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SURUKTAKH-KHAYA SANCTUARY, YAKUTIA, REVISITED: TENTATIVE RESULTS AND PROSPECTS*

Since the expeditions led by A.A. Savvin in 1939 and by A.P. Okladnikov in 1941, Suruktakh-Khaya, a key rock art site on the Markha River, Yakutia, was only revisited recently in 2011. The paintings at the site, unlike those at most sites on the Middle Lena, are quite satisfactorily preserved, making it possible to conduct additional studies in August 2011 mostly using digital photography.

Keywords: Yakutia, sanctuaries, rock art, photography, preservation, destruction, graphic copies.

Introduction

In August 2011, an expedition from the Northeastern Federal University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography carried out field studies at Suruktakh-Khaya (Yakut for “painted rock” or “rock with inscriptions”). Suruktakh-Khaya represents a key petroglyphic site on the Markha River, a left tributary of the Lena. Abundant documentation including photographs, descriptions, measurements, and control drawings has been collected.

The first study of the sanctuary was undertaken by Yakut ethnographer A.A. Savvin in August 1939. During a survey of petroglyphic sites on the Lena, in the words of A.P. Okladnikov and V.D. Zaporozhskaya (1972: 7), Savvin “evidencing accuracy and much vigor” described the sacred rock, numerous petroglyphs and sacrificial sites; in addition, Savvin recorded legends and beliefs relating to the rock (Savvin, 1940: 29). Although Savvin’s

report has regrettably not been published, Okladnikov and Zaporozhskaya (1972: 8–9, 78–79) have quoted large excerpts from it.

In summer 1941, Suruktakh-Khaya was visited by members of the Lena Historical and Archaeological Expedition, A.P. Okladnikov, V.D. Zaporozhskaya, and I.I. Barashkov. The results of the expedition survey were outlined in full in a monograph by A.P. Okladnikov and V.D. Zaporozhskaya (1972: 16–31, 78–88, 125–132), whereas previously, only a general view of the site and separate petroglyphs had been published (Okladnikov, 1949: pl. XII; XV, 1; 1955: 101, fig. 29; 166, fig. 54).

After the monograph by Okladnikov and Zaporozhskaya was published, a number of publications reproduced the most impressive pictures of the site (see, e.g., (Alekseyev, Penkov, 2006: fig. 9, 10, 12; Larichev, 2008: fig. 1–4, 6, 8). Suruktakh-Khaya was described as an “outstanding rock art site of the northern taiga” (Devlet E.G., Devlet M.A., 2005: 292), an “amazingly rich embodiment of the spiritual culture that existed in the Lena region” (Larichev, 2008: 170). Mention of the site abounds in epithets including the words “beautiful,” “impressive,” “unique,”

*This study is part of the project N 2.2.3.1/2652 (Higher Education Research Program 2010–2011) and was sponsored by the “Diamonds of the Anabar” Corporation.

“enigmatic,” “mysterious,” etc. Nonetheless, after 1941 Suruktakh-Khaya was not revisited by researchers until the early years of 2000. The reason for this was that previously, researchers suspected that the findings would not justify the effort and costs involved. This erroneous belief stemmed from the assumption that “at no site on the Middle Lena have intact rock surfaces with petroglyphs been preserved; all sites have been subject to intense destruction” (Alekseyev, Kochmar, 2003: 111). In addition, the drawings made by V.D. Zaporozhskaya in 1941 (Okladnikov, Zaporozhskaya, 1972: 125–132, pl. 19–27) were deemed perfect requiring neither correction nor addition. V.E. Larichev, for example, noted that “the Markha publication is an excellent source” (2008: 170) and claimed that the accuracy of the copyist, who recorded every detail on paper, should not be doubted (Ibid.: 175).

