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A Note on the Discovery of a Prehistoric Maskoid on the Barikot Top-Hill (Bir-kot-ghwandai, Swat)

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Abstract: This note discusses the recent discovery in Barikot (Swat) of a stone slab, reused in later constructions of its hilltop, with an engraved design consistent with a late Bronze age dating. The engraving features a highly stylized human face, a mask or maskoid, that shows potential comparisons with similar maskoids found in the Upper Indus and Ladakh, as well as those from Southern Siberia and Inner Mongolia.

Keywords: Maskoids, Central Asian rock art, Swat valley, Barikot (Bir-kot-ghwandai)

Introduction

The dating of prehistoric rock art is notoriously a difficult field of study fraught with problems; its interpretations often remain shrouded in permanent uncertainty. Only in fortuitous rare cases stratigraphic contexts reveal to us relations of relative, and indirectly, of absolute chronology, which then prove to be decisive. Such contingency took place in November 2012 at the end of the second excavation campaign in the protohistoric necropolis of Udegram (Fig. 1) (Vidale *et al.* 2016). While our workers were removing the remains of the megalithic cysts that were under archaeological investigation, Luca M. Olivieri noticed that one of their basal slabs bore simple engravings made of pecked dots (a cross, probably originally included in a wheel, a secondary line of dots and a sinuous line) (Figs. 2a-c). The slab had been broken and reused, face down, as the solid floor of a tomb chamber identified as Grave 10 (Olivieri 2016). Thanks to radiocarbon analysis the remains inhumated in the tomb had been dated with good probability to the 11th-10th century BCE. The manufacture and original use of the engraved slab were, in consequence, certainly older than this terminus. In addition, in the Kandak valley of Middle Swat, several others of such megalithic phyllite slabs have been found. The specimens bear a limited iconographic lexicon consisting of: wheels with internal crosses made of pecked dots; alignments of dots also forming cross patterns; groupings and alignments of cup-marks joined by deeply incised sinuous lines; and (in rare cases) highly stylized human and animal figures (Olivieri and Vidale 2004; Olivieri, Vidale *et al.* 2006). These engraved slabs were usually erected on high ground: in other words, they were a kind of landmark, sometimes raised in the vicinity of protohistoric necropolises. One of them bore the incised image of an axe, with what seems to be a wooden handle, with a shape that reminds of a typology of copper blade that may broadly considered compatible with a 2nd millennium dating.

More recently, we have also studied an unpublished collection of terracotta human figurines discovered by Sebastiano Tusa at the settlement of Aligrama. These figurines were

Figure 1. Grave 10, Udegram (ISMEO).

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stratigraphically attributed to Period V of Giorgio Stacul's traditional sequence (i.e., to the late 2nd-early 1st millennium BCE). The surface of these figurines is covered with 'wheels', or rosettes, made by impressed points accompanied by multiple fine incisions, sometimes hardly visible (Vidale *et al.*, in press). All of this, in some way, recalls the engravings already observed on the slabs of the protohistoric graves, thus reinforcing the idea of a dating for the Swat lithic material to the late Bronze Age.

This article presents a recently made discovery in the area of the acropolis of Barikot (Bir-kot-ghwandai; Fig. 3): a fragment of a phyllite slab, carelessly reused in later constructions (see below), which preserves an engraving technically similar to those found in the Kandak and, as we shall see, also compatible with a late Bronze age chronology (Figs. 4-5). Its subject matter – a highly stylized human face, i.e., a mask or maskoid – links it to a much wider cultural horizon, extending from Southern Siberia and

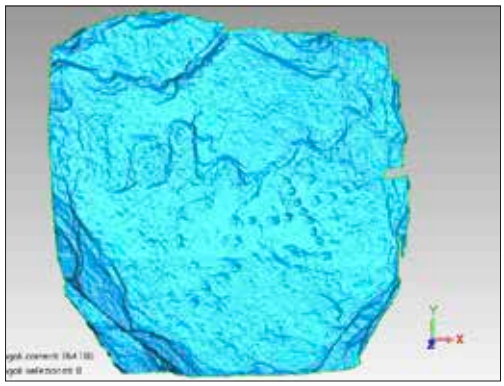

Figure 2a. Grave 10, basal slab, 3D restitution (Giuseppe Salemi, University of Padua).

Figure 2b. Grave 19, basal slab (ISMEO).

