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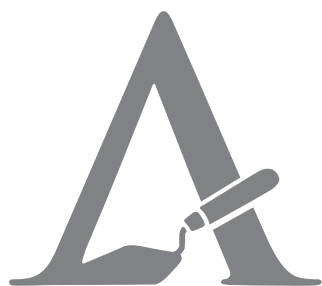
ARCHAEOLOGICA RESSOVIENSIA

VOLUME **20** RZESZÓW 2025



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Wydział Humanistyczny
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DISCUSSIONS AND REVIEWS

Dmytro Kiosak

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(review) Simon Radchenko. *Portable and Parietal Art of Kamyana Mohyla, Ukraine* (= *BAR International Series* 3143). Oxford 2023:
BAR Publishing, 228 pages, illustrated throughout in black & white,
and colour, links to collection of 15 3D models.

Certain locations exert a natural pull on the human mind. In the monotonous vastness of the Steppe, even the slightest elevation or distinct feature stands out like an island in a boundless sea of grass, where most places blur into one another. Without a marker, leaving behind something as small as a bag can mean losing it forever in the uniform landscape. For millennia, an enormous hill made of massive stone blocks resting on fine river sand has served as such an island for Steppe dwellers and visitors alike. This is the Kam'ana Mogila [Kamyana Mohyla] site. The sandstone slabs that form the hill were created millions of years ago, but they have drawn human attention since at least the Upper Paleolithic. Evidence of this long-standing human presence includes the usual material remains – with over 30 sites scattered around the hill – but more strikingly, it appears in the many intentional modifications made to the rock surfaces. These alterations, which we conventionally label as “rock art”, vary in form and intent. It would be reductive to assume every mark was made for the same reason. Yet collectively, they form a complex, enduring record of human interaction with this place – a rock-art site visited and revisited across countless generations.

The research history of the Kam'ana Mogila site mirrors the complex and often turbulent path of Ukrainian archaeology. Initially “discovered” by a 19th-century scholar-traveler in a recently annexed and still exotic landscape of the Russian Empire (Nikolaj Veselovskij), the site remained largely unexplored until a local inhabitant became educated enough to

begin studying it (Valentin Danilenko). Even then, his efforts were overseen and guided by a scientist (Otto Bader) from the distant regions of a new empire – the Soviet Union. Later, the site faced the threat of destruction during yet another of the USSR's grand construction projects – a “strojka komunizma” aimed at building a bright future while disregarding a shadowy and inconvenient past. In a hasty and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to rescue something before the bulldozers arrived, parts of the site suffered irreversible damage. The researcher who probably conducted the most thorough, scientific exploration of the site (Mihajlo Rudinskij) did it on his return fighting with declining health after he was persecuted, exiled from Ukraine, and forcibly relocated to northern Russia. Later on, V. Danilenko returned to the site, already being a recognized researcher. Although he undertook an enormous amount of research, the documentation he left behind is sparse and often contradictory.

In the decades that followed, the site became a magnet for speculation. Groundless theories emerged, linking it to various national origin myths, interpreting its carvings as illustrations of Rigvedic texts in search of an Indo-European homeland, or attributing to it extraordinary sacred significance – often with little regard for archaeological evidence. That is why Kam'ana Mogila acquired something of a notorious reputation within the Ukrainian archaeological community. Working on the site often carried a burden of connotations, and researchers risked being viewed with suspicion – as if their interest hinted at

pseudo-scientific motives. This, then, is the site at the center of Simon Radchenko's monograph. His work reflects a modern, state-of-the-art approach – combining digital photogrammetry with careful, informed interpretation of the evidence. He also undertakes a critical deconstruction of myths and poorly founded narratives that have long obscured a proper, evidence-based understanding of Kam'ana Mogila. Unfortunately, Simon Radchenko's work was interrupted by the Russian invasion and the site now lies in occupied territory. The site museum was looted, and its collections were transferred to Crimea. Given the current circumstances, it is difficult to see how someone could resume their research there in the foreseeable future.

The book in question (228 pages, richly illustrated, with links to 3D models) is the first comprehensive digital-era studies of Ukraine's largest prehistoric rock-art site, Kam'ana Mogila, located in Zaporizh'ia Region, and positioned at the western fringe of the Eurasian Steppe belt. The story unfolds in three parts, further divided into eight chapters.

Part 1, *Kamyana Mohyla in the Eyes of Many*, introduces the site, the author of the book, and previous researchers who have worked there, laying the foundation for the research questions that follow. It consists of three chapters. Chapter 1 – *Genius Loci: How Did We Get to Where We Are?* refers to the author's journey and fieldwork experience at the Kam'ana Mogila site. A personal and very touching narrative recounting how Simon Radchenko came to study Kam'ana Mogila in person. It touches on the challenges of working at a remote site, especially amid logistical constraints from COVID-19 and geopolitical tensions. The chapter offers an engaging, human lens through which the field work is told as an adventure of a human mind. Chapter 2 – *Prehistory and History of Kamyana Mohyla* is centered around geology, geomorphology and archaeological context. This chapter provides a detailed backdrop – from the sandstone island within the Moločna River valley, through its formation, to the stratigraphic and chronological framework spanning from the Upper Paleolithic into medieval times. This sets the stage for understanding both the material and cultural layering of the site. Chapter 3 – *Recent History of The Site: Research and Challenges Along the Way* tells the history of archaeological research on the site. Here, the author explores past investigations – from 19th-century antiquarian efforts to later Soviet-era excavations led by Valentin Danilenko, Boris Mihajlov, and others. It traces evolving interpretations and research styles over time.