Circumstances changed radically in 2009, when Suruktakh-Khaya was visited by the well-known Yakutian businessman, traveler, and amateur photographer E.P. Makarov. Makarov donated his photographs to the Northeastern Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography and granted its specialists the right to use them for research and museum purposes (Makarov, 2010: 105). Thanks to Makarov the present authors were able to assess the state of preservation of the rock surfaces and petroglyphs at Suruktakh-Khaya (Maksimova, 2011: 162–164), to design an expedition for the study of the site, to determine the principal research issues, and to suggest ways of approaching their study.

The objective of the present publication, in which the 2011 findings are published for the first time, is to contribute to the discussion on the state of preservation of the rock surfaces with petroglyphs, the accuracy of the well known copies made in 1941, and the highly informative new findings. The location of the site and the structure of the rock, which are relevant to the features of the sanctuary are also specified.

Description of the site

The Suruktakh-Khaya sanctuary is located on the left bank of the Markha*, 22 km downstream from the mouth of the Namaldzhylakh, the right tributary of the Markha along which the present team travelled by boat to reach the site. The distance in a straight line between the site and the Markha and Lena confluence is 59 m and approximately 150 km along the meandering Markha. The coordinates of the site are: 61°05'0.8" N and 122°53'8.41" E (GPS navigator in WGS–84 system).

*A.A. Savvin (1940: 10) also noted that the site is located on the left bank, while A.P. Okladnikov and V.D. Zaporozhskaya stated that the rock is located on the right bank (1972: 16).

A ridge of Cambrian sandstone with subhorizontal formations occurs in the center of the river curve and runs along the right bank of a stream* and the narrow valley (Fig. 1). At an elevation of 17–18 m above water level, the ridge rises from the bank of the Markha in a southeastern direction; here its width measures 6–13 m. The ridge continues to the east, extends for another 26–28 m, and narrows to 5–1.5 m. The height of the forested terrace situated 260 m from the river measures 90 m. The next ridge is located on the right bank of the river 560 m downstream. The ridges are composed of weathered limestone forming a typical “ruin” relief. Erosion shapes are evident in photographic views of the ridge (Fig. 1) and in the view of the cliff with petroglyphs (Fig. 2, upper right corner). The latter photograph illustrates the nature of the weathering that contributed to the preservation of the paintings. A relatively wide (0.8–1.2 m wide) washout formed along a subvertical crack running from the northeast to the southwest. Judging by the smoothed walls polished by water, this washout serves as drainage for the watershed of the rocky ridge. The top of the rock is beveled towards the washout: the northeastern edge of the rock measures 21.0 (23.6) m high**, while the height of the southwestern edge measures 16.9 (19.5) m. The highest peak of the ridge reaches 29.7 (32.3) m. Judging by the traces of water erosion, rain and snowmelt waters flowed down on the southwestern part of the rock and on the adjoining part of the “facial” (according to A.A. Savvinov) or “frontal” (according to A.P. Okladnikov) surface of the rock. The opposing, northeastern and central parts of the frontal surface facing the river were not subjected to water exposure.

The structure of the rock substratum at Suruktakh-Khaya was formed by two systems of subvertical cracks. The first extends in a NE–SW direction and is represented by the deep, wide washout mentioned above and which constitutes the southern, southeastern limit of this exotic feature variously referred to as “rock ledge,” “isolated picturesque remnant,” “pillar,” “tower,” “sacred mount,” etc. Parallel to this fault runs a series of cracks varying in depth, width, etc. Three of these are quite distinct and situated in the vicinity of the group of petroglyphs and the sanctuary.

The first crack (Fig. 3, right side) separates rock blocks 1 and 2. The thickness of the blocks measures

*The width of the stream at its mouth is 17 m; the Markha measured 35 m wide during the period of our work at the site (August, 18–26). A.A. Savvin also began his studies on the 18th of August 1939.

**Here and below, the first figure given corresponds to the height from the foot of the rock; the second figure given in brackets represents its height from the water level of the Markha on August 24, 2011. In 1939, the height of the same limestone rock measured 22 m (Savvin, 1940: 10).

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