



## Tamga petroglyphs from the southwestern part of Zhetysu Alatau

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**Keywords:** archaeology, Zhetysu, Maly Usek River, Turkic Medieval, medieval nomads, late Middle Ages – Kazakh ethnographic period, tamga, graphic heritage

**Түйін сөздер:** археология, Жетісу, КішіӨсекөзені, ежелгі түркі кезеңі, ортағасырлық көшпенділер, кейінгі орта ғасыр–қазіргі заман, таңба, графикалық мұра

**Ключевые слова:** археология, Жетісу, река Малый Усек, древнетюркский период, средневековые кочевники, позднее средневековье–современность, тамга, графическое наследие

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**Abstract.** In this article, signs and tamgas from Southwestern Zhetysu Alatau are introduced into scientific circulation, they represent a new layer of graphic data for this region. During archaeological research conducted by the authors, more than 1000 stones with knocked-out drawings in Kaishi and about 200 stones in the Maly Usek valley north of Zharkent (Panfilovsky district, Almaty region) were documented. Among them, many tamgas or signs similar to tamgas were found. Some of the signs presented here may not be tamgas but are published for further discussion. Tamga is a generic family mark, a seal that was placed on ancestral property, including cattle. As a rule, a descendant of a certain kind borrowed the tamga of his ancestor and added an additional element to it or modified it. These tamga signs carved in the rock date from the early Turkic period (8th century) to the beginning of the 20th century. This publication represents the first level of generalization of data on about a dozen tamgas and signs obtained in the field. Further efforts are needed to identify links with archaeological sites and rock paintings in areas where tamgas are recorded.

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Оңтүстік-батыс Жетісу Алатауының  
таңба-петроглифтері

**Аннотация.** Бұл мақалада Оңтүстік-батыс Жетісу Алатауының белгілері мен таңбалары

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Тамга-петроглифы  
из Юго-Западного Жетісу Алатау

**Аннотация.** В данной статье в научный оборот вводятся знаки и тамги из Юго-Западного Жетісу



ғылыми айналымға енгізіледі, олар осы өңір бойынша графикалық деректердің жаңа қабатын көрсетеді. Авторлардың жүргізген археологиялық зерттеулері барысында Қайшыда 1000-нан астам және Жаркенттен солтүстігіне қарай Кіші Өсек алқабында (Алматы облысы, Панфилов ауданы) 200-ге жуық қашалған суреттері бар тастар құжатталды. Олардың арасында таңбаға ұқсайтын таңбалар мен белгілер көп табылды. Мұндағы кейбір белгілер таңба болмауы да мүмкін, бірақ оларды одан әрі талқылау үшін жариялауға ұсынылды. Таңба – бұл рулық отбасылық белгі, рулық мүлікке, соның ішінде ірі қара малға басылатын мөр. Әдетте, белгілі бір әулеттің ұрпағы ата-бабасының таңбасын алып, оған қосымша элемент қосып, өзгертіп отырған. Мұндай жартастақ қашалған таңба-белгілер ерте түркі дәуірінен бастап (VIII ғ.) XX ғ. басына дейін мерзімделінеді. Бұл жарияланым далалық жағдайда алынған он шақты таңбалар мен белгілер туралы мәліметтерді жалпылаудың алғашқы деңгейі болып табылады. Таңбалар табылған аудандағы археологиялық ескерткіштер мен жартастағы суреттер арасындағы байланысты анықтау бойынша жұмыстарды жалғастыру қажет.

**Сілтеме жасау үшін:** Херманн Л. Железняков Б. Оңтүстік-батыс Жетісу Алатауының таңба-петроглифтері. *Қазақстан археологиясы*. 2022. № 1 (15). 110-125 -бб. (Ағылшынша). DOI: [10.52967/akz2022.1.15.110-125](https://doi.org/10.52967/akz2022.1.15.110-125)

Алатау, они представляют новый пласт графических данных по этому региону. В ходе археологических исследований, проведенных авторами, были задокументированы более 1000 камней с выбитыми рисунками в Кайши и около 200 камней в долине Малого Усека к северу от Жаркента (Панфиловский р-н, Алматинская обл.). Среди них было найдено много тамг или знаков, похожих на тамги. Некоторые знаки, представленные здесь, возможно, не являются тамгами, но опубликованы для дальнейшего обсуждения. Тамга – это родовой фамильный знак, печать, которая ставилась на родовое имущество, в том числе на крупный рогатый скот. Как правило, потомок определенного рода заимствовал тамгу своего предка и добавлял к ней дополнительный элемент или модифицировал ее. Эти тамги-знаки, высеченные в скале, датируются от раннетюркского периода (VIII в.) до начала XX в. Данная публикация представляет собой первый уровень обобщения данных по, примерно дюжине тамг и знаков, полученных в полевых условиях. Необходимо продолжать усилия по выявлению связей с археологическими памятниками и наскальными рисунками в районах, где зафиксированы тамги.