Figure 2c. Grave 19, basal slab (Drawings by Francesco Martore).

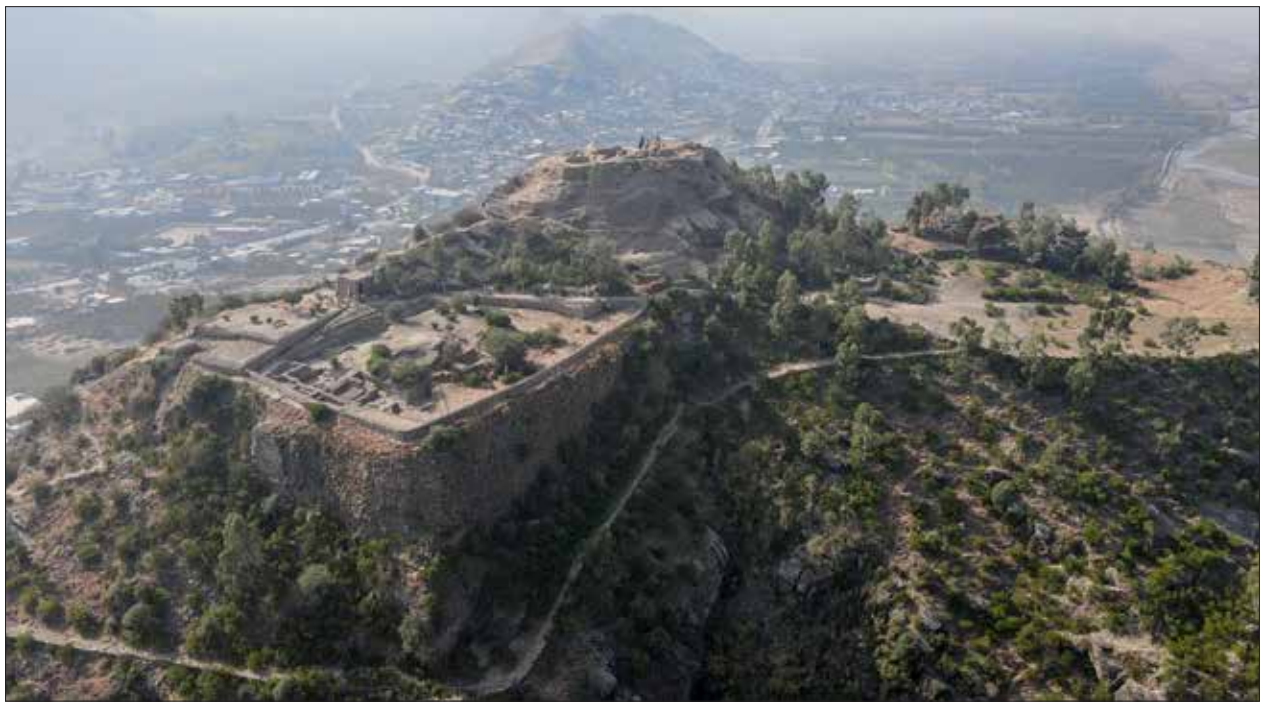

Figure 3. The acropolis of Barikot: a view from NNE (ISMEO).

Central Asia to Southern Inner Mongolia, and southwards, down to the lower Hindukush range.

The protohistoric settlement of Barikot (Fig. 6)

Although the protohistoric sequence of the archaeological site of Barikot has been under investigation since the 1970s, nothing is yet known about the existence of a possible settlement preceding the Bronze Age (Stacul's Period IV, 1700-1400 BCE = Barikot Macrophase 0; cf. Stacul 1978, 1980; 1987: 53-54).[1] Several trenches were opened in the lower area of the ancient city first by Stacul, then by Pierfrancesco Callieri and by Olivieri, and later by Olivieri with the assistance of Elisa Iori.

