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THE NEW ROCK ART SITE OF DURDANA (TALAS REGION) IN KYRGYZSTAN WITH TAMGAS AND TWO NEW SOGDIAN INSCRIPTIONS*

The rock art site of Durdana in Kyrgyzstan (Bakaiyr, Talas Region) was discovered in May 2024 and prospected in June and July 2024. A systematic prospection of the site permitted the documentation of 593 petroglyphs but also of two Sogdian inscriptions. 45% of the engravings are dated back to the Medieval period, some of them of very small dimensions and executed by thin lines in the so-called “graffiti” technic. Furthermore, ten tamgas corresponding to eight different types were discovered, seven medieval and three from the 18th—19th centuries. Among these tamgas, three types were documented for the first time in the Talas Region. After a brief presentation of the petroglyphs of every period, the paper will focus on the Sogdian inscriptions and on the tamgas. The two late Sogdian inscriptions belong to the group of the Turko-Sogdian vertical rock inscriptions and can be dated between the 9th and the early 11th century with the presence of the Uyghur letter *l*. The main value of the inscriptions of Durdana is the presence of the title *sarθang* within the social or military stratification of the Turko-Sogdian milieux.

Key words: Kyrgyzstan, Talas Region, Rock art, Old Turkic period, Sogdian inscriptions, Graffiti technic, tamgas.

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НОВЫЙ ПАМЯТНИК НАСКАЛЬНОГО ИСКУССТВА ДУРДАНА (ТАЛАССКАЯ ОБЛАСТЬ) В КЫРГЫЗСТАНЕ С ТАМГАМИ И ДВУМЯ НОВЫМИ СОГДИЙСКИМИ НАДПИСЯМИ

Наскальное искусство Дурдана в Кыргызстане (Бакайыр, Таласская обл.) обнаружено в мае 2024 г. и исследовано в июне—июле 2024 г. Систематическое изучение участка позволило задокументировать 593 петроглифа, а также две согдийские надписи. 45% гравюр датируются средневековым периодом, некоторые из них очень маленьких размеров и выполнены тонкими линиями в так называемой технике «граффити». Кроме того, обнаружено 10 тамг, соответствующих восьми различным типам, семи средневековым и трем XVIII—XIX вв. Среди этих тамг три типа впервые задокументированы в Таласской области. После краткого представления петроглифов каждого периода в статье основное внимание уделяется согдийским надписям и тамгам. Две поздние согдийские надписи относятся к группе тюрко-согдийских вертикальных наскальных надписей и могут быть датированы в пределах IX и начала XI в. по наличию уйгурской буквы *l*. Главной ценностью надписей Дурданы является наличие титула *sarθang* в социальной или военной стратификации тюрко-согдийской среды.

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Ключевые слова: Кыргызстан, Таласская область, наскальное искусство, древнетюркский период, согдийские надписи, техника граффити, тамги.

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Introduction

Durdana is located in the Talas Region in Kyrgyzstan, circa 66 km southwest of this town, and 8 km south-east of the small village of Bakaiyr (Fig. 1).

The petroglyphs were executed between 1,760 and 1,970 m a.s.l. The rock art site covers a surface of 14 hectares, but the petroglyphs are concentrated in three small groups on three hills on the left bank of a small stream in a mountainous valley (Fig. 2). Springs are still present in summer and this valley could be used for pastoralism and settlement all over the year. Numerous traces of settlements, as well as a contemporary stone shelter are present in this valley. It is more probable that there are other groups of petroglyphs in other parts of the valley and further research will be undertaken in summer 2025.

If some regions of Talas were in the last decade well prospected (Hermann 2020), in contrary there is almost no publication about sites from the western part of that province until recently with the site of Kara-Kuush (Hermann et al. 2024). Before this paper, a rock art site with two runic and a Sogdian inscription was discovered in 1981 in Kuru-Bakaiyr, 12 km south-west of Durdana (Dzhumagulov, Kozhomberdiev 1983). In order to find new sites in the region of Bakaiyr, in May and June 2024, Laurence Delwiche, Gamal Soronkulov from the environmental public foundation Eco-Ayan based in Talas, and Azamat Asein Uulu, director of the memorial of Manas Ordo in Talas, did preliminary prospections of the region in order to prepare systematic surveying of new rock art sites in July 2024 under the supervision of the Belgian researcher Luc Hermann. On 16 July 2024, the members of Eco-Ayan and of Manas Ordo (G. Soronkulov, A. Asein Uulu and L. Delwiche) and Luc Hermann documented the site of Durdana by fixing the petroglyphs with GPS.

Methodology and research materials

Research methodology

The study of a rock art site employs a comprehensive approach in which the whole site is prospected in order to document all engravings, to fix them in their landscape through GPS points or a general map done by tachymeter, to fix their orientation and dimensions through pictures with a scale, but also by documenting other archaeological monuments of the site, such as settlements or graves in order to analyse the images in their contextual reality and in their relations with each other.

Furthermore, rock art should be analyzed through its stylistic features in order to see the development of the rock art site, but also to understand to which period each engraving belongs. The chronological attribution of petroglyphs is based on a stylistic chronology of the rock art of Central Asia as established by many archaeologists (Baipakov et al. 2005; Beisenov, Maryashev 2014;

Kasanov et al. 2017; Rogozhinskiy 2011; Samashev 2012; Shvets 2012 among others). The engravings can be dated by stylistic analogies with petroglyphs found on some stone slabs in Bronze Age tombs or with animal depictions on so-called "deer stones" and from jewellery found in Iron Age kurgans, but also with goat depictions on stone slabs from the Turkic times. For this period, the chronology was also established by the presence of tamgas (clan signs) or of runic inscriptions.