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### *Introduction*

In this article, new materials were obtained for the first time during the study of important Rock Art sites located at the southwestern outskirts of Zhetysu Alatau Mountains (sites of Usek and Kaishi, located in the southern valley of Koyandy Mountains, foothills of Zhetysu Alatau). These sites were published a couple of times as rock art sites and cultural landscapes. The authors of this article with the great help of the “Tanbaly” State Museum-Reservoir led this research. Five prosecutions were done to this microregion. Almost everywhere, where archaeologists conduct research, especially in the exploration of rock art monuments, they found medieval and later engravings of tamga signs on stones. Earlier we paid attention to epigraphic finds. This is one of our first publications devoted to a new topic related to a huge amount of information of importance.

### *Location of the sites*

Both sites are situated in the Panfilov district of Almaty oblast, circa 260 km northwest of Almaty city. Two petroglyph sites were documented: the first is in the Usek Valley and the second at the foothills of Koyandytau, approximately 20 km of each other (fig. 1).



- The first one is called Maly Usek and is located 36 km north-northwest of Zharkent by the confluence of the Maly Usek and the Sredni Usek at an altitude between 1250 m and 1330 m above sea level, south of the Toksanbay range. The site covers circa nine hectares and is located on the western part of a small fluvial terrace above the confluence of both rivers. The rock art was executed on granite boulders that can reach 8 meters. Few engraved rocks are also located on the eastern shore of the Sredni Usek where some Iron Age and medieval kurgans are also present.

- The second site is called Kaishi and is located 40 km northwest of Zharkent, on a high plateau between 1650 and 1850 m a.s.l. at the foot of the Koyandytau Mountains. The Usek River is ca. 20 km east

