

Arabic inscriptions and tamgas from Etshkili-Too (Talas Province) in Kyrgyzstan

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ABSTRACT

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In the new rock art site of Etshkili-Too (Эчкили-Тоо) in the Talas Province of Kyrgyzstan, 105 engravings were inventoried, mainly zoomorphs (caprids) dating to the Old Turkic period, as well as to the 19th and early 20th centuries. Furthermore, nine Arabic inscriptions were documented at three different locations. Seven of them were concentrated near three former settlements at the top of the valley, which were probably occupied during the winter seasons. All inscriptions were deeply pecked into the rock surface, clearly visible, and almost not patinated. They are located at elevations between 1440 and 1600 meters above sea level. They contain ten personal names, exclusively male, including one referring to a *hoja* and *mullah*. There is no evidence to suggest that these inscriptions functioned as epitaphs. The texts were generally written in the Middle Turkic literary language as indicated by the use of the word “oglu” (“son of”). Furthermore, six dates are mentioned in the inscriptions. Three follow the Gregorian calendar (1911 -1922), while one was recorded according to the Hijri (1299 AH viz. 1882 CE). For two additional dates it remains unclear whether they refer to the Hijri calendar (1307 and 1889 or 1313 and 1895?) or to the Gregorian calendar (1907 and 1913?). Furthermore, on one rock surface, two dates are associated with animals according to the traditional nomadic

calendar. One of the inscriptions is the *Basmalah*, located near a settlement. This inscription is compared with another unpublished *Basmalah* inscription, recently found at the rock art site of Kara-Say, also in Talas Province. Another inscription represents a form of oath, although its precise significance remains unclear; it may have functioned as a marker of territorial ownership. This inscription, together with a second example, is analyzed in relation to three tamgas from the same period, raising questions about the transition from tamga symbols to Arabic inscriptions as markers of territorial claims during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Arabographic inscriptions within a rock art context should be systematically documented, analyzed, and published in order to provide new insights into the history of pastoral populations in Central Asia.

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Қырғызстандағы Эшкили-Тоодан (Талас облысы) табылған арабграфикалы мәтіндер мен таңбалар

Аннотация. Қырғызстанның Талас облысындағы Эшкили-Тоо (Эчкили-Тоо) жартас өнері ескерткішінің жаңа орнынан 105 сурет анықталды. Олардың басым бөлігі негізінен көне түрік дәуіріндегі және XIX ғасыр немесе XX ғасырдың басына дейінгі кезеңдерді қамтитын зооморфтар (таутеке бейнелер) болса керек. Сонымен қатар, үш бөлек жерде орналасқан тоғыз арабграфикалы жазу анықталып, құжатталды. Олардың жетеуі аңғардың жоғарғы бөлігіндегі бұрынғы үш қоныстың маңында шоғырланған. Бұл қоныстардың қысқы маусымда пайдаланылған болуы әбден ықтимал екенін атап өткіміз келеді. Барлық жазулы мәтіндер жартас бетіне терең қашалған және анық көрінеді, ешқандай қақ баспаған. Олар теңіз деңгейінен 1440-1600 метр биіктікте орналасқан. Жазуларда он адамның аты аталады және олардың барлығы ер адамдарға қатысты (біреуінде қожа мен молдаға сілтеме жасалады). Бұл мәтіндердің марқұмдарға арналған эпитафиялар екендігін дәлелдейтін ешқандай дерек жоқ. Көпшілік мәтіндер әдетте орта түркі арабграфикалық әдеби тілінде жазылған, мұны «оглу» («ұл») сөзінің қолданылуымен дәлелдеуге болады. Сонымен қатар, мәтіндерде алты мерзім жазылған. Олардың үшеуі григориан күнтізбесі бойынша 1911-1922 жж. аралығына тиесілі, ал қалғандары хижра немесе григориан бойынша 1299 (яғни 1882), 1307 (яғни 1889) және 1313 (яғни 1895?) сонымен қатар григориан күнтізбесі бойынша 1907 немесе 1913? жылдар болуы да әбден ықтимал. Сондай-ақ, бір жартастың бетінде екі мерзім дәстүрлі көшпелі жыл санау бойынша жануарлармен байланысты болды. Жазулардың бірі – елді мекеннің жанында орналасқан «Басмала (биссимилла...)». Бұл жазу Талас облысы Қара-Сайдың жартас ескерткішінен табылған басқа да жарияланбаған «Басмала» жазуымен салыстырылып қаралды. Тағы бір жазу – бұл анттың бір түрі, оның мәні толығымен түсініксіз, мүмкін осы аумақтағы мүліктің белгісі ретінде қолданылды деп те айтуға болады. Аталмыш осы жазу мен екінші жазулы мәтіні сол кезеңдегі үш таңбаның бар-жоғымен талданды, XIX ғасыр және XX ғасырдың басындағы аумақты таңбалау үшін таңба мен арабграфикалық жазуы арасындағы байланысқа да күмән келтіреді. Жартастағы өнер контекстіндегі арабграфиялық мәтіндерді Орталық Азиядағы малшы қауымдардың өмір тіршілігінің тарихына қатысты жаңа мәліметтер мен тың деректерді анықтау үшін оларды жүйелі түрде тіркеу, құжаттау, талдау және жариялаудың қажеттілігі өте жоғары.

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

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**Арабграфические надписи и тамги из Эчкили-Тоо (Таласская область)
в Кыргызстане**

Аннотация. На новом археологическом памятнике наскальной живописи Эчкили-Тоо (Эчкили-Тоо) в провинции Талас в Кыргызстане было зарегистрировано 105 гравюр, в основном изображающих зооморфов (козлов) древнетюркского периода и относящихся к XIX или началу XX века. Кроме того, в трех разных местах было обнаружено девять арабских надписей. Семь из них сосредоточены в трех бывших поселениях в верхней части долины. Эти поселения, вероятно, использовались в зимний период. Все надписи были глубоко выдолблены в скале, хорошо различимы и почти не покрыты патиной. Они расположены на высоте от 1440 до 1600 метров над уровнем моря и содержат десять имен людей, и только мужчин (одно из них относится к ходже и мулле). Нет никаких указаний на то, что эти надписи являются эпитафиями умерших людей. Тексты, как правило, были написаны на среднетюркском литературном языке, о чем свидетельствует использование слова «оглу» («сын»). Кроме того, в надписях упоминаются шесть дат. Три из них соответствуют григорианскому календарю (между 1911 и 1922 годами), одна написана по хиджре (1299, а именно 1882 год), а по двум другим датам неясно, относятся ли они к хиджре (1307, а именно 1889 и 1313, а именно 1895 год?) или к григорианскому календарю (1907 и 1913 годы?). Кроме того, на одном из камней были обнаружены две даты, связанные с животными, следовавшими традиционному кочевому календарю. Среди надписей есть одна – Басмала, расположенная рядом с поселением. Эту надпись сравнивают с другой, ранее не публиковавшейся надписью Басмалы, недавно обнаруженной на наскальном рисунке в Кара-Сае, также в провинции Талас. Другая надпись представляет собой своего рода клятву, значение которой остается неясным, возможно, она использовалась как знак собственности на эту территорию. Эта надпись, как и вторая, анализируется на фоне наличия всего трех тамг того же периода, что ставит под сомнение переход от использования тамг к арабским надписям для обозначения территории в XIX и начале XX веков. Арабграфические надписи в контексте наскального искусства должны быть систематически задокументированы,

проанализированы и опубликованы, чтобы предоставить новую информацию об истории пастушеских популяций в Центральной Азии.