As a specific field of archaeology and Turkology, the methodology for studying tamgas was developed thanks to the works of N. Bazylkhan, A.E. Rogozhinskiy and Z. Samashev (among others). The research method is based on three stages (Bazylkhan 2012; Rogozhinskiy 2012; 2019; Rogozhinskiy, Tishin 2018; Samashev 2020: 73; Bedelbayeva et al. 2024): firstly, a quantitative analysis of the medieval tamgas identified on the studied territory allows, on a second level, a comparative analysis in order to characterize and differentiate the tamgas of the different tribes in the studied region. At least, it is possible to analyze the evolution of the tamgas' pattern in order to give a chronological attribution.

Research materials

77 engraved rocks with 593 petroglyphs were documented. Furthermore, there were two Sogdian inscriptions, 59 Cyrillic inscriptions and 418 anthropic pecked dots. Some of these dots are sketches of unfinished drawings, whereas others could not be interpreted (they were perhaps used to test the quality of the rock before pecking it) (Hermann 2022).

Among the petroglyphs, 462 zoomorphs were counted, as well as 20 anthropomorphs, 95 lines, ten tamgas, three unclear signs and 14 recent objects (six flowers, two cars, one sun…).

With 369 depictions, goats (*Capra aegagrus*) dominate the bestiary. Canids (dogs and wolves — 16 drawings), horses (22 petroglyphs, among them ten with a rider) and camels (nine depictions, none with a rider) are less important. To complete the inventory of the depicted species, five deer, one bull, one feline and one bird of prey were also found. There are probably more canids, horses and felines, because 38 zoomorphs could not be clearly identified and attributed to a specific species. Most of these undetermined animals are either canids/felines or horses.

The petroglyphs are in three different groups:

1. The first group is located south of the site at an altitude of circa 1900 m a.s.l. In this group, the engravings are mainly from the Bronze and Iron Ages, and from the 20th century. A small shepherd house for the summer is near the foot of the cliffs with rock art.

2. The second group is on a hill between 1815 and 1875 m a.s.l. and is located 400 m north-east of the first group. This group has the main concentration of petroglyphs, in particular from the Old Turkic period with many engravings done in the graffiti technic. Furthermore, both new Sogdian inscriptions were found here. At the foot of the hill, there is an old settlement, probably from the medieval epoch due to the presence of a tamga directly pecked on a rock by the settlement.

3. The third group is located north of the site, circa 500 m north of the second group, at an altitude between 1760 and 1775 m a.s.l. The petroglyphs are dated back to the Bronze Age, to the Old Turkic times with five tamgas and to the 20th century. Many old settlements are at the foot of the rocks with engravings.

In the following chapters, we analyse the petroglyphs of each period, but it should be noted that four zoomorphs (two caprids and two undetermined animals) could not be attributed to a specific period, even if they were most probably executed in the Late Iron Age or during the medieval period.

Rock art from the Bronze Age

91 depictions on 30 rocks were attributed to the Bronze Age, among them 85 zoomorphs, four anthropomorphs, and two lines. Caprids are the most depicted animals with 65 petroglyphs (76% of the zoomorphs) (Fig. 3: C), followed by canids (eight drawings), camels (three exemplars), and only one bull, one horse and one deer. Furthermore, there are six unidentified animals.

Rock art from the Iron Age

Only 56 petroglyphs depicted on 10 rocks could be attributed to the Iron Age, among them 54 zoomorphs and two anthropomorphs. We observe that rock art from the Iron Age is less present by comparison with other sites in Kyrgyzstan, and particularly in this region (Hermann et al. 2024: 43).

Caprids are once more the largest depicted group with 45 examples (83% of the zoomorphs). There are also one canid and eight unidentified species, more probably canids.

Rock art from the medieval period

The Old Turkic period is the main epoch in Durdana with 283 petroglyphs (45% of the rock engravings) on 50 rocks, as well as two Sogdian inscriptions (Figs. 6—7). Furthermore, there are 159 pecked dots attributed to this time due to their presence on panels with medieval carvings. Some of these dots look like sketches of unfinished zoomorphs.

Zoomorphs were mainly depicted (235 petroglyphs, viz. 92% of the petroglyphs), among them 188 caprids (81% of the animals), 14 horses (seven with a rider), six canids, five camels and four deer, as well as one feline. There is also one bird on the arm of a rider (Fig. 3: B). It is probably a hunter hunting with a bird of prey (falcon?). Furthermore, 16 animals could not be further identified, but many of them are most probably canids or horses.

Other depictions are 40 lines, seven anthropomorphs (including the six riders on horses), one unclear sign like a circle and seven tamgas (Fig. 8: C, D, F—I). Six tamgas were directly located by a settlement; one in the second group of petroglyphs and five in the third group.

Two panels are covered by engravings done in the graffiti technic (Fig. 3: A*;* 4; 5: A). The depictions are less visible, carved by very thin and superficial lines and are of very small dimensions (2—5 cm). On these panels, we counted 36 animals and five riders on horses, as well as many lines.

The graffiti technic is also known in the same period at the site of Kara-Kuush in this region (Hermann et al. 2024: 48ff).

Rock art from the Kyrgyz ethnographic period (17th—19th centuries)

We named the petroglyphs from the 17th to the beginning of the 20th century (before the Sovietization of the country) as belonging to the Kyrgyz ethnographic period. This denomination derives from the so-called Kazakh ethnographic period as defined by Sala and Deom and going from the 15th to the 20th century (Sala, Deom 2005: 57). Another denomination in Kazakhstan for this period is National Kazakh rock art (народные казахские) but only for engravings from the 19th and early 20th centuries (Rogozhinskiy 2011: 204). In Kazakhstan, this period was also the topic of a book under the name of Kazakh petroglyphs (казак петроглифтері*)* and is dated by the authors between the 18th and the early 20th century (Samashev, Zhetibaev 2005: 119f). As we see, this period is not well-defined, mostly because archaeologists focus their attention on older engravings, which implies that there are only few papers concerning this topic in Kazakhstan, and none at all about the rock art of this period in Kyrgyzstan.