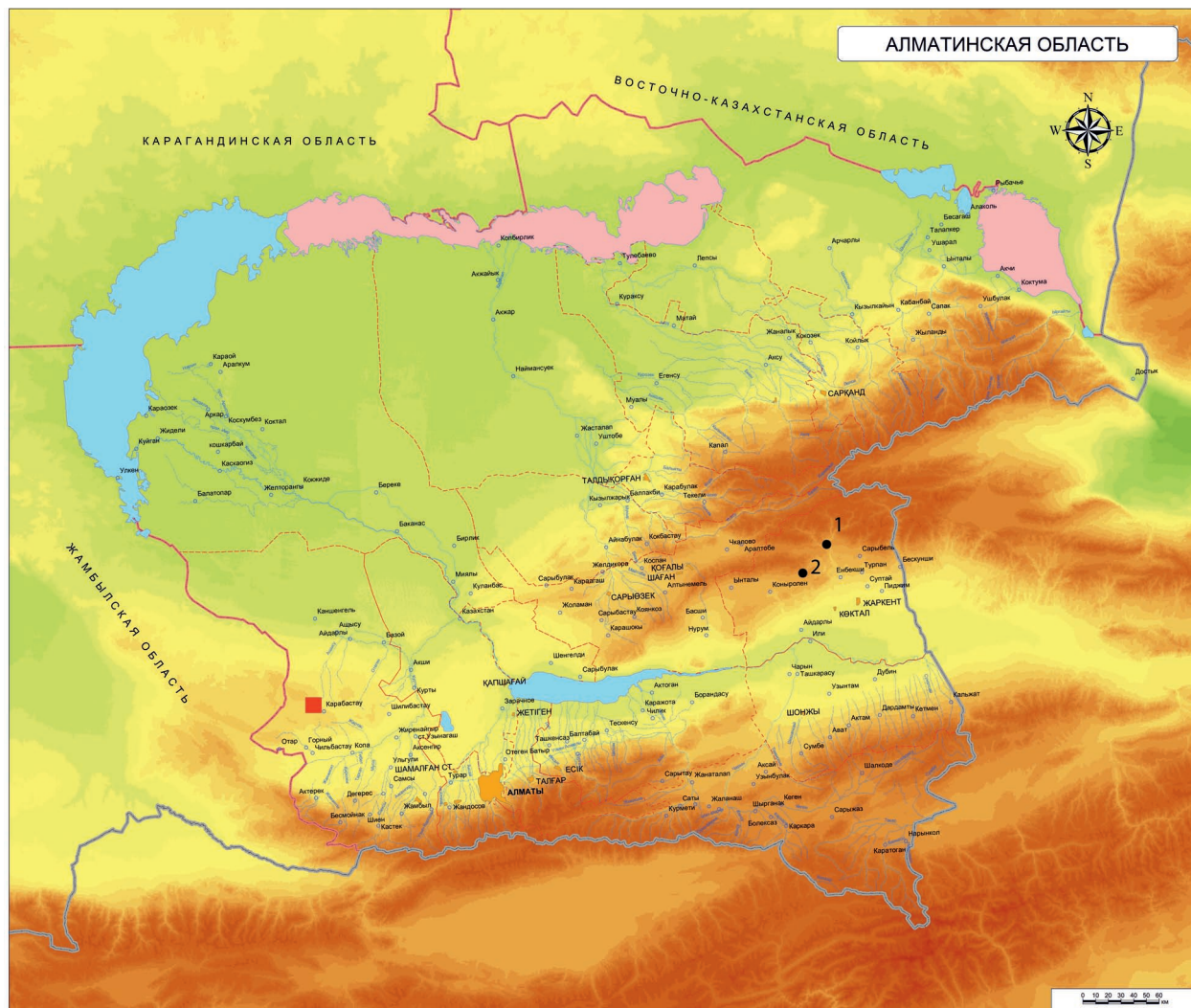


Fig. 1. Location of sites of the Rock Art of Usek (1) and Kaishi (2) on the map of Almaty region  
1-сур. Өсек (1) және Қайшы (2) жартастағы өнер ескерткіштерінің Алматы облысының картасында орналасуы

Рис. 1. Расположение памятников наскального искусства Усек (1) и Кайши (2) на карте Алматинской области



of the site. Nowadays, this valley is still dedicated to pastoralism due to the various streams and pastures. These ones are covered with numerous moraines. These blocks have dimensions varying between 30 cm and 3–4 meters. Furthermore, some Iron Age and Turkic petroglyphs were also found ca. 2 km north of the site on the top of the hills at a height of ca. 2000 m.

### *Discussion*

The site Maly Usek was less prospected and published. The first study of the site by A. Maryashev and A. Goryachev was published in 2002 with seven drawings [Марьяшев, Горячев 2002: 21–22, 228–230]. A second publication was written in German by L. Hermann and had 15 color pictures of the site and its petroglyphs [Hermann 2011: 45–62]. A. Beisenov and A. Maryashev published the third publication with 25 color pictures [Бейсенов, Марьяшев 2014: рис. 26–50]. However, in this book, the site is called Maly Koitas instead of Usek or Maly Usek. The fourth and last publication of Maly Usek was done under the supervision of the “Tamgaly” Museum in 2019 [Амиргалиев и др. 2019: 242–257]. Complete documentation of the site is still not achieved. We estimate that there are circa 200–250 rocks covered with circa 1000 petroglyphs.

Kaishi was for the first time prospected during an expedition of the Tamgaly Museum in July 2011. A paper in Russian [Потапов и др. 2012] followed the first publication in German with 18 color pictures [Hermann 2011: 21–44]. These were the results of the first short survey of this rock art site. One of the most important images was a “sunhead” from Kaishi, published in every early article and also in monograph: photo and drawing of this personage [Амиргалиев и др. 2019: 167]. The site was included in the list of sacred sites of Kazakhstan [Железняков 2017a]. An article about local altar panels from Kaishi was published in 2017 as a result of two short trips to the site [Железняков 2017b]. A new prospection of the site during an expedition of the “Tamgaly” Museum was undertaken in July 2019 with the result of a fourth and last publication of this site [Амиргалиев и др. 2019: 164–201]. Boris Zheleznyakov made a report about the exploration of the Kaishi site in Baku Rock Art International Conference in 2019, but they did not publish it until now [Бесераев 2020]. Although the authors of this paper documented more than 1000 engraved rocks with about 6000 petroglyphs, some parts of this site remain unexplored, and a general publication is still needed. It became a famous rock art site in the Ile Valley near Zharkent.

The aim of this paper is to provide new material about tamgas in Kazakhstan in the Usek Region that is almost not published. As the authors are not specialized in Turkic and Kyrgyz tamgas, we only want to publish this new material without trying to interpret it. Some of these signs look like tamgas but are perhaps not tamga. However, they are also presented here for further discussion.

