

Introduction

1.1. Research questions, methodology and relevance of study

The aim of this study is to reconsider macro ethno-cultural and social processes that took place in East Siberia in the prehistoric period and to better understand them through the notion of dynamic and subjective ethno-cultural identity. A great majority of rock art sites relate to this period, more precisely the Neolithic-Bronze Ages, and such research implies a large geographic scope. Although much information and data on East Siberian rock art has been published, the quality of publications on rock art sites does not make it possible to re-assess the sites so that substantial progress in understanding Siberian prehistory can be made. This study is based on the author's extensive fieldwork which took place in May-September 2017. The goals of the fieldwork were the following: 1) since this research takes the macro-history of a large territory into consideration, it was necessary to survey as large a region as possible, covering different geographic areas; 2) since available publications about the rock art of Trans-Baikal and Yakutia contain only black-and-white drawings and few low-quality black-and-white photographs, the author wanted to create a baseline recording of the rock art sites examined in the fieldwork.

This study continues the long-established Soviet/Russian tradition of considering rock art sites in their archaeological context and builds on the considerable achievements of Siberian rock art researchers and archaeologists. However, new answers to questions relevant not only for Siberian but also global rock art research will be offered in this research, namely, *why rock art was created, why specific styles emerged, and why changes in rock art production occurred*. This is possible to achieve if looking into how rock art relates to the negotiation of ethno-cultural identity, which is understood in terms of perceiving one's own cultural distinctiveness and maintaining it through the active strategic usage of culture, in this case rock art. The phenomenon of ethnicity and ethno-cultural identity occupies an important position within anthropological enquiry, although few attempts have been made to apply relevant anthropological insights for the study of prehistoric societies. Contemporary anthropological thinking considers ethnicity as a dynamic, ever-changing, and multi-componential phenomenon, while archaeological thinking is still dominated by a notion of bounded rigid entities in the past, and researchers pursue correlating genetics, linguistics, historiography (if available), and material culture assemblages to identify ethno-cultural groupings. While this research acknowledges the importance of such correlations, especially linking rock art styles to archaeological cultures to better define timelines for rock

art, this is taken as an initial analytical stage for further interpretation through an anthropological perspective on ethnicity, identity, social practice, symbolism, and community.

The novelty and relevance of this study can be shown through each stage of the research. Firstly, the analysis is based on data collected in the field. The fieldwork took place in three areas of Russia, Zabaykalsky Krai, Yakutia, and Buryatia, and resulted in 108 rock art sites with more than 6,000 individual motifs recorded. No such extensive rock art research has been carried out in the region since the 1980s. It was important to personally visit as many sites as possible because the published data available are represented by black-and-white drawings and few black-and-white photographs, which do not allow the analysis to be more accurate than previously. Moreover, many of the published drawings, compared to actual rock art images, are not quite accurate. When modern non-invasive techniques of rock art recording and processing were used, better-quality data were collected. Secondly, a stylistic and spatial analysis of all recorded motifs led to better definitions of rock art styles and traditions. Thirdly, the chronology of rock art styles and traditions was elaborated based on extensive references to the archaeological record and analogues in art objects from archaeological contexts. Such concrete placement of rock art in time and space allows for the next level of investigation, which is exploring the role rock art played in constructing and reconstructing ethno-cultural identities. The observations made on the active engagement of rock art in social and ethno-cultural processes contribute to the wider field of archaeology and cultural anthropology.

1.2. Background and setting

The rock art of Siberia has a long history of investigation. The first mention of pictures on rocks dates back to 1630 (Kovtun 2011), and by the 19th century answers to key questions, such as who made the pictures and when, were being attempted (Spassky 1822). By the early 20th century, a large amount of data on East Siberian rock art had been accumulated and became known not only to national archaeologists, historians, and antiquarians but also to foreign researchers and the wider public. During the Soviet period rock art research considerably accelerated and advanced. The focus was documentation, chronological attribution, and interpretation in a context of prehistoric rituals and beliefs. Rock art in the Soviet Union and later Russia has been positioned within archaeological enquiry, and this has had positive consequences in that a great focus has been put on studying rock art styles and traditions with subsequent correlation with archaeological periods and

cultures. However, another characteristic is that the range of interpretational approaches and frameworks has been rather limited.

