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The Gaze of the Meliks

Tracing connections and patterns in a petroglyph scene in the Eastern Taurus

Abstract

In the Eastern Taurus Mountains of South-Eastern Turkey *are found several petroglyph fields. One of them is in the plain of Tirsin almost 3000 meters above sea-level. Expeditions led by Muvaffak Uyanik in the late sixties disclosed the petroglyphs and they were published a few years later. Since then, no extensive research has been done in the area. The petroglyphs are organised in scenes, and exhibits a variety of animals and anthropomorphic figures. None of them has been successfully dated. One of the petroglyph scenes is analysed by using the approach of agential realism. This approach focuses on the totality of the petroglyph scene and makes productive use of minute details, that might otherwise be deemed insignificant. The analysis reveals a composition of three extraordinary animals gazing at what seems to be a human. Underneath, two ordinary goats are mirroring each other; one ascends and one descends, the latter appears to have killed the human. It is suggested that the scene is about powerful kings or gods confronting a human, who is transgressing the boundaries of a sacred territory. A number of sub-variants of the hypothesis are formulated and offered in order to be used for further research.*

Introduction

Five animals and a splayed human are pictured on a boulder high up on a Kurdish mountain. Amazingly, one of the animals looks like a giraffe, but the rest of the party seems at first sight rather insignificant. After a closer look, storytelling on a mythical level is unfolding, singing a song about humans, animals and fantastic creatures between earth and sky. Next to the rock are hundreds of other rocks with petroglyphs surrounded by wilderness and a world teeming with life. In this article, I show how narratives hidden in the picture can be unlocked, by being attentive to the fine details and how they mutually connect. My analysis follows the approach of Agential Realism, a New-Materialist approach formulated by professor Karen Barad from the University of California. This approach, I believe, offers a promising method for understanding ancient petroglyphs. For archaeologists, it also provides a delightful way to delve into the imagery. (Fig. 1).

My focus is an image located in a petroglyph field in the *Tirsin/Tirişin* plateau in the *Eastern Taurus* mountains. The plateau, which has several petroglyph fields, is situated 50 km south of *Lake Van* in *Turkey* close to the *Iraqi* border at an altitude of 2850 m above sea level. Among these rugged snow-clad mountains, rivers are flowing strongly through deep valleys leaving little space for agriculture. While the mountains stand largely barren today, they were once cloaked in expansive forests that provided a habitat for animals such as the ibex, bison, and leopard. Many of these species are now rare or have become extinct. The area also has thousands of caves, some of which also have painted or engraved ancient pictures (Uyanik 1974, 21). The petroglyphs are

Fig. 1. The mountains in the Hakkari-region (Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0).

carved on boulders which accumulated in large numbers in river beds and other lower points close to the permanent snow line (Özdogan 2004, 29). Two main clusters contain most of the petroglyphs. One is found in *Khan-i Melikan* which in Kurdish means the fountain of the king, and the other, 1½ hours walk to the north, is located in *Taht-i Melik*, meaning the throne of the king. Even though the royal names indicate that the sites had some importance, this should not be overstated, as "Melik" at least today is also the title of a local chief (Uyanik 1974, 32). It may seem peculiar, that people would want to create petroglyphs in such an inaccessible place at high altitude but this is paralleled by the petroglyphs in *Hakkari Sat* and in the *Kagizman* district at some distance from *Tirsin* (Sagona and Zimansky 2009, 33). In such places, petroglyphs were hidden from the eyes of outsiders, yet every summer pastoralists would bring their animals to *Tirsin* to graze. As late as in the 1960´s, people from far away put up hundreds of tents on the plain (Uyanik 1974, 21, 29). (Fig. 2).

Following his retirement as a school inspector, Muvaffak Uyanik explored *Tirsin* in 1967, 1968 and 1969 (Uyanik 1974, 22), assisted by a graduate student, the later renowned archaeologist Mehmet Özdogan. By then he had already investigated the *Hakkari Sat* mountains, the *Cudi* mountain and other places near the Turkish-Iraqi border. In a hostile and difficult terrain, he made drawings, photographed and counted more than two thousands petroglyphs (Uyanik 1974, 34), and thereby played an invaluable role in bringing these petroglyph fields to light. Uyanik presented his preliminary results at the Valcamonica Symposium 1968 (Uyanik 1974, 22) and published the final work in 1974 (Uyanik 1974, ADEVA,

Fig. 2. The location of Tirsin near the town of Catak in South-Eastern Turkey (Mapcarta).

Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, Graz, Austria). Uyanik worried that visiting people might damage the petroglyphs and he hoped the area would be declared a national park to protect them (Uyanik 1974, 13, 34). Some of the pictures in *Taht-i Melik* documented by Uyanik are in fact not present at the site any more, as some of them have been brought to the *Museum of Van* (Tümer 2018, 24). In the *Hakkari Sat* a mining company has recently begun operations in the petroglyph area (ANF News 2020). (Fig. 3).

No other comprehensive study of the rock art of *Tirsin* seems to exist, nor is there consensus on the dating of the petroglyphs. Mehmet Özdogan authored a brief article on *Tirsin* (Özdogan 2004), in which he noted the difficulty of dating. However, he speculated that the presence of an ancient settlement's remains (Uyanik 1974, 44-45), could suggest the site was inhabited during a warmer period, when the snow line was located at higher altitude. The apparent similarity between some of the images and those found at *Göbekli Tepe* led him to propose a similar date of at least 10,000 years ago. However, the varying degrees of weathering-induced deterioration suggest that the pictures were created over long periods. Some of them are certainly much more recent than Uynanik suggested, indicated by depictions of wheeled carts (Kilic 2018, abstract) and other tools of a later date, as well as the presence of horses (Uyanik 1974, 42). Hale Tümer (2018) also finds that the dating of the petroglyphs is