### *Material characteristic*

*Tamga petroglyphs in Maly Usek.* Among the 50 rocks we documented, 70 petroglyphs could be attributed to the Turkic times and eight drawings to the Kazakh ethnographic times, among them there is one anthropomorphic, three goats, and one wolf, but also two Arabic inscriptions and one tamga (fig. 2). This tamga is probably from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but we do not find any mention of it in scientific literature.

*Tamga petroglyphs in Kaishi.* All Rocks of the site with carvings were numerated according to the survey of 2019 (photos of the whole rock surfaces were taken and part of them if needed). However, not far from the site, there are still small valleys and gorges where there are more petroglyphs and tamgas, and probably inscriptions. There are more than 50 stones with Lamaist inscriptions near a Dzungarian Monastery. This brief information was already published [Григорьев и др. 2017]. The most important panels



Fig. 2. Maly Usek. Tamga and goats. Photo by L. Hermann  
2-сур. Кіші Өсек. Таңба және ешкі. Л. Херманн түсірген сурет  
Рис. 2. Малый Усек. Тамга и козы. Фото Л. Херманна

with inscriptions which repeated Lamaic prayer: **“Om-Mani-Padme-Hum”** were published [Амиргалиев и др. 2019: 192–193].

Rock 26 (fig. 3): this tamga is already known in Chiim-Tash in Kyrgyzstan [Hermann 2020: 188]. It is probably a variant of an “omega”-tamga that is dated back to the 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries [Жолдошов 2005: 69].

Rocks 295, 296, 308, 388, 660, and 714 (fig. 4): this sign in form of a circle with also a dot in the middle on three other rocks seems unclear about its chronological attribution: could it be a solar sign from the Bronze Age? However, it could also be a tamga known as the types of “Okruzhnosti” («round shape») which is present in all historic periods of the Turkic ethnic [Базылхан 2019: 38]. Furthermore, this tamga is attributed to the Dulat tribes [Castagné 1921: 35; Рогожинский 2016: 234].

On rock 382 (fig. 5A), a diamond-shaped goat was found. The pattern differs from rock 482. This tamga is very similar to a tamga found in Kulzhabasy, which is a variant of the runic letter ‘at’ and should be dated from the 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries [Рогожинский, Тишин 2018: 79–81].

Rock 514 (fig. 6A) has a tamga with the shape of a cross that is also already well known, for example in Chiim-Tash [Hermann 2020: 188]. This tamga is in Rogozhinskiy’s repertoire without any further explanation [Рогожинский 2012: 94]. It is known in Merke [Самашев и др. 2010: 165], but also in Bayan Zhurek (90 km north of Kaishi) and probably shows the influence of Nestorianism on Turkic people and would be dated back before the 14<sup>th</sup> century (personal communication by A. Rogozhinskiy).



Fig. 3. Kaishi, Rock 26. Photo by L. Hermann  
3-сур. Қайшы, 26-жартас.  
Л. Херманн түсірген сурет  
Рис. 3. Кайши, скала 26. Фото Л. Херманна

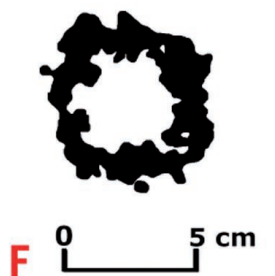
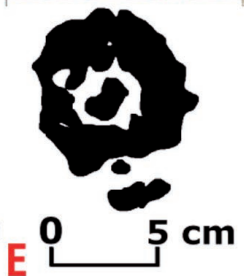
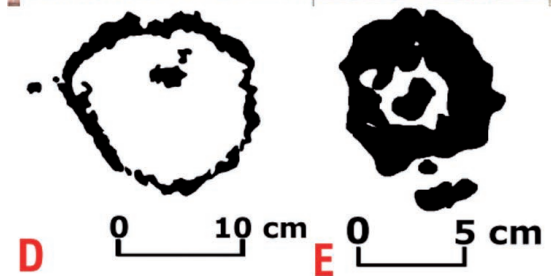
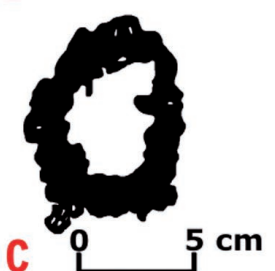
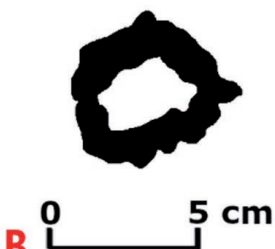


Fig. 4. Kaishi: A – Rock 295;  
B – Rock 296; C – Rock 308;  
D – Rock 388;  
E – Rock 660; F – Rock 714.  
Photo and drawings by L. Hermann

4-сур. Қайшы: А – 295-жартас;  
В – 296-жартас; С – 308-жартас;  
D – 388-жартас; E – 660-жартас;  
F – 714-жартас.