In 1999, on the Barikot hilltop, in trenches BKG 7 and BKG 9, Olivieri and Roberto Micheli exposed under the Indo-Greek wall levels of the site's late Bronze/early Iron phase (1200-800 BCE = Macrophase 1a-c), and rock-cut pits with pottery dating to the Bronze Age (1700-1400 BCE = Macrophase 0) (Callieri *et al.* 2000). In more recent years, we have focused on the late Bronze Age/early Iron Age phases of the site, i.e., the cultural horizon labelled by Stacul (1969, 1987) as Period V (now Macrophase 1a) when extensive graveyards in Swat started to be widely used (SPG; Vidale *et al.* 2016a). In 2016, outside the limits of the Indo-Greek city walls (trench BKG 12 W), we excavated a portion of a building recovering a large worked stone disc, millstones and various other stone and metal tools. Around

Figures 4-5. Protohistoric phyllite stele (BKG 5838) (ISMEO).

the stone disc, and inside various pits located in the inner corners of the room, we found not less than 80 complete miniature vessels (Olivieri and Iori 2020: 82).[2] Among the findings we also unearthed several iron implements that witness the existence of an advanced iron metallurgy already in the 11th-10th century BCE (Vidale and Olivieri 2019).[3] We are also aware of a large and still unexplored graveyard near Barikot, in the nearby Kandak Valley to the south of the site, which we have preliminary dated around 1000 BCE (Olivieri, Vidale *et al.* 2006).

Always in Barikot (trench BKG 11 K), in relation to the protohistoric phase of the site, we made a discovery of paramount importance consisting of a large earthen boundary wall dressed with regular courses of big river pebbles. On the top of this wall, post-holes, sign of the existence of a wooden palisade, were clearly detected. Such palisade may have encircled an inner citadel, or a central prominence, of the protohistoric settlement. The pebble-made wall measured more than 5 metre in width and about 2 metre in height on its inner side. It was impossible to investigate the outer side of it, but the context suggests that the external height of the wall may have ranged between 3 and 5 metres. The AMS radiocarbon dates placed the abandonment phase of this defensive wall approximately between 1000 and 900 cal BCE (Olivieri *et al.* 2019).

[LMO]

Figure 6. Map of the Swat valley and surroundings regions (map by K. Kriz and D. Nell – ISMEO and University of Vienna).

Context and description of the Barikot phyllite slab

In 2020, Olivieri and Michele Minardi excavated on the hilltop of Barikot (trench BKG 14) the remains of a Śāhi fort and a subsequent Ghaznavid watch-tower (7th-10th centuries). The fort, characterized by large round bastions, used to defend a large and deep water-tank (Olivieri and Minardi, in press) of which the use has to be put into relation with a coeval Vaiṣṇava temple built in a lower terrace of the site (Fig. 7). The excavation has proven that the Śāhi structures of the 'acropolis' of Barikot were built on the top of preceding buildings demolished for the occasion (Fig. 8). Such imposing earliest structures essentially constituted, and still do, the substruction necessary to terrace the sloping phyllite rocky outcrop of the hilltop, which descends at 45° to the N, plunging in jumps over 200 metres down up to the bank of the Swat River

Figure 7. Barikot acropolis: zenithal view of the top-hill (ISMEO).

along the northern side of the hill. The terrace on the hilltop, in particular, formed the base of what we can define a lost 'Kushan' acropolis (certainly a pre-Śāhi work), which imposing remains, still marking the northern flank of the hilltop, were subsequently explored in the fall of 2021. In the foundations of this 'Kushan' terrace, at the base of its stone fill below the Śāhi fortification, we recovered Iron Age sherds, a terracotta figurine (Fig. 9), and the phyllite slab (see above Figs 4-5) under discussion.

The slab measures 63 cm in height, 29 cm in width, and is 5 cm thick. It bears an incised pattern measuring 14 cm x 26 cm. Its edges are retouched with a launched percussion process. The dotted pattern/engraving is on what we believe used to be the lower part of the specimen: the phyllite slab is perhaps broken on the upper side, but it looks complete on all other ones, although it may be possible that the fragment recovered was cut out of a larger piece. In fact, the left 'horn' of its design, seems to be interrupted by a fracture. In any case, we are able to distinguish its top and bottom parts, and its front and back sides. Possibly, the slab was intended to be fixed or placed vertically. The engraving marks are of the dot-marks type made by percussion, delicately finished, so that some are very shallow and thus barely visible (Fig. 10). The technique is the same as that used for other slabs with similar percussion designs mentioned above (see in particular Olivieri and Vidale 2004; 2006).[4] The use of dot-marks to define linear compositions is known on the basis of several examples. The choice of dot-marks to the advantage of the incised line can be explained by a greater certainty in the management of the form, but also by the associated use of chromatic features that have been lost to us.[5] In any case, our slab clearly shows the process of hammering, which in the lower part of the drawing is so dense that the definition of the dot-marks disappears in favour of an almost continuous line.