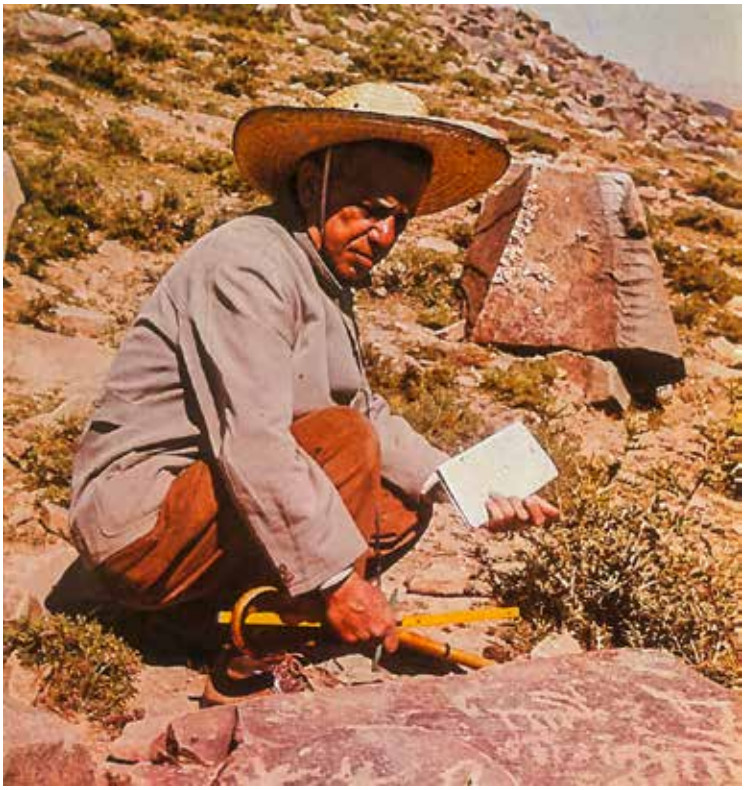


Fig. 3. Photo of Muvaffak Uyanik working at the site (Uyanik 1974, fig. 45)

difficult and suggests tentatively that the realistic pictures belong to the bronze age and the less realistic to the iron age (Tümer 2018, 29). This is based on the assumption, that in this region prehistoric pictures of animals tended to evolve from a realistic style towards a more schematic style, whereas "humans grow in importance" (Anati 1968, 35). İlhan Çağdaş Dönmez suggests that the deer figures in *Tirsin* belong to the Middle Bronze Age, based on a comparison to a deer image found in the *Hirbemerdon Tepe* settlement in *Diyarbakir*, but estimates that the site as a whole has a "long chronology" (Dönmez 2019, 6). As yet, no natural science dating methods have been applied to the petroglyphs (Sagona and Zimansky 2009, p. 27). Dating is always important, but as there is no clear evidence to establish the period to which the image belongs, I will not delve further into the question. In the following, I will first give some information on the context of the image. Then I will explain my theoretical approach and how I use it, before I proceed to the analysis of the image.

Characterisation of the petroglyph site of Tirsin

The petroglyph site of *Tirsin* has been officially known since 1937, but the archaeological authorities were reluctant to explore the area because of the difficult natural conditions. Therefore, Mufaffak Uyanik, took the initiative to organise an expedition (Uyanik 1974, 22). As the area had no roads, Uyanik and his assistants rode out from the village of *Cilgri* near *Catak* on mules with a local guide (Özdogan 2004, 28). Surrounding a mountain peak, which is more than 3200 m above sea level, Uyanik identified

six petroglyph fields including the two mentioned above with more than 2000 pictures (Uyanik 1974, 34). At the nearby village of Narli, ancient petroglyphs were also found. More recent carvings with scriptural signs and Christian crosses were found at two other neighbouring villages, *Mervane* and *Cilgri* (Uyanik 1974, 47-51).

Emmanuel Annati suggested that the area of *Hakkari Sat* almost 100 km east of *Tirsin*, which likewise features a multitude of petroglyphs, had been considered a holy mountain, because of the extraordinary scenic landscape at high altitude surrounded by several glaciers (Anati 1968, 34). This theory could apply to *Tirsin* as well, a notion that is supported by the meaning of "tir sin" in Kurdish, which translates to "to be in awe". The *Cudi* mountain, which is located some 50 km to the west of *Tirsin*, is, to this day, considered a holy place by local people. Furthermore, the local people show respect to the petroglyphs, as noted by Uyanik (Uyanik 1974,17). However, "tir-i sin" can also be understood as "green arrow" according to Uyanik (Uyanik 1974, 32). Ancient arrowheads of bronze have been found, but such findings are not unusual in the region which was riddled with conflicts between Scythians, Urartians and Assyrians in the beginning of the 1st millenium BC.

Due to the hardness of the volcanic sediment stone and the snow protecting them for more than half of the year, the petroglyph images are well preserved and often easy to recognise on the flat surfaces, which has been chosen for their suitability as a natural canvas. Surfaces are coated by rock varnish, except where parts have flaked off exposing rock in a lighter colour. Ochres mixed with fat and organic particles have been found on some of the petroglyphs (Sagona and Zimansky 2009, p. 27). The size of the surfaces on which petroglyphs are carved range from 0.72 x 0.34 m = 0.24 m^2 to 2.50 x 1.12 m = 2.90 m^2. The individual sub-sites demonstrate differences in motifs, style and wear. The drawings of *Khan-i Melikan* are relatively large and realistic and seem to have been executed with care (Uyanik 1974, 34). At *Taht-i Melik* the motifs are more diverse and even schematic (Uyanik 1974, 39). Most of the image elements depict animals but humans and geometric figures are also common. Humans are generally more schematic than animals. Individual figures do not occur alone, but are always found in scenes with other figures. Most of the petroglyphs in *Khan-i Melikan* are better preserved and therefore probably younger, whereas the petroglyphs in the "Below G" area of *Taht-i Melik* look more worn (Uyanik 1974, 42). Small cupmarks 1½ – 3 cm in diameter were found in two locations in *Taht-i Melik*. In one location they were placed in regular lines, in another they encircle a somewhat larger central cavity (Uyanik 1974, 43).