Л. Херманн түсірген  
және салған сурет

Рис. 4. Кайши: А – скала 295;  
В – скала 296; С – скала 308;  
D – скала 388; E – скала 660;  
F – скала 714.

Фото и прорисовка Л. Херманна



Fig. 5. Kaishi: A – Rock 382; B – Rock 482. Photo and drawings by L. Hermann

5-сур. Қайшы: А – 382-жартас; В – 482-жартас.

Л. Херманн түсірген және салған сурет

Рис. 5. Кайши: А – скала 382; В – скала 482. Фото и прорисовка Л. Херманна

In the case of the Chiim-Tash tamgas, their light brown patina on the drawings differs significantly from the color of the modern inscriptions carved above and below the signs. The most probable dating of the signs is by the Middle Ages. The exact analogy of the considered signs is known in the valley of the Merke River (Kazakhstan): a single sign is carved on a boulder, on the foothill plain, near the gorge with the same name, connected by mountain nomadic routes with the upper reaches of Talas. The information was obtained from A. Rogozhinskiy. It is well known that there was a church in Merke converted to a mosque and according to some data to a monastery. In both cases, the signs are associated with medieval petroglyphs and have the same appearance: a straight cross with rounded thickening at the ends. Rather close, although not direct analogies can be found among the body crosses, in particular from

Kostobe burial (Talas Valley), especially many of them come from the Chu Valley. Most of the crosses have extensions at the extremities, although often they are not rounded. However, all this fit well enough in the concept of the Church of the East that the cross is beautiful and universal, connecting with a traditional symbol, but not the instrument of execution.

According to A. Rogozhinskiy, findings of images of such signs in the region are rare – only six signs of two varieties (circle or continuous circle at the ends of the cross), and their locations are concentrated at a considerable distance from each other. In our view, A. Rogozhinskiy rightly compares such images with the most possible Christian affiliation of the persons who beat them out. Although relatively often crosses were also embossed in the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. In such cases, these images are associated with tradition. It is too early to put an end to this issue: every year new similar petroglyphs are discovered.



Rock 594 has a sign looking approximately like a key (fig. 7B). This tamga is probably from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is attributed to the Sadyr [Castagné 1921: 50; Рогожинский 2016: 234].

*Unclear signs from  
Kaishi*

Some signs from Kaishi look like some tamgas, but we are not sure that they should be interpreted as such. We present this material for further discussion.

On rock 52 (fig. 8A), a circle with a line looks like the tamga type 28 according to Rogozhinskiy's repertory [Рогожинский 2012: 94]. This tamga is attributed to the Suan group of tribes who still lives in this region for a long time until nowadays [Рогожинский 2016: 234]. On the same rock, near this sign, there is a goat, which is clearly from the Turkic times. Even if it looks like a tamga, this sign is too unclear to determine it like this with certainty.

On rock 96 (fig. 7A), an unclear sign looks like the tamga type 17 [Рогожинский 2012: 94].

On rock 121 (fig. 9), an unclear sign looks anthropomorphic. Unfortunately, there are many other signs by the possible head, making an interpretation very difficult.

There are two unclear signs on rock 222 (fig. 8B): the first one is a circle with two or three small lines on each side. The second one is a goat with its legs making a circle. This goat could be compared with tamgas documented in Almaly, the so-called "Yakorevidnaya" ("Anchorshaped") – tamga which could until now not be further dated back [Рогожинский, Тишин 2018: 80, 83] (fig. 8).

On rock 297 (fig. 10A), there are two parallel lines with a line joining them in the middle like a tamga from the Saryzhomart site [Рогожинский 2016: 234].



Fig. 6. Kaishi: A – Rock 514; B – Rock 1017. Photo and drawings by L. Hermann

Б-сур. Қайшы: А – 514-жартас; В – 1017-жартас.