Ключевые слова: наскальное искусство, Кыргызстан, Таласская область, арабские надписи, тамги, XIX-XX века, скотоводство, история Кыргызстана, ислам, кыргызский язык.

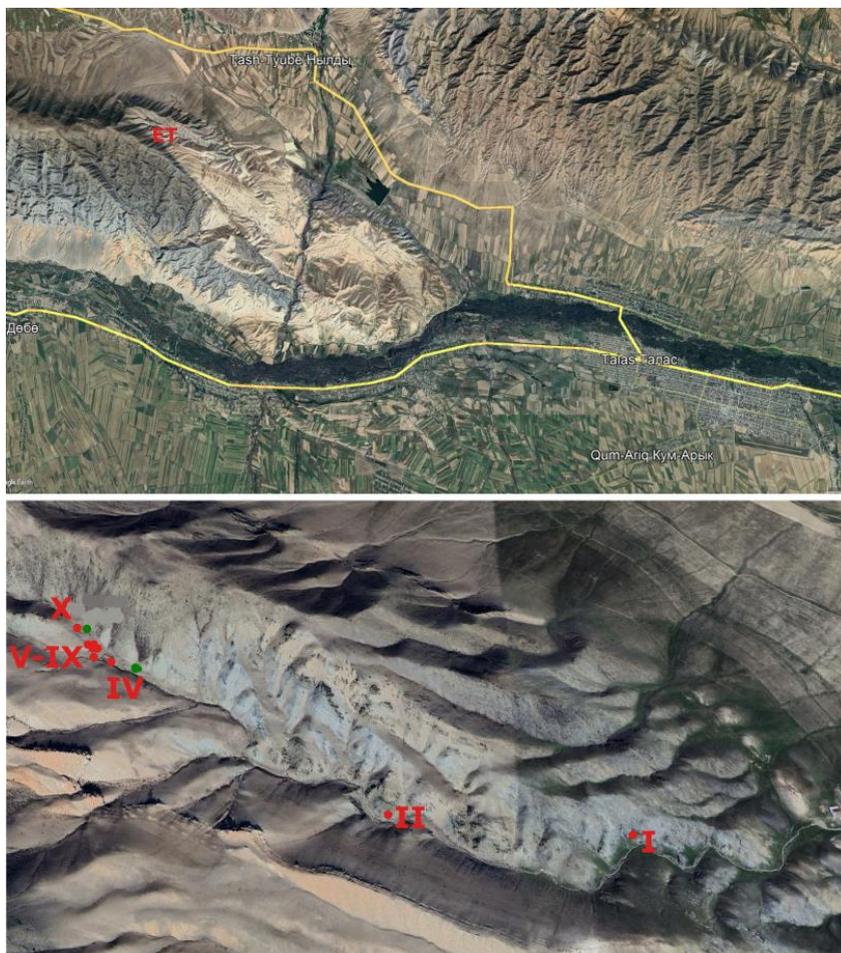
Introduction

The rock art site of Etshkili-Too (Эчкили-Too) is located in the mountainous region of Etshkili in northwestern Kyrgyzstan, 30 kilometers northwest of Talas (Fig.1). The mountainous region of Etshkili extends for of approximately 40 kilometers, covers an area of circa 15 000 hectares and has an altitude between 1030 meters in the western part and 2100 meters in the eastern part. There is no mention of any kind of petroglyphs in this area in previous publications about the province of Talas (Gaponenko, 1963; Amanbaeva et al., 2011: 44).

In April 2025, Gamal Soronkulov and Laurence Delwiche from the environmental public foundation Eco-Ayan based in Talas explored this region and discovered this site. In July 2025, Luc Hermann documented the rock engravings and inscriptions by fixing them with GPS during a project under the supervision of Azamat Asein Uulu, director of the memorial of Manas Ordo in Talas.

This new site is in a northwest-southeast-facing valley in the northeastern part of Etshkili, 19 kilometers northwest of Talas and 4500 meters southwest of the village of Tash-Tyube. The Nyldy river flows circa 3700 meters east of the valley entrance. Petroglyphs are located between 1419 meters and 1602 meters above sea level, all along the valley which has a length of circa 2000 meters. In the higher part of the valley, there are five settlements, most probably from the late 19th-early 20th century.

During the prospection of the site, petroglyphs, mainly from the 19th and 20th centuries were documented, as well as nine Arabic inscriptions and three tamgas. The aim of this paper is to present these inscriptions by translating and analyzing them in order provide new material for the research on Arabic epigraphy, and also in order to identify major trends and common features. Furthermore, we will describe and analyse the three new tamgas in order to see their relations with the Arabic inscriptions.



*Fig.1. Location of Etshkili-Too and the inscriptions in the valley (© Google Earth).
1-сур. Этшкили-Тоо және аңғардағы жазулардың орны (© Google Earth).
Рис.1. Местоположение Этшкили-Тоо и надписей в долине (© Google Earth).*

Materials and research methods

Petroglyphs are not only beautiful drawings which should be published for their esthetic qualities, but reflect the culture and the world perception of the societies in which they appeared. For this reason, rock engravings need a contextual approach in which the whole site is prospected by documenting all engravings: therefore, it is necessary to fix them in their landscape through GPS points or in a general map done by tachymeter, to fix their orientation and dimensions through pictures with a scale in order to understand which relations the petroglyphs have with each others and with their environment. Furthermore, researchers must also document other archaeological monuments of the site, such as settlements or graves in order to analyze the petroglyphs in their archeological context. At last, it seems necessary to adopt a statistical approach of rock art sites in order to identify major trends in the depictions, allowing archaeologists to understand conceptual structures of ancient societies.

Research on ancient epigraphy is primarily based on transliteration and translation of the inscriptions. Secondly, the date of the inscription should be determined, either through a date recorded by its author or through internal elements of the text, such as specific words or characteristic letter forms. Other petroglyphs on the same panel as the inscription may also assist in dating it, since their stylistic features can often be attributed to a particular period. However, in Central Asia it is not uncommon for the same rock panel to have been used during different periods or for earlier drawings to have been renewed in later epochs. For this reason, archaeologists must analyse the techniques used in both the drawings and the inscriptions to determine whether they were executed at the same time. The patination of the inscriptions and of the drawings must also be taken into account, even if precaution is needed by its interpretation due to the fact that patination can vary on a same panel: the sun exposition of the different parts of the rock and the geological composition of the rock provoke variations in the patination on a same panel. Thirdly, the inscription and its meaning should be analyzed, also with other elements, such as tamgas or animal depictions, if these elements are directly related to the inscription. Finally, the newly discovered material must be compared with previously published inscriptions from other sites in order to identify shared features and regional patterns.