Among the 35 petroglyphs of this period executed on 13 rocks, there are 24 caprids, four horses (one with a rider), one camel and one undetermined zoomorph. Furthermore, there are two anthropomorph (one rider), two unclear signs as well as three tamgas (Fig. 8: A, B, E).

Six drawings were made in the graffiti technic by very thin and small lines: one anthropomorph, three horses, one caprid and one unclear sign (Fig. 5: C). We should notice that this technic was used to depict the three horses of this period but only one caprid, as if this technic had a special meaning and was used for different subjects than the usual technic of pecking.

The small number of petroglyphs for this time is similar to other sites in Kyrgyzstan.

Rock art from the 20th century

59 Cyrillic inscriptions were done after 1950. These inscriptions correspond to Kyrgyz names, probably of the shepherds using the hills for pastoralism. Furthermore, there were 55 depicted animals: 45 caprids, four horses (two mounted by a rider), one dog and five undetermined zoomorphs, four of them unachieved.

There are also six flowers, two cars, two yurts (Fig. 5: B), one soviet star, one mountain and one sun behind clouds. Furthermore, there are 50 lines, among them 49 on the same panel, for which we cannot give an explanation.

Discussion

Two new Sogdian inscriptions in Durdana
(Transliteration, translation and analysis by Pavel Lurje)

The two new Sogdian inscriptions are called Durdana I and Durdana II.

Durdana I (Fig. 6):

Location and description: Durdana I is located at an altitude of 1845 m, circa 60 m north-west of an old settlement with the presence of the tamga type 8 (see below). This settlement is at an altitude of 1824 m. The rock with the inscription is oriented to the south-east. The inscription is well visible, has three lines and measures 15 × 31 cm.

Transliteration: 1. *mrty*; 2. *'yl*; 3. *yk-'n*; 4. *srδ'nk*.

Translation: 1. Man; 2. El-; 3. Yegän; 4. Commander.

Dating: The inscription is rendered in cursive Sogdian script. The presence of Uyghur *l* would date it to the eve of the 9th century or later (Lurje 2022), perhaps during the 10th or early 11th century.

Analysis: The inscription belongs to the group of late Sogdian or Turko-Sogdian vertical rock inscriptions, previously published and known as "epigraphy of Semirechye" and corresponding to the region of the Northern Tien Shan. Most of them were discovered in the upper Talas valley and are dated back to the 9th— early 11th centuries. Being written in Sogdian, they include many Turkic names and titles (Livshits 2015: 283—296). Another inscription of five lines, but still poorly understood, has been documented in the site of Kuru-Bakaiyr, 12 kilometres south-west of Durdana (Dzhumagulov 1987: 34—36; Tabaldiev, Belek 2008: 45).

The inscription starts with the Sogdian word *mrty* (man), a very common word also attested in the epigraphy of Semirechye (Livshits 2015: 274). The name *El-yegän* is Turkic and is a binome compound meaning "nephew of the state". Although I am unaware of this compound name in onomastics, both parts are well attested among Old Turkic names (Wilkens 2021: 254, 884—885), as well as among Sogdian names (Lurje 2010: 88, 125—128, 223).

The last word can be transliterated by *srδ'nk*/*sarθang*/ "commander, chief, lord, general" which is well attested in Buddhist, Manichaean and Christian [*srθng*] texts. The Manichaean text of "Sermon of the soul" indicates that *sarθang* was second in rank in the king's army (Sundermann 1997: 86—87), while in Christian texts it is translated by "notable, chief, noble" (Sims-Williams 2016 s.v). Manichaean Middle Persian and Parthian *srhn(n)g* "leader, captain" and modern Persian word *sarhang* "colonel" are etymologically related to this word. I do not know any attestation of this term in epigraphy or in any secular Sogdian text, although I cannot exclude that the word *srδr* on two coins of Nakhshab from the first half of the 8th century should actually be read *srδnk* (Naymark 2024). This word indicates that the position of El Yegän was quite high.

In conclusion, the main value of the inscriptions of Durdana, even if very laconic in itself, is the presence of the title *sarθang* within the social or military stratification of the Turko-Sogdian milieux.

Durdana II (Fig. 7):

Location and description: Durdana II is located 60 meters west of the inscription Durdana I, on a south-facing rock at an altitude of 1872 m. The inscription is well visible and has one line measuring 4 × 24 cm.

Transliteration: *'yl yk-'n*

Translation: El Yegän

Dating: See above

Analysis: This shorter inscription shows the same name in the same orthography as by Durdana I. Given the proximity of both inscriptions, there can be no doubt that they were carved by the same person.

New tamgas in Durdana

Ten tamgas were found on eight panels in Durdana. In the description of the tamgas below, the tamgas are attributed to a type following Rogozhinskiy's typology if it was possible (Rogozhinskiy 2012: 94). All rocks with carvings are numerated here according to the surveys of the authors.

Rock 6A: Two tamgas are on the same south-oriented rock, at an altitude of 1915 m, and are located in the first group (Fig. 8: A). The omega-type-tamga (type 3) measures 8 × 9 cm. Due to the presence of the other engravings on this rock, we think that this tamga was done during the Kyrgyz ethnographic period.

Rock 6B: On the same rock as the previous tamga (Fig. 8: B). It measures approximately 20 × 10 cm. This tamga is probably a variant of type No. 10 with a line curved twice, once up and once down. A dot was pecked in the upside curve. Due to the presence of the other engravings on this rock, we think that this tamga was done during the Kyrgyz ethnographic period.