Л. Херманн түсірген және салған сурет

Рис. 6. Кайши: А – скала 514; В – скала 1017. Фото и прорисовка Л. Херманна



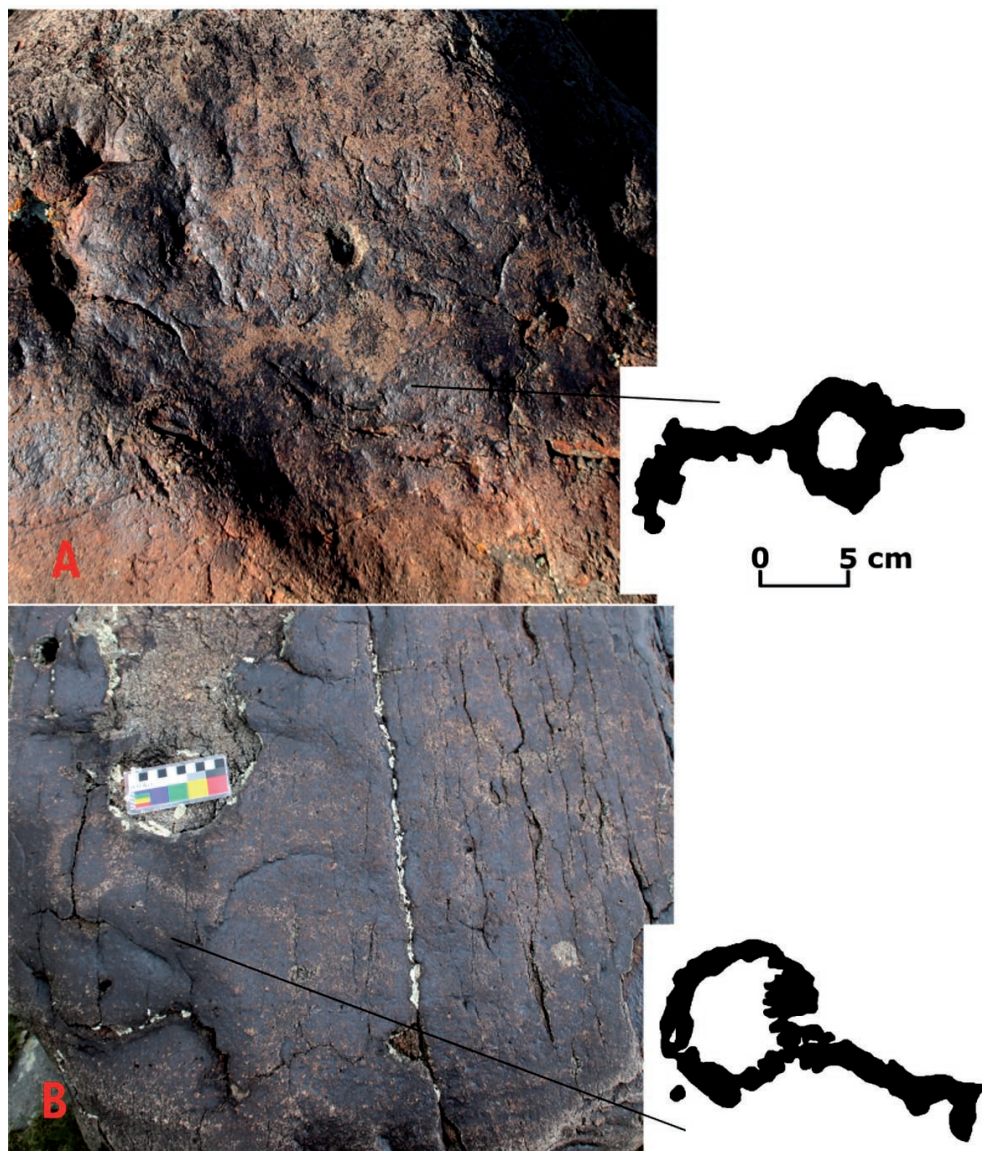


Fig. 7. Kaishi: A – Rock 96; B – Rock 594. Photo and drawings by L. Hermann  
7-сур. Қайшы: А – 96-жартас; В – 594-жартас. Л. Херманн түсірген және салған сурет  
Рис. 7. Кайши: А – скала 96; В – скала 594. Фото и прорисовка Л. Херманна

Rock 482 (fig. 5) shows a very interesting goat with an unfinished diamond-shaped head. Similar kinds of goats are well known in Mongolia where they are interpreted as type IV of a tamga of the Ashina dynasty from the Second Turkic Khaganate (682–744), and more specifically from the Qarqhan Qaghan (694–716) [Рогожинский, Тишин 2021: 586]. In the case of Kaishi, the territory was not under the control of the Ashina dynasty, and for this reason, it is quite vain to think that it could be a tamga of this Khaganate. However, we want to show the similarity with it. These goat's features are quite uncommon, and that is why we also think that it could be a kind of tamga.

