



ABSTRACT SUBMISSION

Art and altitude at the end of the fifth Millennium BCE: exploring the symbolism of Late Chalcolithic monumental reliefs from the mountains of the Caucasus

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Abstract

The paper examines the visual symbolism of stone relief stelae set up at high-altitude locations in the Southern Caucasus. Our ongoing fieldwork in Armenia has revealed an unexpectedly early date for these megalithic sculptures, now radiocarbon-dated to around 4100 BCE. These rare examples of Late Chalcolithic monumental art, conventionally called "vishaps," are carved with animal reliefs depicting the hides of horned bovids, large fish, and water birds. The three elements are arranged, replicated and combined to create impressive therianthrope sculptures.

The paper describes the vishaps' iconographic repertoire and discusses its possible meanings in the socio-cultural framework of early pastoralism. We hypothesize that the imagery of the stelae expresses an enchanted cosmology governed by metamorphic processes, and that the sculptors employed visual strategies such as ambiguity, allusion, and discordant details to facilitate insight and enhance affective power. Finally, we elaborate on the selection of mountain settings as examples of "heterotopic" sacred sites, where diverse groups from various communities congregated for extraordinary and memorable events.

Keywords

Chalcolithic, Monumental Art, Mountain Archaeology, Iconography, Sacred Landscapes

Session

4. The materiality of inscribed and figurative objects

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