Rock 7: In the first group on a south-oriented rock directly by the previous tamgas (Fig. 8: E). It measures 10 × 11 cm. It is probably a variant of type 9, but this tamga seems to have been pecked in two phases. In the first phase, it looks like an unachieved goat, which was completed in a second phase to transform it into a tamga. Due to the presence of the other engravings on this rock, we think that this tamga was done during the Kyrgyz ethnographic period.

Rock 47: Directly by the settlement in the second group on a south-oriented rock at an altitude of 1825 m (Fig. 8*:* D). It measures 25 × 15 cm and it is a variant of type 8. This tamga looks like the letter Y, but with a small circle to the left at the end of the descending line and with a small second line at the end of the left top line, and probably also of the right top line, but the rock is damaged by this part.

Rock 61: This tamga is well-known in the literature about tamgas in Kazakhstan (Novozhenov 2020: 620) and corresponds to the type 11 (Fig. 8: C). It is a diamond-shaped sign with three lines added in the upper part. This tamga is located on an isolated cliff circa 120 m north of the Sogdian inscription II, on a south-oriented rock at an altitude of 1875 m, and measures 18 × 17 cm.

Rock 63: This tamga is of type No. 6 with a line dividing the half-circle into two parts and going up (Fig. 8: G). This tamga is on a south-oriented cliff in the third group by a settlement, at an altitude of 1770 m. It measures 23 × 30 cm.

Rock 74A: Two tamgas are on the same east-oriented rock, at an altitude of 1768 m, and are located in the third group by a settlement (Fig. 8: H). The left tamga measures 6 × 10 cm and is of type 28 with a line going down from a circle.

Rock 74B: On the same rock as the previous tamga (Fig. 8: H). The right tamga measures approximately 10 × 12.5 cm. This tamga is also of type No. 28 but presents a variant: the line divides into two parts in the bottom part.

Rock 75: This tamga is also of type 28 as on rock 74 and is located by the same settlement at an altitude of 1767 m (Fig. 8: F). It measures 13 × 16 cm and is on a southeast-oriented rock.

Rock 76: On an east-oriented rock by another settlement at an altitude of 1765 m, this tamga is a circle belonging to type 27 (Fig. 8: I). It measures 24 × 24 cm.

Among the ten tamgas, three are of type No.°28, and the seven others belong to seven different types: 3, 6, 8, probably 9 and 10, 11 and 27.

The tamga of type 3 was documented in the Talas region, in two exemplars in Chiim-Tash, and with one depiction in Tchatchikei as well as in Zhaltyrak-Tash (Hermann 2020: 189).

The tamga of type 6 is already well-known in the Talas region, especially in Chiim-Tash where this tamga was found in 36 specimens, as well as in Zhaltyrak-Tash with two depictions (Hermann 2020: 188).

The tamgas of type 8, 9 and 10 are not documented in the Talas region (Hermann 2020: 189).

The same can be said about the type 11 but this kind of tamga was found by the authors at another new site in the same region, circa six kilometers east of Durdana (unpublished).

The type 27 was found twice in Tchatchikei, a site of the Kenkol region located 80 kilometres northeast of Durdana (Hermann 2020: 188).

The type 28 was also found once in Tchatchikei, as well as in Tchatchoi, both in the Kenkol valley (Hermann 2020: 187—188).

In conclusion, ten tamgas were found in Durdana, which mainly correspond to eight types of tamgas of the aforementioned typology. Three of them were not known in the Talas region, and another type was found at another site in the same region by the authors but has not been published until now.

Conclusions

If many rock art sites from the eastern part of the province of Talas were published in the last years (for example Zhaltyrak-Tash, the Kenkol valley with the sites of Tchatchikei and Tchatchoi, the Karakol valley), Durdana is only the second publication of a site from the west of this province. This small site — if we consider the quantity of petroglyphs — is very important by the presence of ten tamgas, but above all by the discovery of two new Sogdian inscriptions.

In the province of Talas, one inscription was known in the region of Bakaiyr, as well as three rocks with Sogdian inscriptions in Terek-Say and Kulan-say, north of the town of Talas (Livshits 2015: 286—292, 295—296). The discovery of Durdana brings two new inscriptions in this catalogue. The two late Sogdian inscriptions belong to the group of the Turko-Sogdian vertical rock inscriptions and can be dated between the 9th and the early 11th century with the presence of the Uyghur letter *l*. Furthermore, the presence of the title *sarθang* gives a new clue to understand the social or military stratification of the Turko-Sogdian milieux.

Among the ten documented tamgas corresponding to eight different types, we should notice that three types were discovered for the first time in the province of Talas. Some of these tamgas were associated with settlements.

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Fig. 1. Location of Durdana (1) in the Talas Region, Kyrgyzstan. After © Google Earth Pro 2024.



Fig. 2. Main hill of Durdana with the location of the Sogdian inscriptions I and II (picture: Luc Hermann).