A few approaches originally developed by early rock art researchers still dominate intellectual thinking when it comes to understanding the role rock art played in ancient societies. In East Siberia, considering rock art sites as default open-air ancient sanctuaries has a long tradition in rock art research. This was established by Alexey Okladnikov and developed by his disciples and followers Alexandr Mazin, Nikolai Kochmar, and Alexey Tivanenko (Okladnikov and Zaporozhskaya 1972, 1970, Mazin 1994, Tivanenko 1989). These days the study of ancient sanctuaries has been continued by Vasilii Tashak and Yulia Antonova (Tashak and Antonova 2019). Another common approach is to interpret or 'read' rock art scenes and specific motifs in reference to Siberian ethnography and mythology. This is a rather controversial area of enquiry because contemporary ethnography needs to be employed with caution since there is a large time gap between rock art and when ethnographic data were collected. While traditional ways of looking at rock art still hold their position, some novel approaches have also found their ways to Siberian rock art, such as shamanism and animism (Rozwadowski 2017c, Brandišauskas 2020).

Siberia is an extensive geographical region which stretches from the Ural Mountains in the west to the watersheds of the Pacific Ocean in the east, and from the Arctic Ocean in the north to the national borders of Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and China in the south.¹ This research focuses on East Siberia, which lies east of the Yenisey River, and specifically deals with the following regions (Figure 1.1): 1) Cis-Baikal, or Irkutsk Oblast', which lies west of Lake Baikal; 2) Trans-Baikal, an area east of Lake Baikal and administratively consisting of the Republic of Buryatia, which is geographically referred to as Western Trans-Baikal, and Zabaykalsky Krai, or geographically Eastern Trans-Baikal; the eastern and western parts of Trans-Baikal are divided by the Yablonovy Range; and 3) South-Central Sakha Republic (Yakutia), which is also referred to as a part of North-East Asia.

Another definition, North Asia, in addition to geographic Siberia, includes the Russian Far East region located along the coast of the Pacific Ocean and in the Amur River basin. Although a detailed consideration of this part of North Asia is beyond the scope of this study, a case study of the rock art of the Lower Amur River is included in this book because it is an excellent example of ethno-cultural continuity. An area of the Lower Angara River which geographically belongs to East Siberia is not considered since it is culturally related to the Yenisey River basin, which is beyond the scope of this research.

¹ This study employs commonly used geographic definitions of various parts of Siberia rather than official administrative divisions, which are being constantly reformed for unknown bureaucratic purposes (for instance, Trans-Baikal recently became a part of the Far East region).

Yet another geographic division is South Siberia, which includes an area from the West-Siberian plain in the west to the Zeya-Bureya plain in the east, thus including Altai, Kuzbass, Minusinsk Basin, and Trans-Baikal. However, when talking about rock art provinces, researchers usually refer to the rock art of the Middle Yenisey Basin/Minusinsk Basin. In addition, Trans-Baikal is also considered within the region of South-East Siberia; however, this definition will not be used here.

Siberia, especially its southern part, has been culturally and historically related to Central Asia. Although this region is not within the focus of this study, some references are impossible to escape. Here Central Asia is understood to follow established Russian archaeological tradition and UNESCO definition, which includes "Afghanistan, northeastern Iran, northern and central Pakistan, northern India, western China, Mongolia and the former Soviet Central Asian republics" (Dani et al. 1992, 8).

1.3. Chronology and dates

In terms of chronology, the study focuses on three chronological rock art periods: 1) the earliest, possibly Paleolithic Age, 2) the Neolithic Age, and 3) the Bronze and Early Iron Age. The first period is the most controversial since no solid evidence is available to prove the art's age. However, there are other indications and some recent discoveries which need to be discussed. The Neolithic rock art is represented by the taiga styles, and the most prominent is the Angara style, which originated in the Cis-Baikal region and spread to the east and west. A detailed analysis of this style, its chronology, and its role in the emergence of ethno-cultural identities has already been published (Ponomareva and Taçon 2019), but here the analysis is extended, based on additional data collected during 2017 fieldwork which took place after the manuscript of this paper was submitted. The Bronze Age is marked by the appearance of new motifs and styles. While the Early Bronze Age is better represented by the taiga rock art of Cis-Baikal and South-Central Yakutia, in the Late Bronze Age a new, Selenga tradition dominated in the Steppes of Trans-Baikal. To provide a historical context for the rock art considered, the archaeological record for the Paleolithic, Neolithic, and Bronze Age-Early Iron Ages of Cis-Baikal, Yakutia, and Trans-Baikal is reviewed in corresponding chapters. The next period in Siberian history relates to the rise of the nomadic state of Xiongnu, which is outside of the scope of this research.