The drawing shows an incomplete circle of twelve dot-marks, cut in the middle by a partial vertical diameter of five-to-six dot-marks. The partial circle rests on two oblique lines converging to form an open triangle, with the vertex pointing upwards where the vertical diameter ends. The triangle is composed, as already mentioned, of several thicker hammer marks. Three closely spaced horizontal dot-marks can be recognized immediately below the vertex. A very poorly preserved sub-vertical line of dot-marks (perhaps in number of five), slightly curved to the left, seems to depart from the central one.

Dealing with the meaning of this imagery, we would like to avoid speculative interpretations, such as the use of similar slabs from astronomical reasons, solar calendars or of the like.[6] Its design should be considered as it looks, that is a depiction

Figure 8. The filling of the pre-Śāhi acropolis (ISMEO).

Figure 9. Anthropomorphic figurine (BKG 5826) (ISMEO).

of a maskoid. The object can therefore be simply considered the remnant of a stele with a distinctive type of anthropomorphic image.

The maskoid, at first glance, gives us the impression of being roughly etched. However, as a closer scrutiny indicates, the details reveal some noteworthy refinements. The round 'face' was made with a sequence of five points on the left, and six on the right, interrupted by a vertical median line of five-to-six other points. Few short oblique incisions in the two symmetric fields thus obtained are not sufficient to indicate the possible indication of 'eyes'. An inverted triangular field, on top of this line and on the maskoid's forehead, is entirely light-hammered, and ends in three deeper vertical parallel marks. From the same triangular feature departs two symmetric appendixes or 'horns', likewise made with sequences of four-to-five pecked dots of decreasing size. As already stated, the left 'horn' originally extended beyond the present limits of the host slab.

It is precisely these iconographic features that qualify the image as belonging to the maskoid group and delineate important comparisons with the world outside Swat – in particular, with the abundant inventory of similar images from Siberia to the Upper Indus. Often these maskoids (Fig. 11), although quite formally different, show features that may be compared to the new Barikot specimen for the following elements: 1) the round contour; 2) the projections on the middle forehead; and, 3) the inverted triangular field under the forehead, that in the Upper Indus specimens clearly results from the crossed, X-like partition of the face.

[MM]

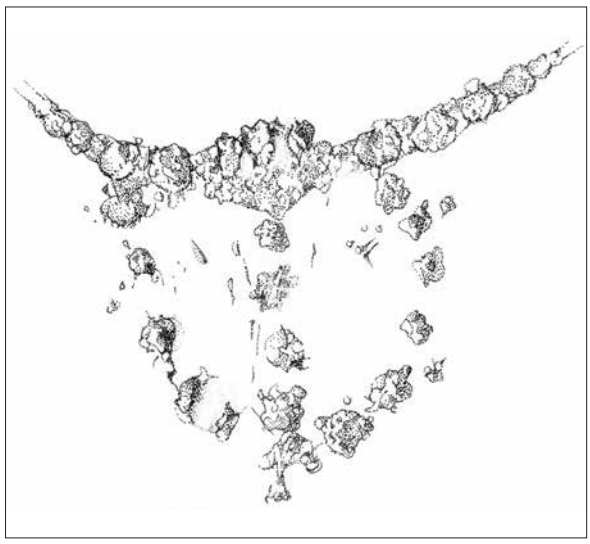

Figure 10. Graphic intepretation of the carving of Fig. 5. The diameter, along the vertical line of dots, measures about 14 cm (Drawings by Massimo Vidale).

Maskoids in their archaeological and chronological contexts

Maskoids are well known in the Upper Indus valley (Hauptmann 1997; Bandini-König 2011) and as far as Ladakh (Francfort *et al.* 1990, 1992; Francfort 2003; Vernier 2007; Bruneau *et al.* 2010-2011; Bruneau 2012; Devers *et al.* 2015; Vernier 2016, Bellezza 2017), and Upper Tibet (various contributions by J.V. Bellezza). These patterns are also commonly reported in the early Bronze Age Siberian Okunevo Culture (Jettmar 1982a, 1982b, 2002; Francfort *et al.* 1990) dated to the 3rd – 2nd millennium BCE (Kubarev 2001; Parzinger 2006); and more generally in the rock art repertories and sculpted stele of Inner Asia (Devlet 1999, with previous references) including southern inner Mongolia and the lower Amur and Ienisseï basins.