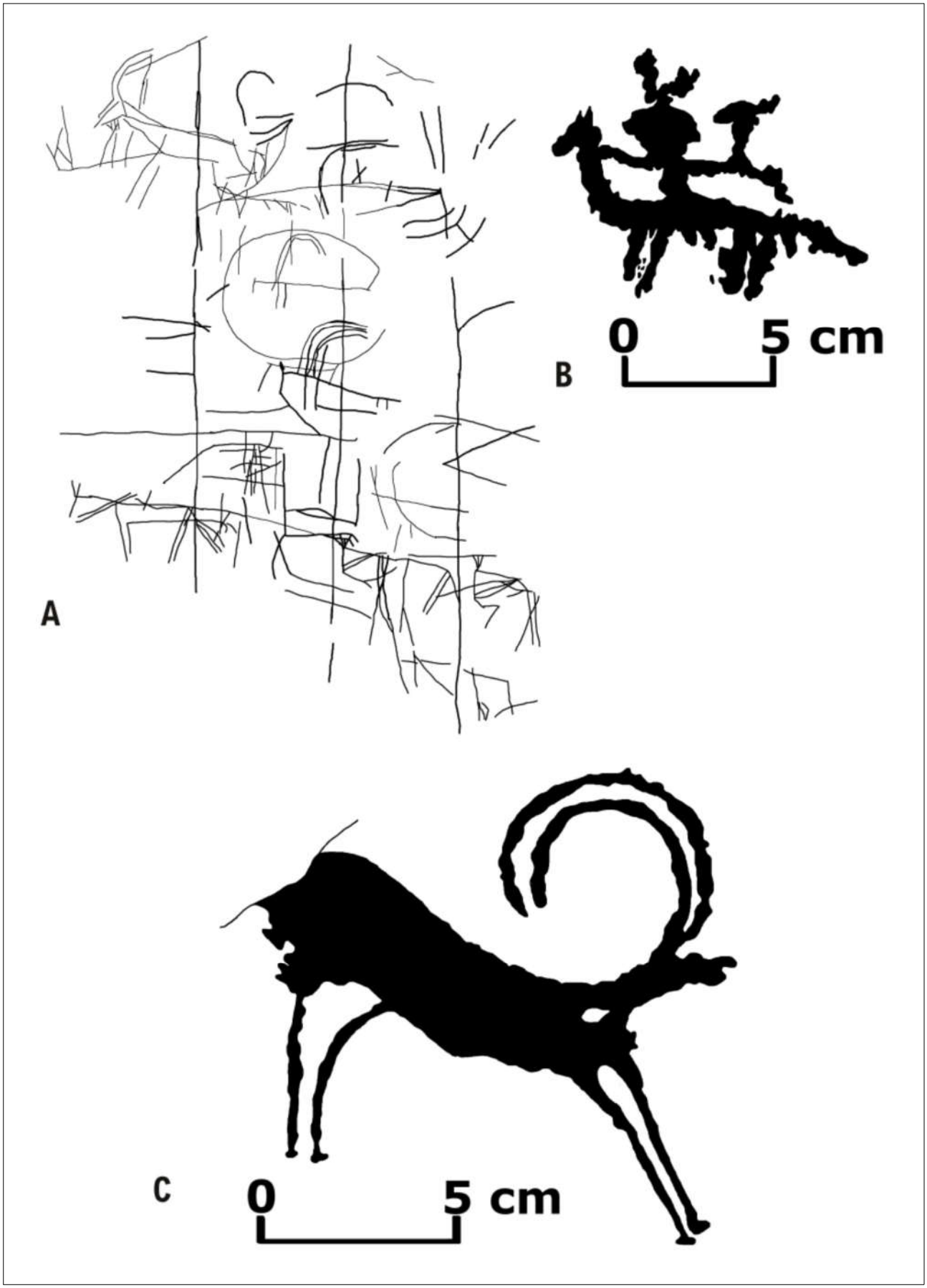


Fig. 3. ***A*** **— Graffiti from the Old Turkic period;** ***B*** **— Rider with a bird, Old Turkic period;** ***C*** **— Caprid from the Bronze Age** (drawings: Luc Hermann).