A general chronology of the periods considered in this volume is as follows. The Paleolithic epoch is a very long period with the earliest evidence of the first hominins' presence in Siberia dating to the Early Pleistocene. However, evidence of the possibly earliest rock art belongs to the Upper Paleolithic, dating to 45/40–10 ka, which is divided into the early stage 45/40–28/25 ka, middle stage 28/25–19/18 ka, and final stage 16/15–10/11 ka (Derevyanko, Markin, and Vasil'ev 1994).

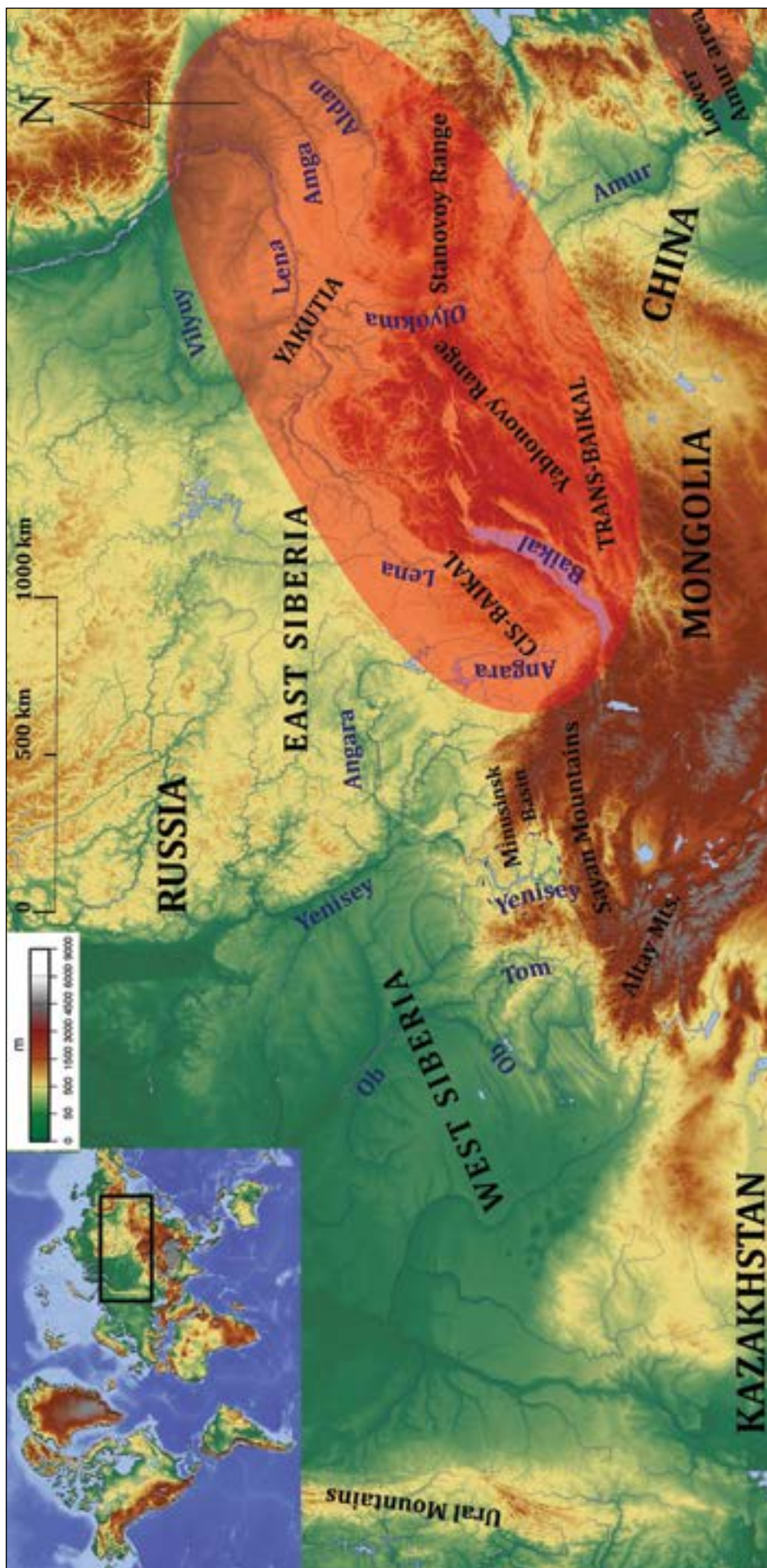


Figure 1.1. The area of research and geographic divisions referred to in the book.