Research background

Research on Arabic epigraphy in Central Asia has largely focused on inscriptions in funerary contexts, such as those found on mausoleum or on tombstones (Dzhumagulov, 1987; Muminov, Duisenov, 2023).

Arabic inscriptions in a rock art context have so far rarely been translated or analyzed, and are often not even published as images, despite the fact that some rock art sites present a large corpus of such inscriptions. For example, there are more than 67 Arabic inscriptions in Kara-Too in Kyrgyzstan (Hermann, 2019: 20). Only in the last decade have several studies addressed Arabic inscriptions associated with petroglyphs. In Kazakhstan, such research has focused on the sites of Kulzhabasy (Bazilkhan et al., 2013), Akkainar and Tamgaly (Zheleznyakov et al., 2019), and Eshkiolmes (Hermann, Bazilkhan, 2023). In Kyrgyzstan, similar studies have been conducted at Kuldak (Tabaldiev, 2012: 56), Kara-Say (Hermann et al., 2025a: 368ff), and Sandyk-Tash (Hermann et al., 2025c: 58–59). Furthermore, one study has examined the site of Karatash in Uzbekistan near the border with Kazakhstan (Kashchey, 2020: 41–42).

In the Talas province of Kyrgyzstan, all Arabic inscriptions from the Ur-Maral region have recently been systematically documented and published (Hermann et al., 2025b). The Ur-Maral region is located 50 kilometers south of Etshkili-Too.

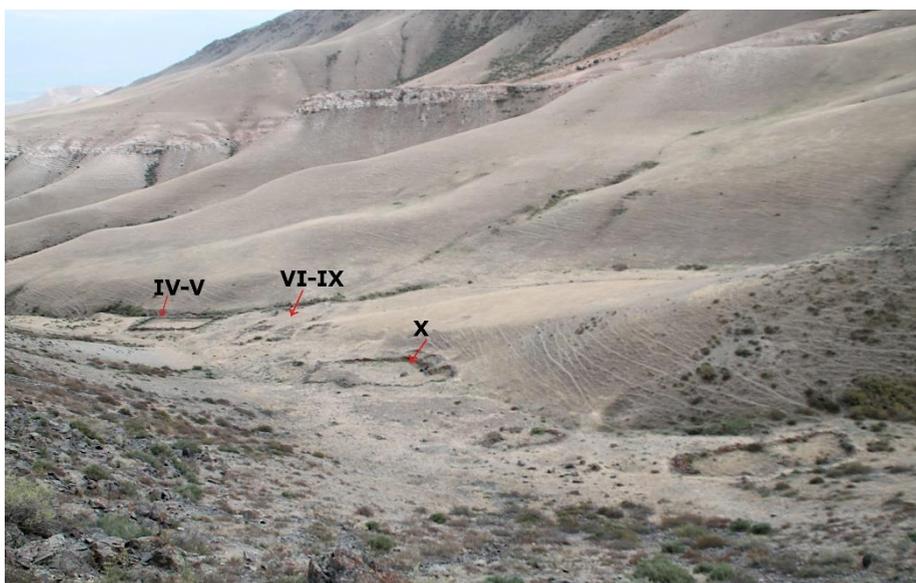
Arabic inscriptions found in a rock art context are usually personal names, most likely those of shepherds (Bazilkhan et al., 2013; Zheleznyakov et al., 2019; Hermann et al., 2025b) and in some cases those of a mullah (Hermann et al., 2025b: 189; Hermann et al., 2025c: 58). In few cases, inscriptions may represent epitaphs for deceased people (Hermann et al., 2025a: 370; Hermann et al. 2025b: 187) or contain a religious expression (Hermann et al., 2025a: 372).

Nine Arabic inscriptions were found at three different locations in the valley, even if two inscriptions are isolated (Etshkili-Too I and II), whereas the remaining inscriptions are

concentrated near three settlements at the top of the valley (Etshkili-Too IV-X) (fig.1). Two of them are located near the first settlement, at the entrance to the valley (Etshkili-Too IV and V), four near the second settlement (Etshkili-Too VI-IX), and one near the third settlement (Etshkili-Too X) (fig.2). No inscriptions were found near the two settlements. The inscriptions were documented from entrance of the valley to its upper part and assigned Roman numerals accordingly. It should be noted that Etshkili-Too III is a runic inscription, which will be published in a future study. Three Cyrillic inscriptions were also documented but have not yet been assigned numbers.

In total, 105 petroglyphs were documented, including 99 zoomorphs: 78 caprids, five horses (two with a rider), three dogs, two snakes and eleven undetermined animals. Three other anthropomorphs and three tamgas were also found at this site. 55 linear markings were also observed on different panels, although their meaning could not be interpreted.

If 11 engravings are attributed to the Bronze Age (10 caprids and one zoomorph) and 28 to the Old Turkic period (27 zoomorphs, among them 24 caprids, one dog and one horse, as well as one anthropomorph), the main percentage of rock art is from the late 19th-early 20th century and is contemporary with the Arabic inscriptions. For this epoch, we documented 54 petroglyphs, viz. 52 zoomorphs (38 caprids, four horses (two with a rider), two dogs, two snakes and six undetermined) and two other anthropomorphs. Two undetermined zoomorphs could not be assigned to a particular period. The chronological attribution of the three tamgas will be discussed in this paper.



*Fig.2. Location of the inscriptions Etshkili-Too IV-X by the settlements (Picture: Luc Hermann).
2-сур. Этшкили-Тоо IV-X жазбаларының елді мекендер бойынша орналасуы (Сурет: Люк Германн).
Рис.2. Расположение надписей Этшкили-Тоо IV-X в поселениях (Фото: Люк Германн).*

Analysis

Arabic inscriptions from Etshkili-Too (transliteration and translation by Napil Bazylkhan)
Etshkili-Too I

Location and description (Fig.3): The inscription is on a south-facing rock and has three lines. The letters are deeply pecked, but due to heavy patination they are not clearly visible. The rock is located 1442 meters above sea level, and the inscription measures 38x77 cm. No other inscription have been identified in its immediate vicinity.

Transcription: 1. Almambet – [13 sene?]; 2. Qara danis; 3. Tursun [?]

Translation: 1. Almambet (13 years/ Year 13?); 2. Qara Danis; 3. Tursun (?)

Dating: Depictions of goats dating to the late 19th century or beginning of the 20th century was recorded on nearby rocks. Petroglyphs of other periods are completely absent. On this basis, the inscription is most probably dates to the late 19th century or early 20th century, possibly to the year 1895 or 1913 (see the analysis below).

Analysis: The inscription contains the name of three people. In the first line, the expression “13 sene” indicates the year when the inscription was engraved. This may correspond to the year 1313 of Hijri calendar or 1895 according to the Gregorian calendar.