Zoomorphic petroglyphs are always depicted in profile, usually with few but characteristic details. Different kinds of goats and deer are common, but smaller animals like foxes and snakes are rare. Oxen and horses are rare too, whereas images of bear seem not to figure at all even though bears used to be common in the mountains (Sinclair 1987, 255). The more realistic pictures are larger in scale, and they often have lines dividing the animal into smaller parts. Bulls are identifiable by their lowered head and large shoulders and are only found at *Khan-i Melikan*. Anthropomorphic figures were found in different shapes, positions and activities such as running and kneeling. They are depicted frontally in a schematic way, usually as thin 'matchstick types' (except for what Uyanik names "demon figures"), and in the periphery of animals. Legs are always shown, arms not always, but when they are, they are stretched to the sides or upwards as if in an adorating posture. Arms may also engage with some tool e.g. a bow. Zoomorphic composites combine features of different species e.g. a bull and a deer, and some may have heads at both ends. Anthropomorphic composites called "demon figures", are counted 23 times. They have human features in a distorted way e.g. a very large hand or several heads (Uyanik 1974, 46).

After having provided an overview of the broader context of the petroglyph, my primary attention will now shift to the interconnections within the image itself.

Agential realism as a way to analyse and understand petroglyph images

My contention is that small details may reveal very significant information. Attending to the details and the effects and affects of the image, evoke understandings which would not materialise by using a comparative approach. Agential realism is a powerful approach that makes this possible. It is part of what is called new-materialism, even though it is not really new, as it has many similarities with phenomenology. What may seem surprising is, that Karen Barad developed agential realism with a point of departure in the quantum physics of Niels Bohr, and that her approach is applicable in disciplines as different as science, politics, arts etc. An example of its application in petroglyph studies is Jones (2014, 333-336). The approach is agential in the sense that inanimate things are understood as having effects upon other things and bodies (Harris and Cipolla 2017, p. 38). This does not imply that things have intentions or subjectivity; the effect is simply about making a difference by being connected; effect is not necessarily linked to causation. The image on a stone makes a difference, because it changes the stone. The stone makes a difference, because it marks the image in a certain way. A petroglyph makes a difference to humans, because humans engage with it. Agency in this sense is not granted or willed, it is just there (Juelskær 2012, 17).

So, an element in a petroglyph scene must be understood in its immediate context, that is the whole it is part of. As in *Tirsin*, a petroglyph figure is part of a scene on a certain stone, which is part of a wider complex of petroglyphs, which again are part of a natural landscape. A petroglyph is also a product of one or more rock carvers and is influenced by a certain practice or tradition, which again is inscribed in a wider history. This means that an effect also changes the future. The situated image is therefore constituted by relations on multiple scales in space-time, knitted into a dynamic web. The image itself may seem static, but its effects and the surroundings including the human element are dynamic. The complex of all these agencies are therefore in agential realism regarded as "intra-actions" instead of "inter-actions", because they are part of a whole. For this reason Barad prefers to talk about "phenomena" instead of objects (Barad 2007, p. 146), and by that she emphasises they are open-ended and unstable. Phenomena are unstable because they are constituted in dynamic relationships and because they are indeterminate. To determine what a phenomenon is about, requires that particular material arrangements are present (Barad 2007, 261). Certain phenomena are therefore verifiable (stabilised, recognisable and communicable) because they appear the same way again, when they are measured in the same way (Barad 2007, 43-44). This is why agential realism is realist.

Karen Barad calls any intervention by a human like a researcher or a rock carver an "agential cut". The cut delimits the topic, leaving something in and something out and constitutes the topic in a certain way. But what has been left out or made absent, may in some ways still be present. It may have been cut away because it is taboo or dangerous, and in this sense it may be co-defining the image. It may be an elephant in the room, ignored while being near, or part of a negative definition. This involves ethical considerations, because cutting something out may have serious consequences for what is considered important and what is not. Uyanik indicated the giraffe as the only significant part of the petroglyph scene, not only because it was a surprising element, but also because it to him raised the question if giraffes had lived in the area at some point (Uyanik 1974, 42). Drawings are also actively co-defining the petroglyph as exemplified by the differences between the photo of the image and the drawing made by Uyanik. Unwillingly, the researcher may also have some responsibility for damage being done to the image, most evidently because of research interventions and by attracting the attention of the public and sometimes careless people.

Therefore, the agential cut have ontological, epistemological as well as ethical dimensions. Engaging with an image

implies an open dialogue in which the researcher poses questions to the totality of the image and the image returns answers and new questions. If the approach is not holistic, then the focus would be restricted to matching the elements of the image with preconceived categories. Such a non-holistic approach does not give full justice to the image, as it does not take the image for what it is, but reduces it to its components, as when the above mention "giraffe" is not understood in its pictorial context. This dialogue can not be the spinning of some social constructivist narrative and is in fact far from it. Social constructivism denies what it calls "essence" and maintains instead a radical relativism and subjectivism, in which what one hold true is supposed to be as valid as anyone else´s truth. Agential realism on the other hand claims that there is only one world, and that the researcher is not outside but part of that world (Barad 2007, p. 26). What is needed is therefore engagement in the world instead of pretending to be standing outside looking in. This 'outside' is constituted by Cartesian theory-based thinking where data reflect theory, but Barad rejects the commonly used term of reflection because of its affinities to mirroring and sameness. Translated to archaeology, the advise is to take things as they appear, not presuming they stand for something else (Alberti and Marshall 2009, 349). The task of the researcher should not be to reflect but to "diffract", another concept taken from the world of optical physics, because that highlights differences rather than sameness (Barad 2007, 29). Diffraction is basically the pattern which arise when waves meet: when crest meets crest, the waves become amplified, and when crest meets trough the waves are cancelled out (Barad 2007, pp. 71-94). As a research method it means to follow links and superpositions by:

"reading insights through one another in attending to and responding to the details and specificities of relations of difference and how they matter" (Barad 2007, 71).