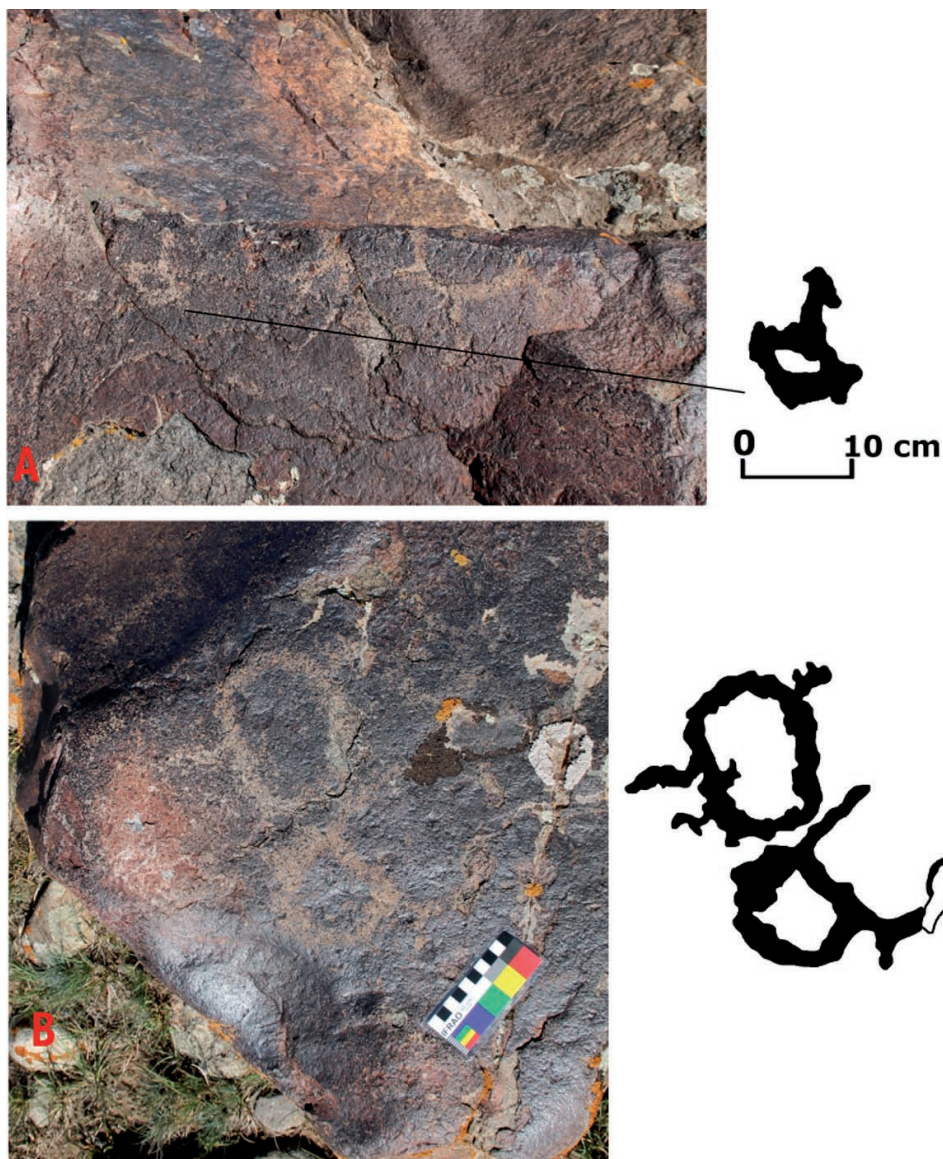


Fig. 8. Kaishi: A – Rock 52; B – Rock 222. Photo and drawings by L. Hermann  
8-сур. Қайшы: А – 52-жартас; В – 222-жартас. Л. Херманн түсірген және салған сурет  
Рис. 8. Кайши: А – скала 52; В – скала 222. Фото и прорисовка Л. Херманна

Rock 581 (fig. 10), we see a line ending in a circle. A second line, making a reversed letter A., closes the first part of the line. We did not know a similar sign in the literature.

On rock 948 (fig. 11), a sign looking zoomorphic (bull) is very stylized. The dating of this petroglyph is very unclear: Bronze Age or more recent? In any case, this figure is associated with a Turkic goat and Turkic graffiti and has the same patina. For this reason, we suggest that this animal (?) is also from the Turkic times. Due to the extreme stylization of this zoomorphic image, we think that it could be a tamga, even if we have no comparison for it.



Fig. 9. Kaishi, Rock 121. Photo by L. Hermann  
9-сур. Қайшы, 121-жартас. Л. Херманн түсірген сурет  
Рис. 9. Кайши, скала 121. Фото Л. Херманна

On rocks 964 and 965 (fig. 12), two lines are most probably from the Turkic times. The first one looking like a snake is associated with a goat from this period, whereas the second looks like an unfinished camel. Their patina is very light. Their interpretation as a snake and unfinished camel is not satisfactory at all but we also cannot say that there are tamgas. Both rocks are only a few meters from each other and no other lines like these were found.