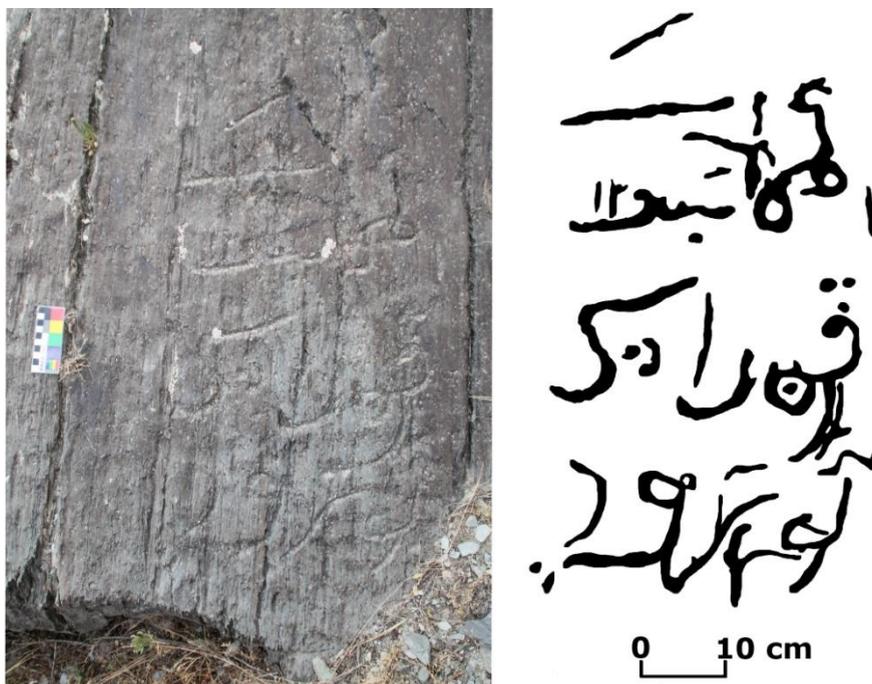


Fig.3. Etshkili-Too I (Picture and drawing: Luc Hermann).
3-сур. Эчкили-Тоо I (Сурет пен қолсызба: Люк Германн).
Рис.3. Эчкили-Тоо I (Фото и прорисовка: Люк Германн).

Etshkili-Too II

Location and description (Fig.4): The inscription, measuring 36x11 cm, is engraved on a large rock, facing south at an altitude of 1494 m above the sea level. A rider on a horse,

a second horse, a dog and a goat. Furthermore, a runic inscription (Etshkili-Too III) was also found on this panel but will be published in a separate study. Although some letters are not clearly visible due to cracks on the rock surface, the other ones are very clear and without patina. There is no remaining characters are well preserved and show no significant patination. No Arabic inscriptions have been identified in the immediate vicinity.

Transcription: šabdanbay

Translation: Shabdanbay

Dating: It probably dates to 1928. Petroglyphs depicting zoomorphs and the date 1928 were engraved on the same panel. The pecked technique used for the zoomorphs, for the date and for the inscription is very similar.

Analysis: It contains the name of a person. If the date was carved by the same hand as the inscription, it should be noted that it was written according to the Gregorian calendar rather than the Hijri calendar.



Fig.4. Etshkili-Too II (Picture and drawing: Luc Hermann).
4-сур. Эчкили-Тоо II (Сурет пен қолсызба: Люк Германн).
Рис.4. Эчкили-Тоо II (Фото и прорисовка: Люк Германн).

Etshkili-Too IV

Location and description (Fig.5): This inscription, as well as the following one, is located at the top of the valley, near different settlements. It is situated near the first settlement at the entrance of the valley, at an altitude of 1587 m above sea level. The inscription, measures 22x4 cm and is slightly patinated, which makes some letter difficult to read and some letters are no more well visible. It is associated with a depiction of a goat.

Transcription: Ahmet jan oγli

Translation: Son of Akhmetzhan

Dating: It probably dates to the late 19th century, as its graphic features and language correspond closely to Kyrgyz phonology. Furthermore, the stylistic features of the zoomorph also suggest a date in the late 19th century or early 20th century. The nearby settlement most likely belongs to the same time.

Analysis: The text is written in the Middle Turkic literary language as evidenced by the use of the word “oγli” (son). The expression “son of” occurs frequently in Arabic inscriptions from the Ur-Maral region, although the authors usually mention their own first names (Hermann et al., 2025b: 178). Even if there is one exception is the inscription Chiim-Tash V, where the author only wrote “son of” without including his own first name (Hermann et al., 2025b: 184). A notable difference between Chiim-Tash V and Etshkili-Too IV is the use of the word “ogli” in the latter, whereas the former uses the form “uli”.

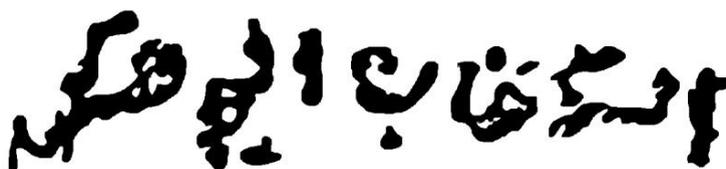


Fig.5. Etshkili-Too IV (Picture and drawing: Luc Hermann).
5-сур. Эчкили-Тоо IV (Сурет пен қолсызба: Люк Германн).
Рис.5. Эчкили-Тоо IV (Фото и прорисовка: Люк Германн).

Etshkili-Too V

Location and description (Fig.6): This north-facing rock is located near the same settlement as Etshkili-Too IV. The inscription measures 43x11 cm. Parts of the inscription are patinated and no more clearly visible.

Transcription: 1. Er kim kelib uşbuğa qaldirimiz; 2. Kóbey Siqalman oγli İrisqan Eljarqan oγli

Translation: 1. Whoever comes, we left this here. 2. Kōbey, son of Syqalman. Yryszhan, son of Elzharkhan.

Dating: The inscription probably dates to the late 19th century, as its graphic features and language correspond closely to Kyrgyz phonology.

Analysis: The text is written in the Middle Turkic literary language as evidenced by the use of the word “oγli” (son). Two people engraved their names and indicated that they did so for every person who would pass by. This statement is somewhat surprising raises several possible interpretations. It may reflect a desire to be remembered by future visitors, functioning almost as a form of anticipatory epitaph. Alternatively, it may represent a way of marking property or territorial presence: the mention of the names could have served to remind other shepherds frequenting the valley that it belonged to Kobey and Yryszhan?