"It is about taking what you find inventive and trying to work carefully with the details of patterns of thinking (in their very materiality) that might take you somewhere interesting that you never would have predicted." (Juelskjær and Schwennesen 2012, 13).

This reading must be on the lookout for "matters of practices, doings and actions" (Barad 2007, 135) including itself as engagement. It is carried out by thick description, followed by imaginative associative and logical thinking and iterative questioning with attention to how agents constitute each other. Vision is prominent in modern Western culture, but not necessarily in other cultures (Ingold 2002, 245-246, 249). Using only one sense is an example of how an agential cut leaves out information, so all relevant aspects of the image-material should be registered including, if possible, non-visual elements like touch, sound and smell. Finger-touch can reveal information about the carving e.g. how deep it is, as well as about the surface of the rock, fractures etc. (Jones and Diaz-Guardamino 2018) and balancing on rocks demonstrate the intricacies of the immediate environment. Sound provides information on how dense the rock is and about the surrounding 'sound-scape' of weather, water, cracks, animals, humans etc. Smell may be of hypothetical relevance to petroglyphs. Senses work in conjunction as a "synergic" (Ingold 2002, 268) or "synaesthetic" system (Hamilakis 2017, 172). In the present study, multisensorial data are of course restricted, since the information mainly comes from the visual report of Uyanik, but the world of rock-carvers was full of sounds, smells and somatic sensations. One example of synergy is when petroglyphs are exposed to water in a way that influences how they look and feel (Nash 2018, p. 415). When people took their goats and sheep up to the plain of *Tirsin* in the spring, the rainfalls would make the pictures appear alive, and water would become part of the pictures. Some months later, when the weather had been dry for a while, the grass had become

yellow and the pictures perhaps inanimate, people would leave the plain again.

Concluding this section, I quote Tim Ingold who recommends to "think from materials, not about them" (Ingold 2012, 437-438). Many subtle things go on in an artefact, which may say more about the artefact in its entirety than questions of style and age. Agential realism is an approach and a method which can help clear out important details, understand how they connect mutually and formulate testable hypotheses about their role in a society of the past. Tests and improvements should preferably be carried out by using a common agreed upon procedure and mutual dialogue. In the next section I will carry out a thick description of the petroglyph, which will serve as basis for my hypotheses.

The elements of the petroglyph scene

I selected the specific petroglyph, which is the focus of my analysis, mainly because Uyanik had made a drawing of it (Uyanik 1974, fig. 46). This would assist my presentation, since it is difficult to discern all the details in the photo. However, please be aware that my description refers only to the photo, because of some deviations from the photo in the drawing - probably deliberate interpretations of the author. As mentioned above, Uyanik found the picture interesting only because of the giraffe in the middle of the scenery and considered the image as such "a rather indistinct composition" (Uyanik 1974, 42), but it certainly contains a significant narrative. Other intriguing narratives can likewise be revealed from the other

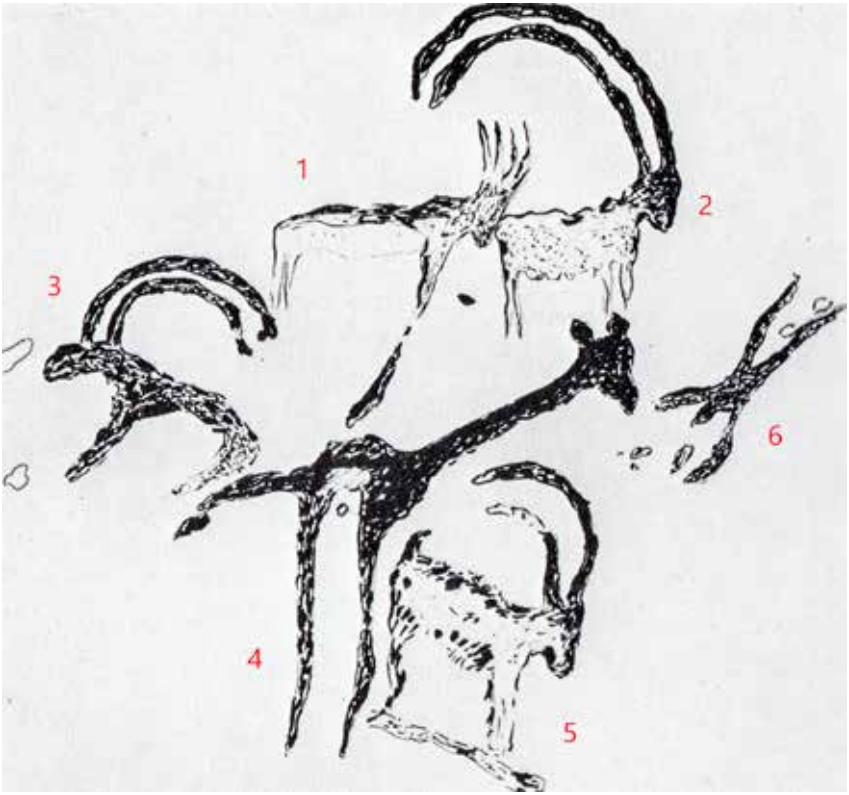
Fig. 4. Photo of the petroglyph scene (Uyanik 1974, fig. 47).

scenes in the corpus exposed in Uyanik´s book. In the following, I conduct a thorough description of the image by finding differences, similarities and connections. When these details are read through one another in diffractive ways, possible hypotheses emerge. (Fig. 4 and 5).