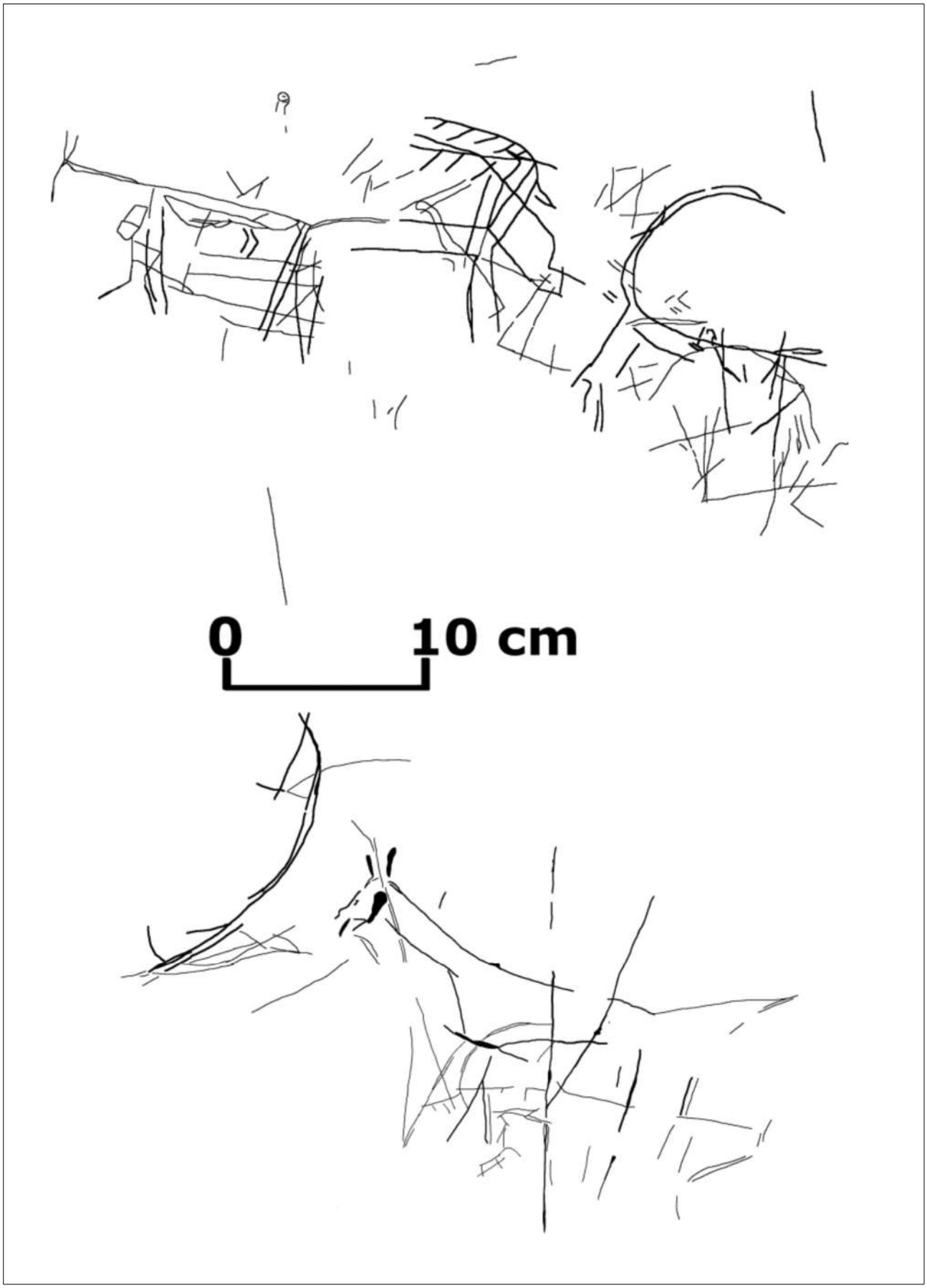


Fig. 4. Graffiti from the Old Turkic period (drawings: Luc Hermann).

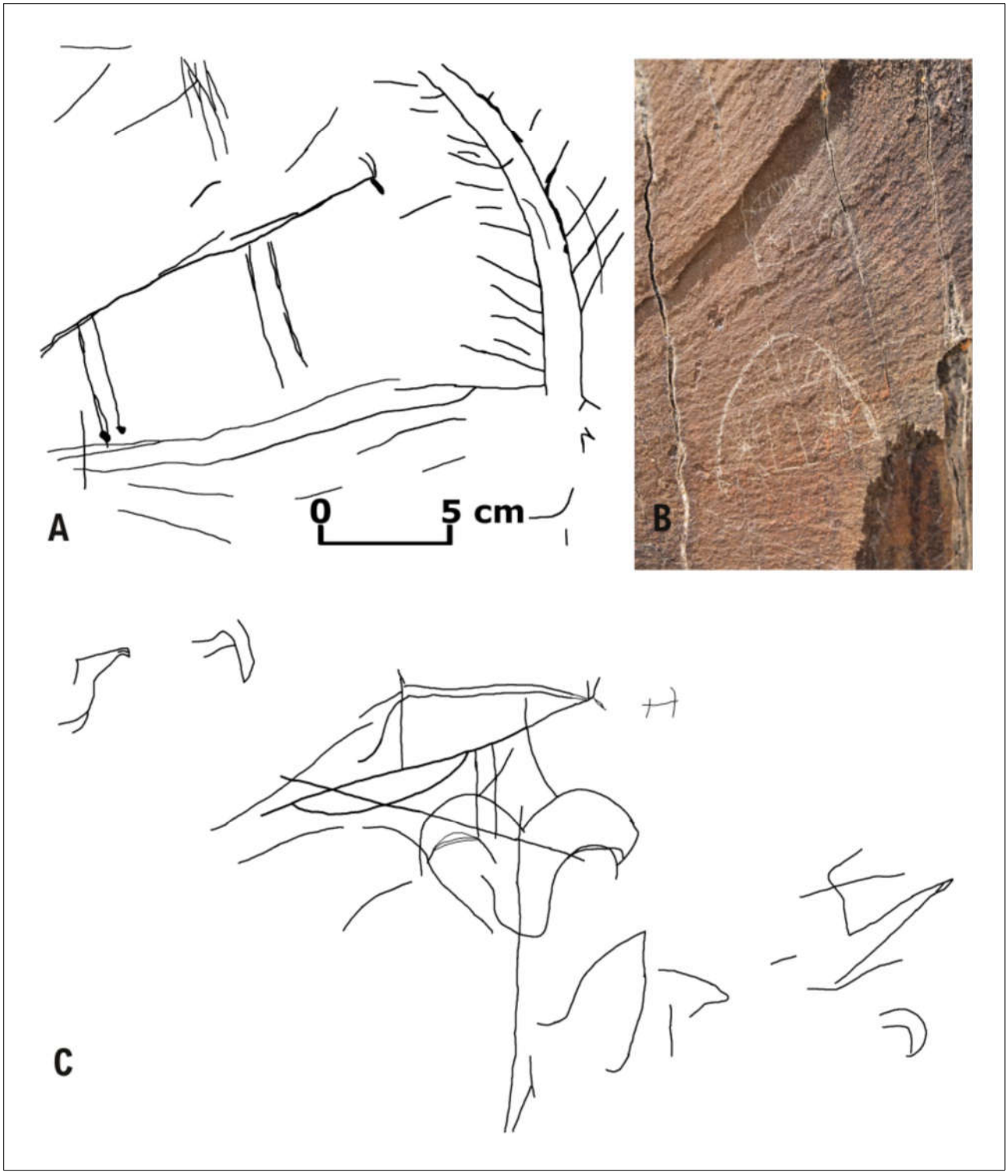


Fig. 5. ***A*** **— Graffiti from the Old Turkic period;** ***B*** **— Two yurts from the 20th century;** ***C*** **— Graffiti from the Kyrgyz ethnographic period** (pictures and drawings: Luc Hermann).