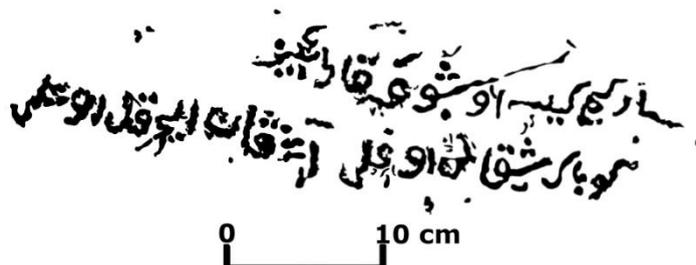


Fig.6. Etshkili-Too V (Picture and drawing: Luc Hermann).
6-сур. Эчкили-Тоо V (Сурет пен қолсызба: Люк Германн).
Рис.6. Эчкили-Тоо V (Фото и прорисовка: Люк Германн).

Etshkili-Too VI

Location and description (Fig.7): This inscription, located near the second settlement at an altitude of 1592 m above the sea level, is engraved on a west-facing rock and measures 23x6 cm. The letters are well visible and have no patination. A dog was depicted under the inscription.

Transcription: 1. 1922-nči sene; 2. 1916 [awa?] -n i Yılan

Translation: 1. Year 1922th; 2. 1916th dragon

Dating: 1916 and 1922.

Analysis: Both inscriptions display the same patination and are aligned on the same horizontal line. However, a crack in the rock surface separates them. This crack was likely used to mark the end of the inscription on the right and the beginning of the one on the

left. The dates appear to have been written according to the Gregorian calendar rather than the Hijri calendar. In this inscription, the author(s) also referred to the traditional nomadic calendar, which assigns an animal to each year within a 12-year-cyclcus: dragon for 1916, snake for 1917, horse to indicate 1918... The word “dragon” (“Yılan”) was used for the year 1916, while the depicted dog most likely corresponds to the year 1922, which was the Year of the Dog. To our knowledge, no other examples have been documented in Central Asian rock art where animals are directly associated with dates according to this traditional nomadic calendar.



Fig.7. Etshkili-Too VI (Picture and drawing: Luc Hermann).
 7-сур. Эчкили-Тоо VI (Сурет пен қолсызба: Люк Германн).
 Рис.7. Эчкили-Тоо VI (Фото и прорисовка: Люк Германн).

Etshkili-Too VII

Location and description (Fig.8): This inscription is also located near the second settlement, on a west-facing rock, and measures 36x29 cm. The inscription is not patinated, but the rock surface was not very appropriate for an engraving, so that some letters are difficult to read. A goat was depicted in the lower part of the rock, but offers a different patination. This zoomorph is therefore more recent than the inscription.

Transcription: 1. Ušbu; 2. Osılay [Onsalay?] olub; 3. Barča бүkil qarayan jamiya 7-nči yıl; 4. bolyan waqıtında yazğanım keyin ki oğularımızya; 5. belgi qilib H[J]ala Muhasan Baısybay oylı; 6. ušbu qolum qoydım

Translation: 1.-2. Thus came to be; 3. The whole community bore witness. In the 7th year, at that time, 4. I wrote this for our descendants as a sign (of remembrance). 5. Zhala Mukhasan, son of Bagsybai, 6. hereby affixed my own hand (signature).

Dating: 1889 or 1907? The mention of the 7th year would be 1307 after Hijri (1889) or 1907 following the Gregorian calendar.

Analysis: The text is written in the Middle Turkic literary language, as evidenced by the use of the word “oγli” (son). The inscription is particularly remarkable, as it appears to represent an engraved oath mentioning the entire community as “witness” (qarayan). With the expression “Qolum qoydum”, the author, Zhala Mukhasan, indicates that he wrote the text with his own hand, functioning as a kind of signature attesting to his presence. The expression “Qolum qoydum” has also been recorded in an inscription from Zhaltyrak-Tash (Hermann et al., 2025b: 181). Furthermore, the author explains the engraving of the text on the rock by describing it as is a “sign of remembrance for his descendants” (“bolγan waqitında yazγanıim keyin ki oγularimizγa”). Engraving the inscription on rock allows it to endure through time and remain visible to the author's descendants. However, the text does not specify the subject of the remembrance or the act of witnessing. It is possible that the inscription itself served to mark the ownership of this territory or of this settlement. It is, however, surprising that an inscription resembling an oath has relatively small dimensions, and that the author did not choose a bigger rock in order to make it more visible.

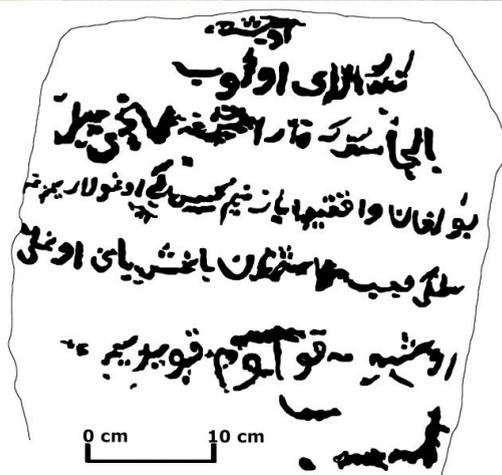
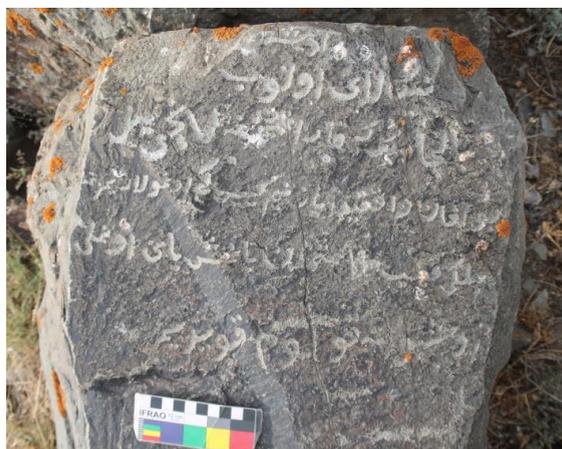


Fig.8. Etshkili-Too VII (Picture and drawing: Luc Hermann).
 8-сур. Эчкили-Тоо VII (Сурет пен қолсызба: Люк Германн).
 Рис.8. Эчкили-Тоо VII (Фото и прорисовка: Люк Германн).

Etshkili-Too VIII

Location and description (Fig.9): This inscription is also located near the second settlement, on a south-facing rock. The first line measures 16x5 cm, whereas the second line has a length of 27, 5 cm. The inscription is clearly visible and shows no signs of patination.

Transcription: 1. 1911 jili; 2. Bissimillah ir-rahman ir-rahim de

Translation: 1. 1911; 2. In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

Dating: 1911 as written by the author

Analysis: The date is provided by the author. It should be noted that the date follows the Gregorian calendar rather than the Islamic one, which is surprising given the religious character of the inscription.

The second part of the inscription contains the well-known Basmalah. This formula is recited in the Qur'ān before each surah and is also pronounced by Muslims before the prayer. The orientation of the rock does not correspond to the direction of Mecca; however, the rock and its inscription may have symbolized a religious place for daily prayers in the vicinity of a settlement. Furthermore, this inscription may have had a propitiatory function, providing a form of protection for the settlement and its inhabitants.