The petroglyph, which is a part of the *Taht-i Melik* cluster, displays a set of six figures. Its dimensions are approximately 100 cm by 80 cm (Uyanik 1974, fig. 47), and it is carved into the flat upright surface of a free-standing rock with broad streaks of thick pecking. Even though, the rock is only partly visible on the photo, it seems to have triangular faces. The left edge is sharp and straight, and the sunlit surface behind is just as flat as the front side. The right edge is uneven and has a contrasting rough band on the front side running along the edge. This band may have been pecked by purpose, but that is difficult to make out from the photo. Below the petroglyph is a rounded break-off. Parallel to the left edge are two clear, natural, almost linear grooves of variable lengths, probably cracks. Parallel to the right edge a number of parallel subtle striations can be discerned, which are probably natural scratches from movements of rock and ice. The narrow angle of the sunlight enhances the elements by their shadows on the flat surface, almost creating a 3D illusion.

Five of the figures are instantly identifiable as standing animals in profile, whereas the sixth on the right side may be a human in a splayed upside-down position. The im-

Fig. 5. Drawing of the petroglyph scene (Uyanik 1974, fig. 46; numbers added by Kristian Alex Larsen)



age fills out the space between the edges of the rock and takes advantage of its features: The arching horns of animal no 2 follow the triangle where the edges of the rock meet on top, and follow at the same time the rounded edge below the image, and the human seems to have its feet upright on the rough band to the right.

The animal in the upper left part of the scene **(no. 1)** is facing towards the right. Its head has about five outgrowths on the back of its head, pointing upwards like a round elongated feather-crown. The forehead is touching the rear of the animal in front of it (no. 2). The legs are angled as the animal is leaning forward. The tail is lifted and pointing backwards and touching, together with the hind leg, animal no. 3. The stomach is thin, the thorax thicker, and there is a long distance between the hind and the front legs. Under the front legs, a stripe connects this animal with the animal below like a bridge (no. 4).

The next animal **(no. 2)** is also facing right. It has two ibex-type horns longer than its own body, which are rising as an arch high above its body and even above the head of the animal behind (no. 1). The horn-arch follows the edges of the rock, that seem to meet (outside the photo) in a pointed 'summit' a little above the horn-arch. Typical for a goat, the legs are positioned as if balancing on a rock. The trunk is blurred but looks short and plump.

Below and to the left of animal no. 1 is animal **no. 3**, which – unlike all the other animals - is facing towards the left. Its two ibex-type horns reach towards its rear almost touching the hind legs of animal no. 1 above. The trunk is marked with two parallel streaks, and the front part under the head is marked by thick pecking. Compared to the first two animals, this one seems to be climbing upwards towards the sharp edge of the stone. Its thick tail touches the behind of animal no. 4; however, this tail may also belong to animal no. 4.

To the right of animal no. 3 is animal **no. 4**, which Uyanik interpreted as a giraffe. It is standing on a horizontal surface facing right. It has very long legs, a very long neck and two round ears, which almost touch the feet of animal no. 2. The trunk is relatively small and round, and the snout touches the arm of the human to the right. The bridging streak mentioned in relation to animal no. 1 could perhaps be the tail of animal no. 4 in an upright position.

Under the long neck of animal no. 4 is animal **no. 5**, which is facing right and has two ibex-type horns of which the lower one is short and the other one is about the same length as the horns of animal no. 3. The tail seems to touch the chest of animal no. 4. Like animal no. 3, the trunk is emphasised with two parallel streaks. Compared to the other animals, animal no. 5 seems to be descending downwards. The ground on which it is standing is marked with a sloping streak. Between this animal and the human is a pronounced spot.

No. 6 is depicted as a human corpse in the drawing, but that is not completely evident in the photo, as this figure is schematic and blurred. Seemingly turning upside down, the interpretation as a human is likely because of the splayed limbs, the smaller "head" protruding between the "arms", and the feet touching the rough edge of the stone, perhaps as if the human was falling from a rock. However, both arms are much thicker than the legs, which can not be accidental, since the pecking must have been laborious. So, either the being is a strong armed human in upside down position, or alternatively – if the feet are down - a male human without his head, or perhaps something entirely different. I choose to go along with the interpretation of the figure as a human as no other possibility seems to me likely.

Reading the elements through one another

A diffractive reading of the coherent details soon develops a picture of relations and oppositions. The picture is a dense group of carefully interconnected figures forming a composition. Each animal comes close to one or two neighbours. Animals nos. 1 and 4 are even connected at a distance by a 'bridge', perhaps a tail in an unexpected position. The straight streaks at the same

time divide the composition into fields emphasising the spaces in between like boundaries on a map. Animals nos. 1,2 and 4 are all oriented in the same direction towards the human and are standing on a horizontal terrain. Animals nos. 3 and 5 are standing on a continuous slope heading in opposite directions. Animals nos. 2,3 and 5 have ibex-horns, whereas animals nos. 1 and 4 have other kinds of 'headgear'. Who may these animal be, what are they doing and where are they roaming? The three of them (nos. 2,3 and 5) are clearly goats and must therefore be related as such, whereas the two other animals (nos. 1 and 4) are something else and differ from each other and the goats in a number of ways.

No. 1 has a showy headgear, which is probably not horns since it is made up of 5 streaks. It could be a mane, a feather-crown, a fire but it also has a resemblance to the fingers of a hand. Similar 'fingers' or feathers on top of a head are also found on an anthropomorphic figure present at the nearby site of *Taht-i Melik* (Uyanik 1974, Fig. 96). (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6. Human figure with crown (Uyanik 1974, fig. 96).

Large hands with fingers spread apart are quite common on petroglyphs like e.g. in Ausevik, Norway (Lars Larsson 2022, 108) but also in two different images in *Kahn-i Melikan* (Uyanik 1974, Figs. 56 and 58). Another kind of parallel could be headgear-rays mentioned found in Siberia as well as Norway, which again could be depictions of feather-hats or crowns (Viste, 38). Furthermore, animal no. 1 has a long body with a thin stomach, a broad thorax and an extended tail evoking the figure of a large cat. So, if the headgear is a mane, the cat may be a male lion. Perhaps, the similarity to a hand may also associate the animal with the transformative quality of a manipulating hand, and the similarity to a crown with the might of a king – a "Melik" which also gives name to the site. The lion is not native to the Taurus today, but neither is animal no. 4 – the "giraffe". However, if the animal is a native cat, then the peculiarity of the headgear is accentuated. Leopards were extant in *Tirsin* at least fifty years ago (Uyanik 1974, 44) and two other petroglyph-figures photographed to the book of Uyanik are in fact interpreted as leopards (Uyanik 1974, fig. 73 and fig. 103). (Fig. 7).

