZhT II, CT IV and UM IV). In four cases, the author specifies whose son he is (ZhT VII, ZhT VIII, CT V) or the mullah is (ZhT II). In one case, the plural

was used for multiple family members (CT I). As these inscriptions were found near summer pastures, we suggest that the names are those of shepherds as well as the three mullahs. Furthermore, the use of the family name Ormaral which also corresponds to the region where the inscription was engraved seems to confirm that it was written by shepherd (ZT VII).

About the date of the inscriptions:

Only three of the inscriptions had dates: probably 1900-01 (CT IV), 1909 (1327 in the Hijri calendar, CT I) and 1919 (ZhT I). A fourth inscription can be dated to the 19th century based on the style of the two goats depicted alongside it (UM IV). A fifth inscription can be dated to the 18th or early 19th century based on the distinctive features of a letter (CT III). All the other inscriptions are most likely from the 19th century or early 20th century, because their graphics and language usually correspond closely to the Kyrgyz phonology. Furthermore, we observe that these inscriptions usually have the same patina as the inscriptions which can be dated.

About the technique used for the inscriptions:

13 inscriptions were deeply pecked into the rock and are therefore clearly visible. However, four inscriptions, all of which are located on two panels at Zhaltyrak-Tash, were only slightly engraved and are very small in size (ZhT II, III, VII, VIII). Due to their orientation, these small, engraved inscriptions could only be seen in specific daylight conditions: ZhT II and III could only be seen after 11 am, and ZhT VII and VIII could only be seen before 3 pm.

About the subjects of the inscriptions:

All of the inscriptions are names of people, and only of men are named. One inscription with two names refers to deceased people (UM IV), and a third inscription referring to a mullah but written by someone else, is also probably an epitaph (CT IV). The remaining names are most likely those of the shepherds who engraved them, as evidenced by the phrase "I wrote my name" ("Qolum qoydum") on one inscription (ZhT VIII) or the phrase "this is" ("Bu") on inscriptions (CT I, CT II and AK I). One inscription is more unusual, referring to pilgrims ("hajlary") (ZhTII). However, it is difficult to determine whether it was a dedication to the Hadj to Mecca or a pilgrimage to the Zhaltyrak-Tash rock art site, which is still considered sacred place by the shepherds today. However, we didn't find any religious inscriptions in Arabic script at Zhaltyrak-Tash or at other places in the Ur-Maral region.

It should also be noted that four inscriptions were associated with a tamga. Three of them are at the site Chiim-Tash (CT I, CT II and CT V) and the fourth is at the Agynai-Tor site (AT I). Both sites are located at the foot of a pass. However, we currently do not have sufficient information to determine whether there is a relationship between the association of tamgas and inscriptions and the locations of these inscriptions.

Conclusion

Due to the abundance of other petroglyphs at these rock art sites, Arabic inscriptions have largely been overlooked by archaeologists and remain mostly unpublished. Furthermore, publishing inscriptions from the late 19th or early 20th century is often not considered a priority when there are still unpublished Bronze Age petroglyphs. Nevertheless, these inscriptions provide valuable new information about the history of Kyrgyzstan and the people of Central Asia. They are an integral part of the rock art sites and must therefore also be documented and studied.

The presence of 17 Arabic inscriptions in the Ur-Maral region offers researchers new material for studying literacy before the Sovietization of Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, these inscriptions are not unique to this region: more than 67 Arabic inscriptions have been found at the Kara-Too site near Kochkor in Kyrgyzstan (Hermann, 2019: 20). Other inscriptions from the Talas region have recently been published (Hermann et al., 2025a: 368), and the authors of this paper documented an additional site near Talas in the summer of 2025 bearing eleven Arabic inscriptions (unpublished).

Until now, the study of Arabic inscriptions has mainly focused on graveyards. While two or three epitaphs are present among the inscriptions in the Ur-Maral region, most of them record the names of their authors. These inscriptions were engraved at high altitudes, near summer pastures or mountain passes. Such sites were frequented by shepherds, and it is likely that they carved their names on the rocks, as also observed in the few Arabic inscriptions previously published (Bazilkhan et al., 2013; Zheleznyakov et al., 2019; Hermann & Bazilkhan, 2023). Considering the numerous Arabic inscriptions engraved on rocks during the 19th and early 20th centuries, it is evident that shepherds were capable of writing their names and sometimes more complex sentences. This suggests that Islamic schools played a leading role in the alphabetization of nomadic populations in Kyrgyzstan before Sovietization, and likely in other Central Asian countries as well. These Arabic inscriptions written by shepherds indicate that alphabetization in Central Asia (at least in Kyrgyzstan and probably also in Kazakhstan) began before Sovietization. For these reasons, it is essential that archaeologists document and publish Arabic inscriptions in order to adopt a differentiated approach to the study of literacy in Central Asia.

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Conflict of Interest.

There is no conflict of interest related to this article.

Мүдделер қақтығысы:

Мақалаға байланысты мүдде қақтығысы жоқ.

Конфликт интересов.

Нет конфликта интересов, связанного со статьей.