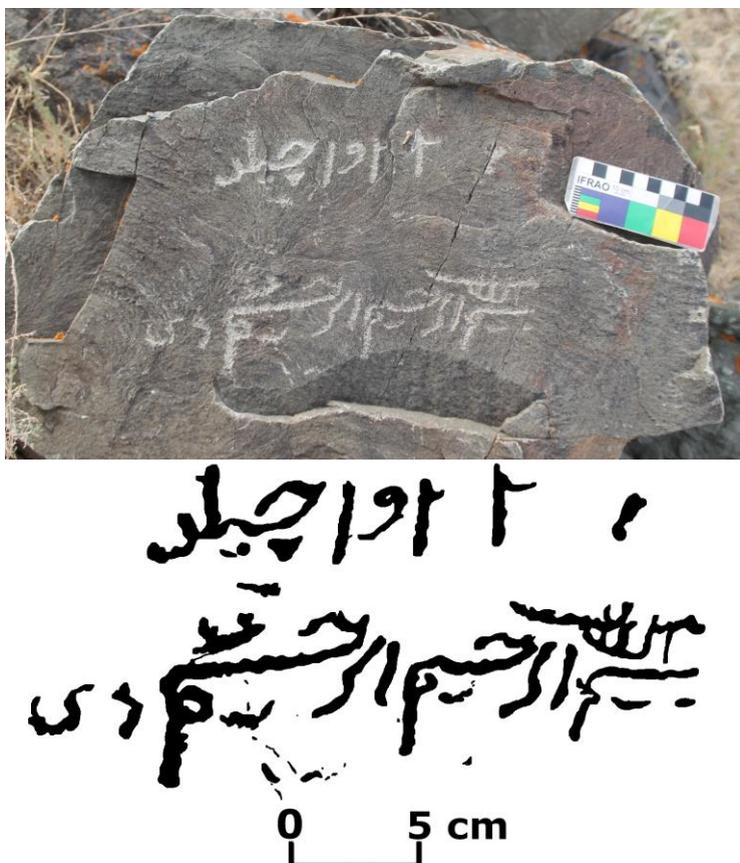


Fig.9. Etshkili-Too VIII (Picture and drawing: Luc Hermann).
9-сур. Эчкили-Тоо VIII (Сурет пен қолсызба: Люк Германн).
Рис.9. Эчкили-Тоо VIII (Фото и прорисовка: Люк Германн).

Etshkili-Too IX

Location and description (Fig.10): This inscription is also located near the second settlement, on a flat rock, and measures 18x9 cm. The inscription shows no signs of patination. Although lichen partially covers the inscription and the rock surface, the text remains clearly legible.

Transcription: Mirza Muhamed Kenek

Translation: Myrza Muhamed Kenek

Dating: The inscription most probably dates to the late 19th century, as its graphic features and language reflect forms close to the Kyrgyz phonology.

Analysis: The text records name of a person.

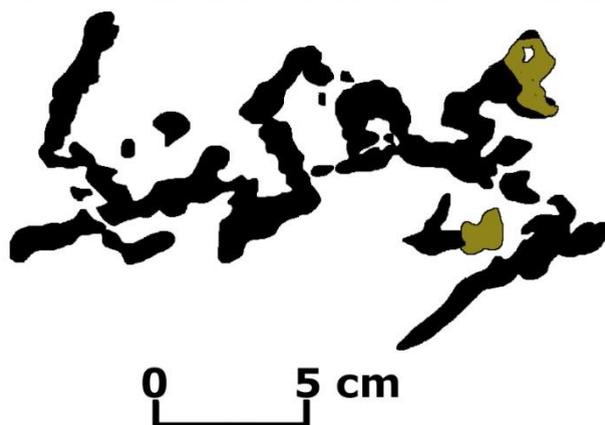


Fig.10. Etshkili-Too IX (Picture and drawing: Luc Hermann).
10-сур. Эчкили-Тоо IX (Сурет пен қолсызба: Люк Германн).
Рис.10. Эчкили-Тоо IX (Фото и прорисовка: Люк Германн).

Etshkili-Too X

Location and description (Fig.11): This inscription is located in the middle of a third settlement at an altitude of 1602 meters, on a south-facing rock. The first line on the right part of the rock measures 21x6 cm, whereas the second line on the left part measures 51x24 cm. The inscription is well visible and not patinated. In the lower part of the rock, a small Cyrillic inscription shows the same patina as the Arabic inscription.

Transcription: 1. 12[99]..? 2.Mullaqali Muhamed +ning qojasi Bu - Turur [Tarurud?// Mirqadir?]

Translation: 1. 1299; 2. Mollah Kali Muhammad is the teacher (khoja) of Turur (Tarurud?// Mirqadir?).

Dating: 1882 (1299 after Hijri)

Analysis: Two individuals are mentioned in this inscription. Turur may have been the author, referring to Kali Muhammad as his khoja. The titles khoja and Mollah suggest that Kali Muhammad was likely the imam of a nearby mosque. The date follows the Islamic (Hijri) calendar, which corresponds well with the religious references found in the text.

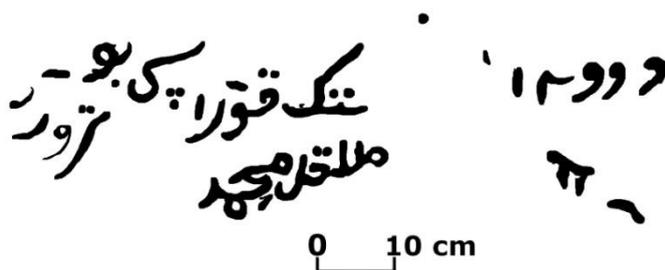


Fig.11. Etshkili-Too X (Picture and drawing: Luc Hermann).

11-сур. Эчкили-Тоо X (Сурет пен қолсызба: Люк Германн).

Рис.11. Эчкили-Тоо X (Фото и прорисовка: Люк Германн).

A new Arabic inscription in Kara-Say (transliteration and translation by Napil Bazytkhan)

The rock art site of Kara-Say is located 60 kilometers southwest of Etshkili-Too. Two Arabic inscriptions this site have previously been documented and published (Hermann et al., 2025a: 368). In July 2025, however, a third Arabic inscription was discovered and remains unpublished. It is presented here for the first time, as it provides an interesting comparison with the Arabic inscription of Etshkili-Too VIII.

Kara-Say III

Location and description (Fig.12): This inscription is located in the immediate vicinity of a settlement, on a south-facing rock. It measures 26x15 cm and is situated at an altitude of 1,728 m above sea level. The inscription is strongly patinated and has the same color as the rock surface. Furthermore, a more recent inscription has been engraved over it. For these reasons, the inscription is very difficult to see and read.

Transcription: 1. Bissimlillah ir-rahman ir-rahim Muhamed; 2. La illaha illah Muhamed / kalima; 3. Rasul allah.

Translation: 1. In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful; 2-3. There is no God except Allah (and) Muhammad is Allah's prophet.