By touching the goat (**no. 2**) in front of it with its head, the cat becomes closely connected to that animal, which also has majestic features – the extremely long horns which cover the cat and the other animals below, like the arch of the sky. The arch follows the upper corner of the rock, as well as the breakage under the petroglyph. This enhancing repetition of the form of the arch, has a framing and perhaps also a protective effect. Perched atop a rock with its legs gathered beneath it, the goat expresses a sense of vigilance and exaltedness. Together the two figures have a special relationship and importance, which is intimated by the encircling embrace and dynamics of both animals headgear, and their being in the central position at the top of the image.

In close contact with the two animals on top is the long-necked and long-legged animal below (**no. 4**), which is identified as a

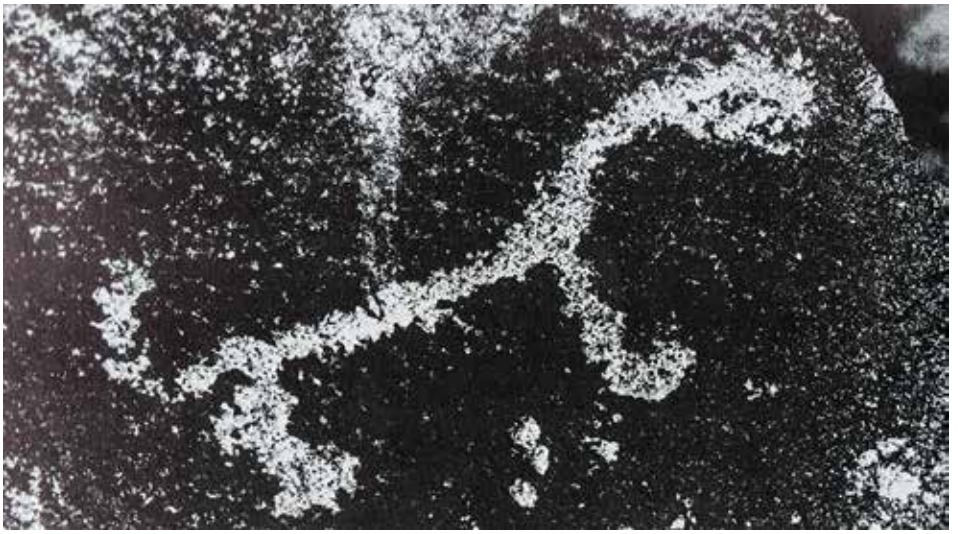


Fig. 7. Figure interpreted as a leopard (Uyanik 1974, fig. 103).

giraffe by Uyanik (1974, 42). A giraffe is certainly what immediately comes to mind, but this animal is also an unlikely one to come across in these mountains, an environment hostile for giraffes. The likeness of a giraffe is however emphasised by the small round ears, the rounded trunk and the form and proportion of the head. But what is a giraffe doing on this mountain, out of place? Perhaps, it is its quality of being strange, exotic and even magical that may explain its presence. Furthermore, its towering, impressive appearance also has a majestic quality like animals nos. 1 and 2. Being so tall, the giraffe may seem to be all-discerning. It is well-known that people, memories and tales travelled long distances in past times, and similar surprising figurations of non-extant species are found elsewhere as well (Larsen 2022, 17-18). The petroglyph does not necessarily reflect the local fauna. Connectivity between the three animals is effected by their overlaps, the long-distance 'bridge' between the cat and animal no. 4 and that all three animals are standing on a horizontal plane contrary to the remaining two animals (nos. 3 and 5).

As indicated by its horns, animal **no. 3** is also a goat. Its contrasting orientation towards the left indicates that something remarkable is going on. This orientation could be explained as mirroring animal **no. 5** – a goat as well. The two goats have a similar size and body form except that no. 5 has one short perhaps broken horn, and both of them are standing on a continuous slope, contrary to the other animals. No. 3 seems to be climbing up the mountain and no. 5 is descending. Unlike the other animals, they do not reveal extraordinary features, but they are of course kindred to goat no. 2. Being outside the central majestic triangle of nos. 1,2 and 4, they have a more peripheral position in the image.

I have already discussed if figure **no. 6** is a human. The rough pecking and the small size of the figure does not make is easy to decide upon. However, a human body plan seems more likely than the outline of an animal or a geometrical sign, and the other figures are easy recognisable from their outline. Furthermore, this figure is tiny in relation to the animals, a trait often seen in petroglyphs, where humans are depicted as tiny matchstick figures. The spot ahead of the human could then be a pool of blood. But why did it stumble and die? The answer may be found in the rest of the image, and therefore I pose more questions to it.

There is a symmetry between the two goats nos. 3 and 5, divided by the giraffe. Perhaps the two goats are one and the same, pictured 'before and after'? If so, something violent possibly happened in between, because the descending goat seems to have a broken horn. Did it butt the human? If yes, then it strengthens the interpretation of the spot being a pool of blood. Why are the three animals nos. 1,2 and 4 looking directly at the human, whereas the other two (nos. 3 and 5) do not? Did these three animals just pass by the corpse and stop because of curiosity, or are they gazing intently at it for some other reason? They seem to be acting in unison and they are all strange and majestic. Is the stone on which the petroglyph is carved more than a canvas? Perhaps even an image of the mountain with peak, slopes, streams and different surfaces? If so, that situates the scene in the surrounding environment. Unfortunately, Uyanik does not provide information on the exact positions of the different petroglyphs in the area of *Taht-i Melikh*.