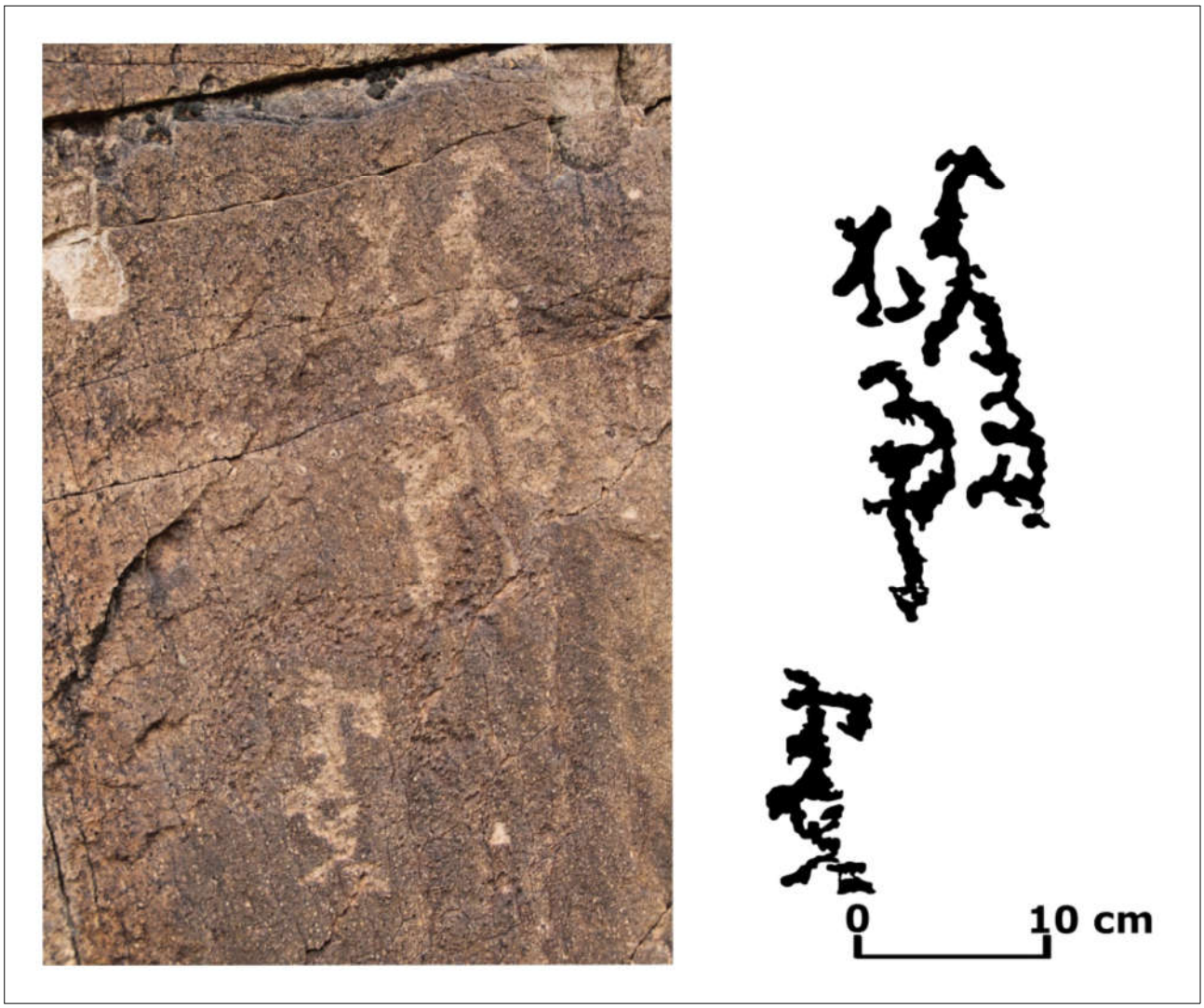


Fig. 6. Sogdian inscription Durdana I (picture and drawing: Luc Hermann).