Dating: Due to the strong patination of the inscription, it is suggested that it dates at least to the 19th century. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the inscription is significantly older.

Analysis: The first part of the inscription contains the well-known Basmalah. This formula precedes each surah in the Qur'ān and is commonly recited by Muslims before prayer. The formula is further complemented by the shahādah, one of the Five Pillars of Islam, expressing the Islamic declaration that there is only one God. This phrase is also part of the adhān, recited by the muezzin when calling the faithful to prayer. The word kalima is also present, referring to the declaration of faith contained in the shahādah. The orientation of the rock does not correspond to the direction of Mecca; however, the rock and its inscription may have symbolized a local place for daily prayer in the vicinity of the settlement. Moreover, the inscription may have had a propitiatory function, symbolically providing protection for the settlement and its inhabitants. A similar interpretation was previously proposed for the Basmalah inscription of Etshkili-Too VIII, which is also located near a settlement.

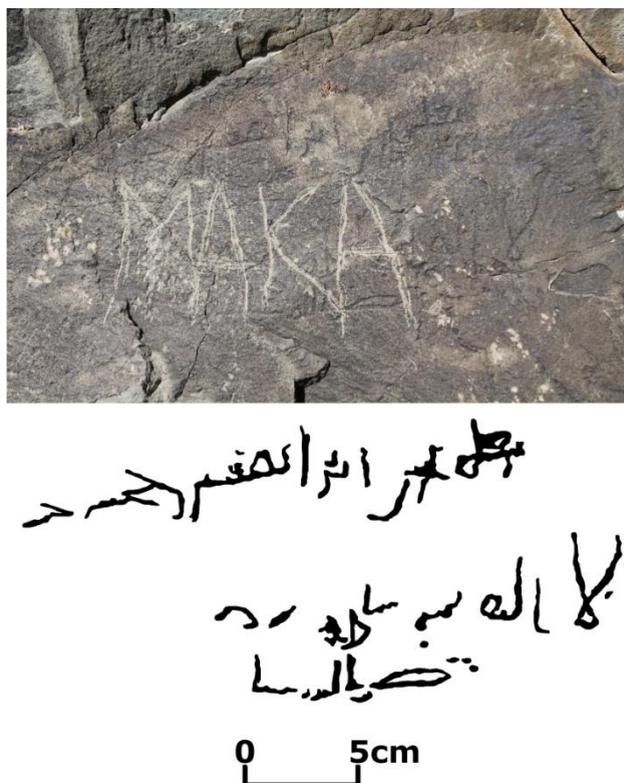


Fig. 12. Kara-Say III (Picture and drawing: Luc Hermann).
12-сур. Қара-Сай III (Сурет пен қолсызба: Люк Германн).
Рис.12. Кара-Сай III (Фото и прорисовка: Люк Германн).

Tamgas from Etshkili-Too

Three tamgas were documented on two rocks. In the description of the tamgas below, the tamgas are attributed to a type following Rogozhinskii's typology if it was possible (Yatsenko, Rogozhinskii, 2019: 41). The tamgas are numerated here according to the surveys of the authors.

Rock 16 (Fig. 13A): This tamga, resembling a key, measures 7x10 cm and is located at an altitude of 1,580 m above sea level. The rock appears to have been slightly displaced in the past, making it difficult to determine the original orientation of the petroglyphs. This tamga represents a variant of type no. 30 and likely belonged to the Sadyr, a subgroup of the Naiman (Castagné, 1921: 21).

Rock 26A (Fig. 13B): Two tamgas were depicted on a single stone located by the same settlement as the rocks with the inscriptions Etshkili-Too X-XI, at an altitude of 1601 meters. The rock was also moved, so it is not clear what the original orientation of the engravings was. The tamga on the left side of the panel looks like a half-moon and measures 15x8 cm. This kind of tamga, of Oguz origin, was still in used in the 19th century in the Tamgalyzhar area in the western extremity of the Betpak-Dala desert in Kazakhstan (Rogozhinskii, 2019: 290-294).

Rock 26B (Fig. 13B): The tamga on the right side of the same panel as the previously described tamga resembles the Greek letter "Psi" and measures 14x10 cm. It corresponds to the so-called "Tarak tamga", used by the Kazakh töre, descendants of the Chinggisids. (Rogozhinskii, 2019: 273).

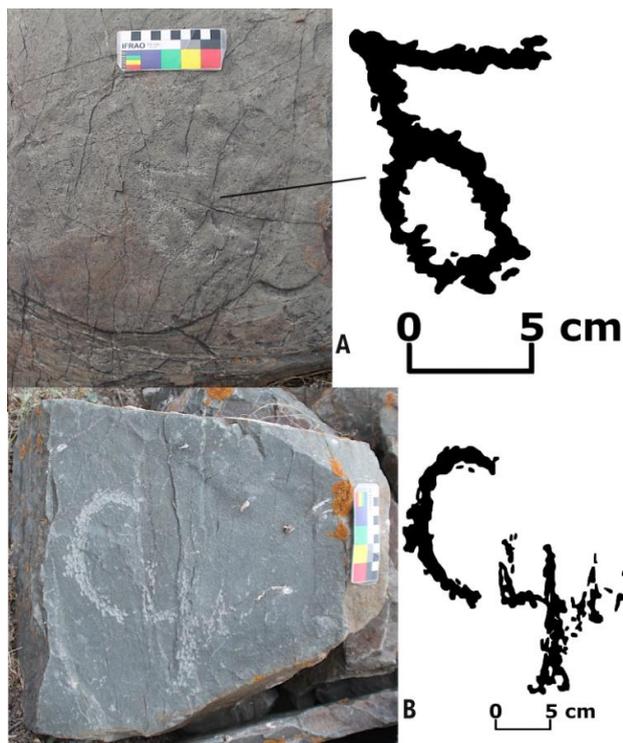


Fig.13. Tamgas from Etshkili-Too (Pictures and drawings: Luc Hermann).

13-сур. Етшкілі-Тоодан келген таңба (Суреттер мен қолсызбалар: Люк Германн).

Рис.13. Тамгас из Эчкили-Тоо (Фотографии и прорисовки: Люк Германн).

Results

A global analysis of the Arabic inscriptions from Etshkili-Too: major trends and common features

Altogether, nine Arabic inscriptions were documented in the Etshkili-Too region at three different locations. We observe some general features by these inscriptions.

Location of the inscriptions:

The inscriptions were found in a valley that is easily accessible from the plain of Talas and from nearby villages. While the first two inscriptions are located at altitudes between 1,440 m and 1,500 m above sea level, the other seven are situated at the top of the valley, between 1,587 m and 1,602 m. These altitudes are not particularly high for Kyrgyzstan, and the sites can be easily reached on foot and, of course, on horseback.

The presence of seven inscriptions near three of the five settlements indicates a strong connection between the inscriptions and the inhabited areas. Given the relatively low altitude of the settlements and their proximity to a small stream that flows only in winter and spring, it may be suggested that these settlements served as winter camps, occupied from late autumn to early spring. The settlements are located at the top of the valley and are surrounded by small mountains, which provide partial protection from strong winds.