An encounter between divine powers and a human

Summarising my observations and questions so far, I find in the centre of the image a group of three majestic animals, all gazing at the human. This central group intersects the sloping line on which two goats are standing in opposite directions. The descending goat has seemingly, contrary to the ascending goat, one broken horn and the other unbroken horn comes close to the human. As there is a symmetry between goats nos. 3 and 5, there is also a symmetry between goat no. 5 and the human, in the sense that both seems to be wounded. In combination, the two symmetries may express: A perfect goat went up the mountain. When it came down again, the goat was broken. The goat was broken on the human, and the human was broken on the goat.

Repetitions may impose order and regularity, and has the effect of emphasising something, which is especially played out in symmetries. Barad suggests that symmetries reveal underlying conservative ideas (Juelskjær and Schwennesen 2012, 12) because they are based on mirroring and constancy. Symmetries stabilise something that could have been called into question and creates an illusion of harmony and law. Image symmetry is therefore used in power symbols to corroborate conservative values and power-structures (McManus 2005, 158-160). Our petroglyph combines two powerful design features: the majestic beings in the centre/top and the more profane beings wrapped around the centre in a symmetrical way. This was a common design feature in ancient Mesopotamian tradition signifying royalty and divinity, exemplified by the Uruk Vase and the Naram-Sin stele, and that may apply here as well even though it may not be a result of direct influence. Structural parallels can be found elsewhere too, for instance some versions of the Roman vexillum-logo and modern military logos, because it is a potent expression. Moreover, the three majestic animals are not just symbols or representations, they are also revealing and exerting power, they do something (Ingold 2002, 130). They may have been "living doubles", like images of kings were in ancient *Mesopotamia* according to Zainab Bahrani, a symmetrical doubling that embodied and augmented the power of the king. The image was coupled with the king, as the king was coupled with the image (Bahrani 2003, 171-172). *Mesopotamia* is just south of *Tirsin*, but the natural and ancient political conditions were of course very different. We do not know much about the cosmology of the people who lived in the mountains and carved these rocks. As the rocks have in all likelihood been carved occasionally during long periods of time, the carvers have probably belonged to different peoples, and even relatively concurrent carvings could have been linked to different peoples with more or less (dis) similar cosmologies. What is evident at least is that, contrary to the carvings in *Mervane* and *Cilgri* mentioned above, the carvings in *Tirsin* have nothing to do with Christianity or Islam. Furthermore, it is a fair guess that the carvers had some kind of animic-shamanistic cosmology, because animism

seems to have been common at least until the 1st Millenium BC all over *Eurasia* outside of urban contexts. Animism is a cosmology inhabited by visible and invisible conscious communicative beings of all kinds, ordered in hierarchies, which were also living doubles (Ingold 2002, 113).

I suggest, that the three majestic animals canalise the might of three different powers, which could be either kings/clans, spirits or perhaps rather gods, each having some special role to play. If they are gods, they are reminiscent of divinities widely known in *Eurasia*: The horn-arch of animal no. 2, in the top of the image, may indicate a sky-god; the feline a warrior/fire god; and the giraffe may indicate a firmly standing god of the earth, which is overlooking all plants and trees (Eliade 2014, §62). Also the two seemingly 'ordinary' goats nos. 3 and 5 may be spirit-gods, perhaps a variant of the twin-gods known from Indo-European religions as the "divine twins" (Jackson 2002, 67 and Eliade 2014, §71). These often play the role as healers and helpers and have often a position as lesser gods (Jackson 2002, 78). All such god-spirits could manifest themselves in varying shapes (Ingold 2002, 91). What are the majestic animals doing then, when gazing at the human? If they were just wondering, it would mean that the wounded or dead human was an unusual sight. Neither do they seem aggressive. If the cat-predator was about to devour the human, it would have been in front close to the human, but it stands behind the majestic goat, perhaps because it is held back by the goat. As they are all extraordinary in different ways, their intentions may also be extraordinary. Being strong (aggressive, protective and vigilant), they may either indirectly have effected the tragic event, or may have taking care of the fallen human. If the fall was a factual event in which a human was accidentally hurt in the mountain after an unfortunate meeting with a goat, then the role of the majestic animals was perhaps to help the wounded human or assist its soul. In this case, the human is in focus and the image is commemorative and well-wishing.

But the petroglyph could also be about great powers in the mountains resisting human intrusion. The *Tirsin* area may have been taboo, a forbidden or restricted land to humans. By ignoring the great powers, the human was either punished by the goat with the broken horn or it attracted it by its impudence. This goat is as mentioned kindred to the mighty goat (no. 2), but since it has no extraordinary features, it must be lower in rank or perhaps an incarnation of the mighty goat. In this perspective, the tragic event becomes a backdrop to the mighty powers, which are then not only in the centre of the scene but also of the narrative. It has been suggested elsewhere (Ehrenreich 2019), that the frequent depiction of humans as match-stick figures in rock carvings and rock paintings, may express a humbleness and may even serve to ridicule human delusions of grandeur. A humbleness also found in the well-known proverb saying that "what goes up, must come down", which has a long past as exemplified by the myths of Ikaros and the Babel Tower. In this light, the petroglyph scene may be an account of what happens when humans go too far and too high, an account serving as an apotropaic stop-sign to deter further transgressions – here not directed against spirits, but against humans. If the straight streaks between some of the figures are more than "bridges" meant to divide the composition into fields like boundaries on a map, this may convey that the territory of the spirit-gods is closed and divided into sub-areas. The stop-sign was not necessarily intended to be read by outsiders, it was probably intended to be effective by itself. Therefore, it makes sense, if the petroglyph was located in the middle of the field – and perhaps it was the very petroglyph fields that were forbidden to outsiders. Alternatively, the "stop-sign" could also be marking human territory in the same way as boundary-stelae and burial mounds may do. Uyanik mentions, that the summer pastures in *Tirsin* were visited by several different clans, which were always in mutual conflict over territorial rights (Uyanik 1974, 29). The pasture was always a scarce resource, and not all flocks of

animals would be welcomed. In this light, the two goats walking up and down, could show the annual migration to and from the summer pastures. These understandings may be combined and complemented. The outstretched arms of the human could be a posture of adoration. The human may accept its defeat, and may even praise the powers that made it fall, in the sense of Job in the Bible: "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised." (Job 1:21, The Old Testament). Taken a step further, this alludes to human sacrifices, but then it would in my opinion be difficult to account for the two symmetrical goats.