The following, Mesolithic period is dated to 10,8/10,5–7 ka in Trans-Baikal (Konstantinov, Yekimova, and Vereshhagin 2016), 11,7 – 8,2 ka in Cis-Baikal (Berdnikova and Berdnikov 2018), and 10,5–6 ka in Yakutia (Mochanov and Fedoseeva 2013b). The period is characterised by a technological change owing to an adaptation to environmental changes.

While in Europe the Neolithic epoch starts with the appearance of farming communities, in Russian archaeological research the Neolithic period is defined based on technological rather than economical advancement. Thus, the adoption of ceramic pottery marks the New Stone Age. In the Far East, the period of transition from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic, 13300–10300 uncal. bp/ 16150–11850 cal. BP, has been broadly accepted as the Initial Neolithic instead of the Mesolithic (Shevkomud and Kuzmin 2009), and archaeologists in the Buryat Republic consider the Neolithic Age started at 12000 uncal. bp/14150 cal. BP, while the aceramic layers of the Final Pleistocene-Early Holocene Age still coincide with the Mesolithic Age (see e.g., Ivashina & Tsydenova, 2011; M. V. Konstantinov, 1994; Tashak, 2011). While there are regional differences in the chronology of the Neolithic, which are discussed in Chapter 6, in general the Early Neolithic dates to 8000/7500–5500 cal. BP and the Late Neolithic dates to 5500–4500/3800 cal. BP.

The Eneolithic and Bronze Ages are marked respectively by the appearance of copper and bronze artefacts or evidence of copper/bronze casting technology. In general, this period is dated to 4500/3800 – 2700 BP. Another period considered in this volume is the Early Iron Age from its start in the 7th century BC and before the rise of the nomadic state of Xiongnu in the 2nd century BC.

In this volume, an attempt is made to comprehensively review the archaeological studies for relevant periods (Chapters 5–7); however, the problem in synthesising all the models and chronologies available is that their authors, owing to varying regional traditions, provide dates in different formats, calibrated and uncalibrated ones. As a rule, dates in international journals are provided either in calibrated format or in both, while in Russian publications, only uncalibrated radiocarbon dates are more commonly provided. Thus, bp/bc represents uncalibrated dates, and BP or BC calibrated ones. Where available, dates are provided in both formats, and cal. BP is a preferable format in this volume. In some instances when needed for understanding the timing of specific phenomena, uncalibrated dates have been calibrated by the author using OxCal 4.4 and the IntCal 20 Curve with calibrated range 95.4% (indicated in footnotes), and dates calibrated in BC format have been converted to BP format by subtracting from 1950. Additional comments are provided in relevant passages when necessary.

Much attention is devoted to discussing the Middle-Holocene archaeology of the Cis-Baikal region since stages/cultures first developed in this region later served

as a reference model in Trans-Baikal and partially Yakutia. In the following Late Bronze Age, Trans-Baikal becomes a key region for the cultural history of East Siberia owing to the emergence of early nomadic societies closely linked to other cultures of Central and East Asia.

1.4. Book structure

The book consists of eight chapters. After outlining the research design here, the book continues with a description of fieldwork, its preparation, methods, primary data analysis, and a brief outline of the data collected. Chapter 3 reviews the history of rock art research in Siberia. Chapter 4 discusses ethno-cultural studies in the Soviet Union-Russian Federation and Euro-American/Anglophone social sciences to establish a theoretical framework for this research. Although ideas underlying this study have not been explicitly influenced by the Soviet social sciences, it is necessary to consider the dominant thinking at that time, especially in terms of concepts of ethnos and ethnicity. This review will show the relevance and novelty of this study theoretical framework for Siberian archaeological and rock art research. Chapters 5–7 are the main part of this book, consisting of several case studies of various rock art traditions of East Siberia. Chapter 5 tells a story of considerable continuities in rock art production as evidenced by the possibly earliest rock art images in the region. Chapter 6 tells a different story, focusing on the Neolithic taiga rock art, which is about how increased mobility resulted in a heightened sense of identity. Chapter 7 explores the Bronze Age Steppe rock art and disentangles the complex relationships between several rock art traditions present at that time. Chapter 8 closes the book by outlining the main findings and avenues for future research.