On rock 1017 (fig. 6), a sign is similar to a tamga found in Mongolia and dated back to the 8<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries [Самашев и др. 2010: 149, рис. 28]. However, we did not know about the presence of this tamga at other Kazakh sites.

On a separate stone in the upper part of the location of Kaishi, near the ruins of the monastery structures, a 4-petal flower was carved on its surface. Apparently, they directly related to Lamaic attendant of the 17<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> centuries. (fig. 13). Relatively light patina of flower carving confirms this late period [Амиргалиев и др. 2019: 191].



Fig. 10. Kaishi: A – Rock 297; B – Rock 581. ►  
Photo and drawings by L. Hermann

10-сур. Қайшы: А – 297-жартас;  
В – 581-жартас. Л. Херман түсірген  
және салған сурет

Рис. 10. Кайши: А – скала 297; В – скала  
581. Фото и прорисовка Л. Херманна

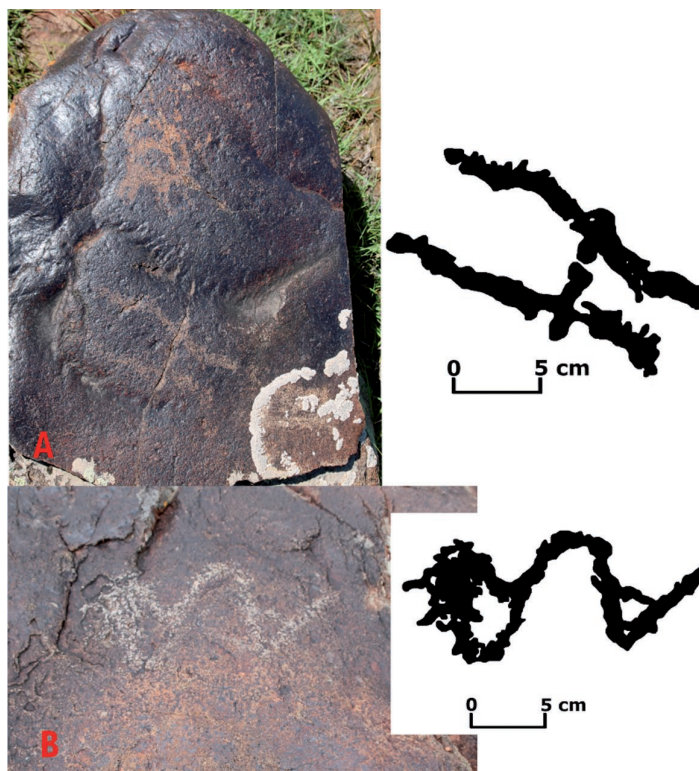


Fig. 11. Kaishi, Rock 948. Photo by L. Hermann

11-сур. Қайшы, 948-жартас. Л. Херманн түсірген сурет

Рис. 11. Кайши, скала 948. Фото Л. Херманна



Fig. 12. Kaishi: A – Rock 964; B – Rock 965. Photo by J. Biver  
12-сур. Қайшы: А – 964-жартас; В – 965-жартас. Ж. Бивер түсірген сурет  
Рис. 12. Кайши: А – скала 964; В – скала 965. Фото Ж. Бивера



Fig. 13. Kaishi. The carved image of the «Lamaist» symbol – a flower near the ruins of the monastery.  
Photo by B. Zheleznyakov

13-сур. Монастырь үйіндісінен алыс емес жердегі гүл - «ламаист» нышанының салынуы.  
Б. Железняков түсірген сурет

Рис. 13. Кайши. Выбивка «ламаистского» символа – цветка недалеко от руин монастыря.  
Фото Б. Железнякова

### *Conclusion*

Tamgas from the Early Turkic times and the Kazakh ethnographic period were found in the Usek Region and in Kaishi Valley. Some of these tamgas are already known at other Kazakh sites but – more surprisingly – are also similar to tamgas from Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, many other signs look like tamgas (and perhaps are tamgas), but their interpretation remains unclear. In Maly Usek, a new kind of tamga from the Kazakh ethnographic period was documented.

In order to study the Turkic times in Kaishi and in Usek site, it is necessary to conduct more detailed prosecutions in the peripheric zones. In any case, information about tamgas is already a full-fledged source; with the development of Turkology, this information will be asked by all researchers of the historical and cultural heritage of this region.



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