These considerations of course rely on the interpretation of the spot as a pool of blood and the missing horn part. Were these "components" discounted as accidental or insignificant, there would not have been any mishap, and the understanding of the image would change accordingly. Then the petroglyph could be about the epiphany of spirits/gods to a shaman lying in a state of trance or even 'flying' in a trance (Viste 2019, 41). This would also sit well if *Tirsin* was a sacred landscape, and it may also be expected that mystical rituals took place in such a place were many people from different clans met during the summer. Among the petroglyphs are plenty of "demon figures" as Uyanik called them, strange bodies with big hands and long fingers. There is also a so-called X-ray figure in *Taht-i Melik* – a skeleton figure equipped with a large hand (Uyanik 1974, fig. 56). Such images are known all over the world including *Norway* (Viste 2004, 37), and are typically being connected to shamanism (Eliade 2014, 18). On the other hand, again following the lead of Ehrenreich, the human may be fleeing rather than flying. Then, the human is not upside-down but rather senselessly (having no head) escaping at full speed to the right, terrorised and defecating as it runs away. The sloppy execution of the human figure may be a mockery of (some or all) humans and their ridiculous self-pride. Ehrenreich gives a similar example and points out, that modern hunter-gatherers are often fiercely egalitarian, and may use humour aggressively to deflate people who think they are somehow superior (Ehrenreich 2019). Another example of headless humans being attacked is found in Catalhöyuk (Sagona and Zimansky 2009, 90, fig. 4.4 – 1).

As animated pictures, the petroglyphs are embedded in a landscape which is also a lifescape, teeming with movements and changes of humans and spirits, plants and animals as well as weather and rocks. Going up to the pastures in the spring and leaving them again in late summer, was part of an annual circle marked by regular movements of snow, ice, water and the climax of the solstice. Humans, goat herds and the animals roaming in the mountains danced along in this circle, intimately connected with the "meliks". Also the cracks and edges in the rock may link the image to features in this landscape (Jones and Diaz-Guardamino 2018, 11/25). The peak of the petroglyph rock could correspond to the nearby mountain summit, which is surrounded by six petroglyph sites, or perhaps to the large rock resembling a throne, from where the name "*Taht-i Melik*" (the king´s throne) is derived (Uyanik 1997, 33). Being large and imposing means that the king in question may be similarly grand and impressive, perhaps more than just a local chief. The two clear, natural, almost linear grooves of different lengths in the left part of the rock may correspond to the watercourse on which the rocks of *Taht-i Melik* are piled (Uyanik 1997, fig. 45). The river which is flowing through the area is called "the fountain of blood" (Uyanik 1974, 32). Even if this name has a natural explanation like for instance ochre in the water, blood is also associated not only with death but also with life.

Conclusion

Petroglyphs are always enigmatic, and much has been written about how to understand them. In the end, one substantiated suggestion may often seem just as well-founded as another. One influential method has been to formulate so-called "informed" hypotheses when analogies exist, that is when present or recent peoples

have somehow explained the images they were making (Tacon and Chippindale 1998). Such hypotheses may be compelling but are basically still guesses, because similarities belong to the world of ideas if they are not rooted in context.

The reading of the petroglyph scene I present in this article, develops diffractively from the phenomena it intra-acts with - the groups, the networks and the surroundings are seen through each other and again seen through relevant knowledge about past cosmologies. Initially appearing as a static and seemingly random assortment of figures, the image transforms into a dynamic narrative full of potential, due to the way the figures as agents constitute each other through their relationships. Even if the giraffe is eye-catching, it recedes in importance when the petroglyph is considered in its totality. The narrative of the petroglyph scene is based on the presence of three extraordinary animals, their collective gaze towards the small and blurred humanlike figure, the use of symmetry and centrality and the integrated features of the stone on which the petroglyph is carved. Understanding the scene as mythical is justified by the extraordinary attributes of the three central animals. The significance of the humanlike figure in the narrative is not derived from anthropocentric thinking, it is clearly indicated by the very gaze of the extraordinary animals, which I interpret as "meliks" – some kind of royal/divine figures. So, if the small figure is accepted as a human, it gives the narrative a confrontational content, even if the human is fleeing from the scene. My suggestion is, that the intended effect of the petroglyph is to confine (some) humans inside given limits, so they are not disrupting social or cosmic order.

These are my hypotheses, which I am not claiming are authoritative understandings of the petroglyph scene. On the contrary, I find it important not to close the case, but rather to open and widen it. It is especially pertinent to look at the other petroglyphs reported in the book of Uyanik and consider if some of these configurations can be understood in a related way. I hope my suggestions will be questioned and held up against other petroglyph scenes especially in the assemblage of *Tirsin* but also elsewhere. Two examples of petroglyphs that ought to have a closer look is figure 60 which has a large picture of three bisons, figure 73 that may show a leopard attacking a bison and various "demon"-figures e.g. figure 56. They may also show similar powerful figures. Can these figures be related to animistic figures elsewhere in *Asia* and to specific religious phenomena? Such an analysis can and should be done with different methods; however, agential realism offers the advantage over typology-based methods, in that it focuses on the totality of the phenomenon in question, and makes productive use of minute details, that might otherwise be deemed insignificant.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my profound gratitude to ADEVA (Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, Graz), the copyright holder, for their generous permission to use photos from Muvaffak Uyanik's book. My heartfelt thanks go to Dr. George Nash for his review. I am also deeply grateful to my dear cousin, Theresa Frang, for her meticulous proofreading and helpful suggestions.

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