Maskoids are often cautiously dated to early Bronze Age horizons, around the late 3rd - early 2nd millennia BCE. Some scholars (see for example: Ashfaque 2021: 194, or Kilunovskaya 2010) propose a similar generic chronology while grouping the maskoids of northern Pakistan together with other images of demons and giants, hands, ibexes, markhors and other wild goats.[7]

As far as chronology is concerned, it is possible that facial designs similar to maskoids on some stele from Minusinsk basin, Tuva and the Altaï might date back to an earlier Chalcolithic phase of the late 4th/first half of the 3rd millennium BCE, and generically referred to Afanasievo population groups (Bruneau and Bellezza 2013: 41).

Coming to interpretation, although the available bibliography regarding this class is impressive, maskoids remain quite ambiguous.[8] On that, we fully agree with H.-P. Francfort (Francfort 2015:

31). So far, any hypotheses on the meaning of the image are quite speculative, and this means that the interpretation of maskoids,[9] in such a wide and diversified cultural spaces, seems still an unsolvable issue. Albeit the question still entirely open, the discovery of the Barikot specimen provides further, although indirect, evidence on the complex network of shared features which in the Bronze Age linked the Swat valley with different regions of Central Asia.

Concluding remarks

The partial remains of an engraving on a stone slab found in a secondary deposition, reused as building material, can hardly be considered as key evidence in order to reach some positive conclusions on the matter at hand. However, there are some elements that may be considered important. Typically, maskoids are engraved on boulders or open cliffs, less frequently on slabs as in the case of Barikot. The maskoid of Barikot shares some its features with the facial details of a set of mysterious anthropomorphic figures characterized by long pointed hats and lines crossing their face engraved on stone slabs from the Tas-Khazaa burial ground in southern Khakassia (the early phase of the Okunevo culture, 25th -23rd centuries BCE): namely, the partitioned face (e.g., Savinov 2019: figs. 2.5 and 6; figs. 4.3 and 9), or the antemnae (ibid.: fig. 3.3 and fig. 6.6). One of the best-known examples is possibly the stele from the Tuim River, Khakassia (Esin 2009). We can also consider the painted and engraved slabs from the Karakol, Jalal-Abad Province, Kyrgyzstan (dated to 2nd Millennium BCE; Kubarev 2001, fig. 6), and the stone slab found in the Kurgan 2 at Arzhan in the Russian Republic of Tuva (Čugunov, Parzinger and Nagler 2010: 138, fig. 117.2).[10]

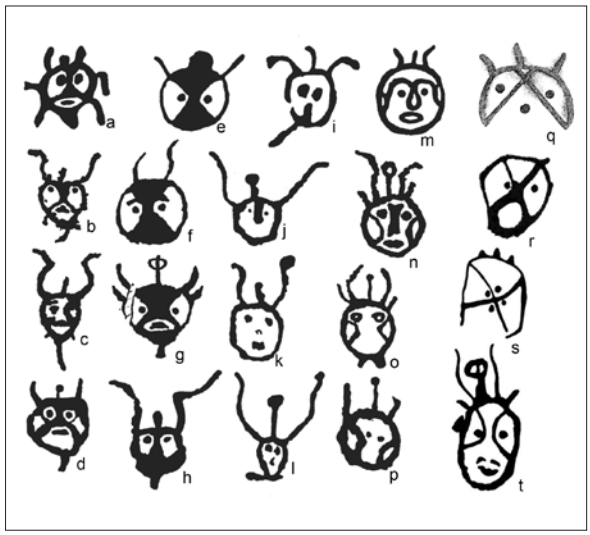

Figure 11. Bronze age maskoids from various regions of Central, Inner and Southern Asia. a, Mountain Geram, Siberia; b-d, Ienisseï Canyon; e, Upper Indus (northern Pakistan); f-h, Ienisseï Canyon; i, Inner Mongolia Yinshan; j-l, Ienisseï Canyon; m, Lower Amur, Sakachi-Aljan; n-p, Ienisseï Canyon; q-s, Upper Indus; t, Mugur-Sargol, Siberia (a-p modified from Francfort 2015, Fig. 4b; q, from Hautptmann 1997, 53, 1; r and s, from Jettmar and Thewalt 1987: 12; see also Francfort *et al.* 1992).