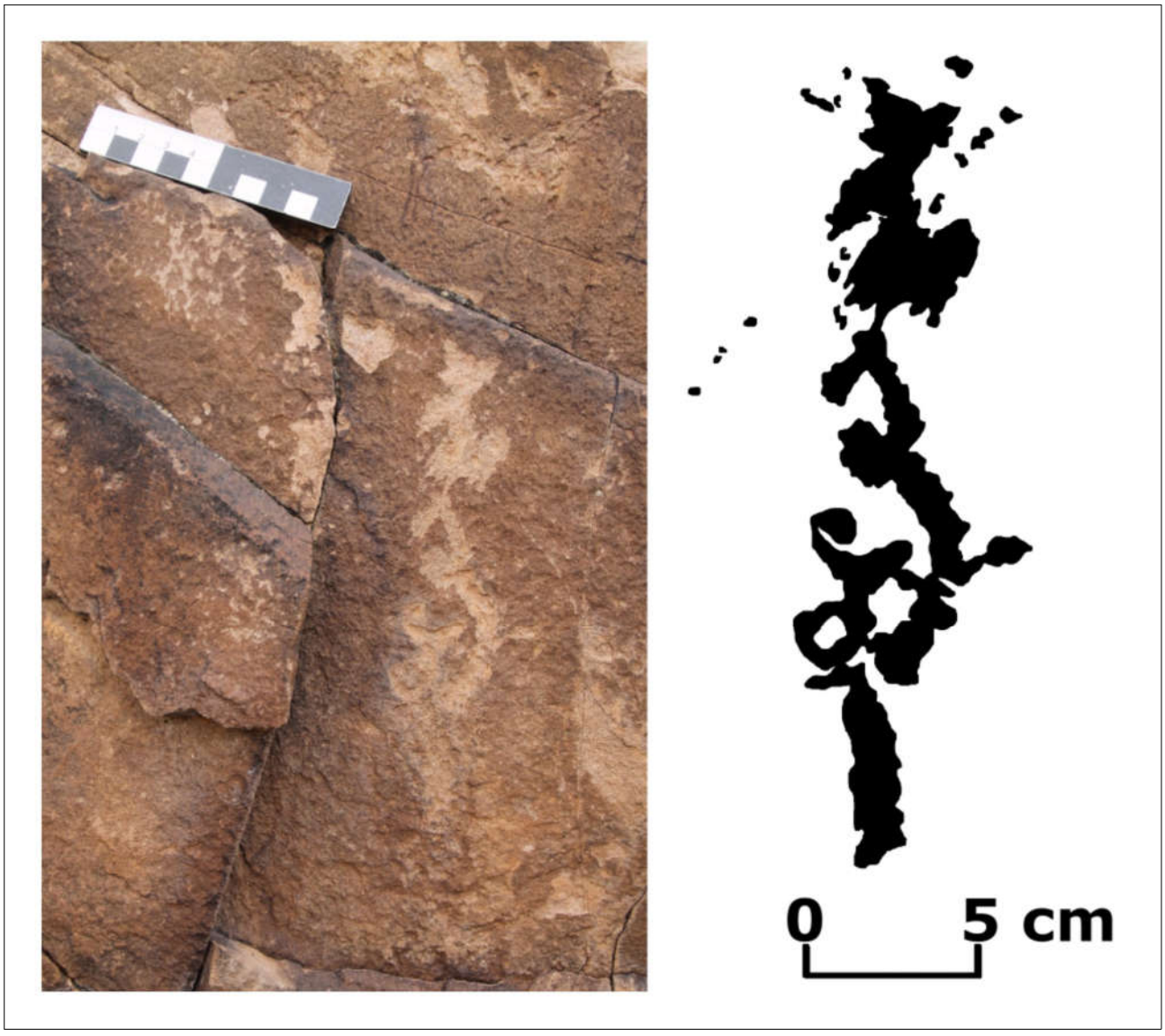


Fig.7. Sogdian inscription Durdana II (picture and drawing: Luc Hermann).

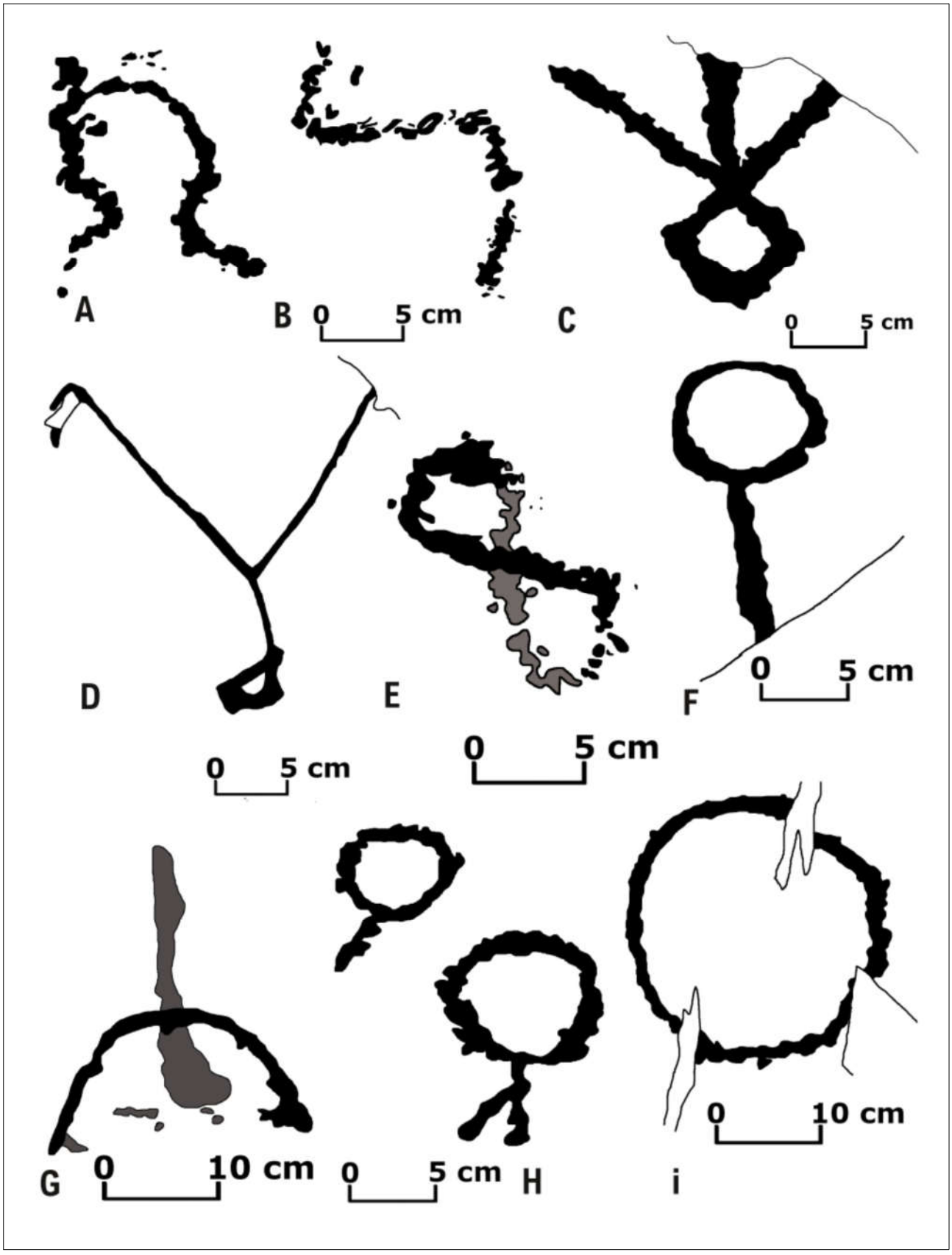


Fig. 8. Tamgas from Durdana (drawings: Luc Hermann).