Nine different names were documented in six inscriptions. In addition, a seventh inscription does not mention the author's name but only his filiation, referring solely to his father's name (IV). Two other inscriptions containing three names also indicate the authors' filiation, specifying whose sons they are (V and VII). One inscription refers to a mullah, who is described as the author's teacher (khoja) (X). Two inscriptions do not mention any personal name (VI and VIII), although one of them consists solely of a Basmalah (VIII).

It is clear that a disciple of a khoja would have been educated to read the Qurʾān, and the Basmalah inscription may also have been written by a mullah. The other authors were probably shepherds living near the settlements during the winter season; the association of personal names with depictions of goats may indicate that shepherds were responsible for these inscriptions. Inscription VII, however, raises a more complex question regarding its authorship: the oath-like nature of the text, invoking the entire community as witness, suggests that it may have been engraved by an aksakal, that is, an elder, possibly the leader of the local settlement.

Dating of the inscriptions:

Six dates are recorded on five rocks. Three dates follow the Gregorian calendar, ranging from 1911 (VIII) to 1922 (VI), although Arabic numerals were used to write them. In addition, inscription II includes the date 1928; however, it is not written in Arabographic script, and it remains uncertain whether this date was engraved by the same hand as the inscription.

Only one date clearly follows the Hijri calendar: 1299 (1882) (X). In two other cases, the Hijri calendar was probably used: 7-nči, corresponding to 1307 (1889, VII), and "13 sene", corresponding to 1313 (1895, I). However, an alternative interpretation based on the Gregorian calendar is also possible, yielding the dates 1907 and 1913, respectively, given that the inscriptions appear to have been produced in the late 19th or early 20th century.

The remaining inscriptions most likely date to the 19th or early 20th century. This dating is supported by the graphic features and linguistic forms of the inscriptions, which correspond

closely to Kyrgyz phonology. Moreover, the inscriptions generally display the same patina as those that can be dated.

Technique of the inscriptions

The nine inscriptions were deeply pecked into the rock surface and are relatively large, with lengths ranging from 18 cm and 51 cm. For this reason, they are clearly visible. The authors appear to have deliberately sought such visibility, possibly in order to mark the territory.

Subjects of the inscriptions

Although personal names constitute the main content of the inscriptions, four of them have a more specific meaning. Among the personal names recorded, none clearly refers to deceased individuals, nor can any of them be interpreted as epitaph.

One inscription located near a settlement has a clearly religious character and consists of the *Basmalah* (VIII). A similar inscription was also found at Kara-Say (Kara-Say III), likewise near a settlement.

Another inscription refers to the year of the dragon, associating the word “*Yılan*” (“dragon”) with the date 1916, and to the year of the dog, associating the date 1922 with a depiction of a dog (VI), following the traditional nomadic calendar.

Two other inscriptions may represent attempts to mark ownership the territory or the settlement (V and VII). In both cases, the authors invoked witnesses, either directly (“*qarayan*”, VII) or indirectly (“*Er kim kelib*”, V). In these inscriptions, the authors also indicated their filiation by mentioning their fathers’ names and, in one case, by referring to their descendants in order to extend the inscription’s relevance into the future (“*oγularimizγa*”, VII). Such a practice may have served to assert territorial claims for both the present and future generations. The use of rock as a medium ensured the durability of these inscriptions.

It may also be suggested that the simple recording of personal names in other inscriptions served a similar function of marking ownership of territory. When a shepherd engraved his name on a rock, it may have signaled to other shepherds that he was the first to occupy that pasture or valley. The presence of *tamgas* (see the following chapter) also contributed to such territorial claims. As marks of property, *tamgas* affirmed the presence of a particular clan in the valley. The possibility of writing personal names may have provided shepherds with a new – and perhaps more specific – means of asserting their claim to a territory than the use of a *tamga* alone.

The three tamgas

One *tamga* of type 30 is not associated with either Arabic inscriptions or a settlement. This *tamga* shows no signs of patination, and a goat, stylistically attributed to the 19th century is located in its immediate vicinity. The two other *tamgas*, engraved on the same rock, are also not patinated and were still in use in the 19th century. Furthermore, they are located near a settlement where two Arabic inscriptions were found, both of which can be dated to the late 19th century. For these reasons, the three *tamgas* are considered with the Arabic inscriptions and with the occupation of the settlements and they are therefore attributed to the 19th century. However, the *tamgas* are not directly associated with the Arabic inscriptions on the same rocks. It is noteworthy that in this valley, which contains five settlements, only three *tamgas* have been documented. This may suggest that *tamgas* represented an older method of marking territorial ownership. The possibility of engraving personal names in Arabic may have provided a more effective means of asserting land ownership than the use of *tamgas*.

Conclusion

In contrast to the Ur-Maral region, it is not clear whether the nine inscriptions from Etshkili-Too were made by shepherds (see Hermann et al., 2025b: 189). At least, one inscription was written by someone who had studied under a hoja, as explicitly stated by the author himself (X). Another inscription consists of the Basmalah (VIII). It remains uncertain whether such a religious formula could have been engraved by local shepherds or whether this sacred expression would normally have been written only by a mullah. The fact that the date on the same rock follows the Hijri calendar might suggest that it was engraved by a lay person. Nevertheless, this individual was sufficiently literate to write a complex religious formula such as the Basmalah. Two other inscriptions also contain relatively complex sentences: one refers to the community as a witness (VII), while another addresses people who might pass by in the future (V). In both cases, the authors demonstrate the ability to compose more elaborate texts using Arabic script. Finally, one inscription refers to the traditional nomadic calendar, mentioning the years of the dragon and the dog (VI). To our knowledge, no other inscriptions using this calendar have yet been documented. However, future discoveries and publications of Arabic inscriptions may provide further information about this practice within an Islamic society.

The association of personal names with dates in four inscriptions (I, II, VII, and X) indicates that the authors sought to anchor their names in time. Moreover, the two inscriptions referring to the community or to future passers-by also project themselves toward the future: one mentions the author's descendants (VII), while another addresses those who might later come to the site (V).

It is also noteworthy that these inscriptions are not directly associated with tamgas, and that only three tamgas were documented in the entire valley despite the presence of five settlements. While the tamgas most likely date to the 19th century, the inscriptions appear to belong to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This observation leads us to hypothesize that the possibility of writing personal names on rocks may have gradually rendered the engraving of tamgas obsolete. If an inscription could record both a name and a date, marking territorial presence through a tamga may no longer have been necessary.

Future publications of Arabic inscriptions from rock art sites will help confirm or refute this hypothesis and will likely provide further insights into the history of Kyrgyzstan and of the peoples of Central Asia during the 19th and early 20th centuries. For this reason, it is essential that archaeologists systematically document and publish Arabic inscriptions. Such materials may also contribute to a renewed understanding of rock art from earlier periods.

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