It seems that slabs decorated with maskoids were usually elements related to funerary architecture. These maskoids are usually interpreted (with all the caveats above expressed) as images of spirits, deities or as representations of souls of the dead, who are differently ranked in the hierarchy of supernatural characters who accompanied the deceased into the other world. Following this idea, we cannot rule out the possibility that the Barikot slab also came from a dismantled burial. Certainly, the slab, whatever structure it was part of (a burial or even a ritual ensemble?) was originally located on the hilltop of Barikot and was dismantled and reused in situ for the stone fill of the pre-Śāhi acropolis. We know that Barikot has been, since antiquity, a primary node in the routes from the Indus valley to the Hindukush. Therefore, the discovery of the slab with the maskoid on the highest and most segregated point of the Barikot hill, dominating the valley and only accessible via a steep slope – and furthermore restricted (in later periods) for monumental sacred installations belonging to the various religions that followed each other's in the region – leaves open the possibility that the Barikot's highest peak might have been a sacred one even in prehistoric times. Apart from the evidence yielded by the 1999 excavation campaign (trench BKG 9, see above), evidence of open-air of prehistoric rock engravings is also documented on the acropolis just below its hilltop (Fig. 12).

As far as the chronology of our slab is concerned, the most direct comparisons (including the engraving technique) include the two already mentioned specimens from Swat: the cover slab from a grave of Kandak (Olivieri, Vidale *et al.* 2006: 79, fig. 3), and the reused lower slab of Grave 10 from Udegram (Olivieri 2016). On the basis of the latter evidence, we may assume a Bronze Age chronology for the Barikot slab, that is a terminus not later than the end of the 2nd Millennium BCE, maybe corresponding with the earliest phases of the Swat Protohistoric Graveyards.

[MV]

Notes

1. See Table 1 for further details on the Macrophases of Barikot.
2. Cf. the groups of miniature vessels found at Aligrama (Stacul and Tusa 1975, 1977) and Kalako-dherai (Stacul 1993, 1997).
3. Fragment of sickle, from Barikot, Trench BKG 12, SU (207); dagger, Barikot, Trench BKG 12, SU (218) = (217), BCE1223-1036 cal 2σ 100% – BCE1208-1109 cal 1σ 94.3%; fragment of a bangle, Trench BKG 12, SU (305), BCE1131-1011 cal 2σ; head of a pin, from Barikot, Trench BKG 12, SU (217), BCE1223-1036 cal 2σ 100% – BCE1208-1109 ca cal 1σ 94.3% (Olivieri *et al.* 2019).
4. For a distributional analysis of these artefacts and the compositional significance of the dot-marks, see considerations in Olivieri and Vidale 2004.
5. As well as in more elusive components such as the production of sounds and smells, caused by the percussion and combustion of mineral microparticles.
6. Such interpretations would imply a horizontal face up position of the slab.
7. In the impressive rock-art complex of Gogdara I, not far from Barikot, bi-

Figure 12. Barikot acropolis: interconnected basins and permutations of cup-marks (BKG survey 1992-1993: feature 174) (ISMEO).

Table 1. Barikot: Macrophases 0-10.

MACROPHASE	PHASE	SUBPHASE	CHRONOLOGY (^{14}C)
0			BCE 1700-1400
1	a		1200-1000
	b		1000-900
	c		900-800
2	a	1	600-500
		2	500-400
	b		400-250
3	a	1	250-200
		2	200-100
		3	100-50
	b		BCE 50-70 CE
4	a		70-120
	b		120-200
5	a		200-250
	b		250-300
6			300-400
7			400-550 (no ^{14}C)
8	a		680-850
	b		850-1000
9	a		1000-1100
	b		1100-1300
10			1300-1600

triangular animals were dated from the same chronological threshold to the early Iron Age (see Olivieri 1998).

8. They are often linked to shamanistic contexts (as postulated in Devlet 2004), or to specific deities (Kyzlasov 1990).

9. See Kovtun 2021.

10. The slab of Arzhan 2 was reused, thus its maskoid was carved before the erection of the kurgan (early 1st Millennium BCE). However, apart from the fact that both these specimens are engraved stone slabs, there is very little in common between the one of Arzhan 2 and the one from Barikot (as confirmed by H. Parzinger, pers.comm.).

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