Part 2, *Rock Art Research: A [Re]Construction of Knowledge*, contains the material-based research on several instances of rock-art from Kam'ana Mogila. The selection of case-studies is rather dictated by organizational constraints, accessibility of sites and insurmountable circumstances (presented in Chapter 1). However, luckily, they cover most of the timespan of prehistoric rock-art activities at the hill. Namely, Chapter 4 – *The Wizard Cave: The Metaxis of Kamyana Mohyla's Upper Paleolithic Art* focuses on “Wizard Cave”, one of the key grottoes with petroglyphs. Simon Radchenko critically engages with earlier interpretations by Valentin Danilenko and Boris Mihajlov and presents his own, placing the cave's engravings in broader intellectual and political contexts. Chapter 5 – *The Dragon Cave, the Churinga Cave, and the Goat Cave: A Mesolithic Rock Art Assemblage With Additional Bronze Age Material* takes on the challenging task of attributing non-figurative portable rock-art pieces – which lack clear stratigraphic context or direct dating – to the Mesolithic period. The argument draws on several lines of evidence: the riverine economy of Late Mesolithic groups associated with the site, the resemblance of certain shapes in the portable art to various fish species, and the discovery of two similar rock-art pieces at the nearby stratified Mesolithic site, Kam'ana Mogila 1, where the enclosing sediments were datable and have been analyzed. Chapter 6 – *The Bull Cave: Interpretative Scaffolding of Eneolithic Rock Art* presents a convincing argument for assigning the “Rain Bull” petroglyph to the Eneolithic period. While the contours of this interpretation were previously proposed by Boris Zemlakov (1939), and later developed by M. Rudinskij and B. Mihajlov, the author strengthens their case by identifying numerous analogies that firmly place the petroglyph – along with the associated rock-art complex – in the fourth millennium BCE. Among these is a recently discovered stela from a burial structure, which provides a clear and supportive parallel, making the proposed dating of the composition more robust.

In the chapters of Part 2, each cave is presented as a locus of competing narratives: Valentin Danilenko's and Boris Mihajlov's traditional readings and Simon Radchenko's reinterpretations using digital imagery. Themes include layered engravings, potential ritual meanings, and the multilingual art heritage embedded in each grotto.

Part 3, *Complex Entanglement at Kamyana Mohyla*, aims to develop theoretical generalizations based on the material evidence from Kam'ana Mogila. Chapter 7 – *Rock Art Localities as a Core Element of the*

Cultural Landscape proposes interpretation of rock-art practice in the surrounding landscape, finding evidence of acquaintance with Kam'ana Mogila and its stones on the numerous archaeological sites around. The study would benefit from petrographic examination of supposed imports, however the Kam'ana Mogila sandstone is characteristic enough in the region to be recognized by macroscopic examination. The chapter makes the case for an instance of cultural landscape around Kam'ana Mogila being linked by networks of practice and complex entanglements between human and non-human agents. It delivers a broader interpretation: Kam'ana Mogila wasn't isolated. It served as a catalyst for symbolic exchange, linking communities across Eurasian steppe circuits. Chapter 8 – *Human–Non-Human Interactions at Kamyana Mohyla* tries to look at the materiality of Kam'ana Mogila's rock art from point of view of multiple ontologies, new materialism, speculative realism, posthumanism and object-oriented ontology. The meanings of the engravings are not recoverable; however, the author is able to propose the typical life-cycle of portable art object and provide patterns of human interaction with these pieces.

The book concludes with reflections on the site's endangered status amid conflict. Simon Radchenko highlights plans for future scientific analyses (e.g. red ochre pigment analyses), settlement excavations near the site, and creation of virtual representations to preserve and share Kam'ana Mogila digitally. All plans have been cancelled or postponed due to the war and occupation – underscoring another important dimension of this book: its role as a digital and theoretical effort to preserve Kam'ana Mogila for scientific inquiry as it existed prior to the invasion. The 3D photogrammetry work by Simon Radchenko has resulted in detailed digital models of the site, petroglyphs and artefacts, now accessible online to anyone interested. These models offer an invaluable resource, especially given the looming possibility that the original artifacts may be lost forever.

Moreover, the book in question reclaims the Kam'ana Mogila site for modern scientific discourse, freeing it from the connotations often associated with pseudo- and para-scientific theories. To achieve this, the author adopts a rigorously self-critical approach, choosing to state only what can be substantiated by the current state of evidence. This commitment to avoiding over-interpretation runs as a consistent thread throughout the book, guiding the reader through the intellectual discipline required to restrain imagination in the face of such remarkable prehistoric discoveries.

The book serves as an important stepping stone in re-framing the prehistory of Ukraine within the

context of contemporary discourse on human prehistory. It is thought-provoking, initiating numerous lines of inquiry that warrant further exploration and raise many as-yet unanswered research questions. In particular, the Mesolithic chronology proposed for the rock art in the Churinga, Goat, and Dragon grottos permits a relatively broad interpretation. The author appears inclined to narrow this timeframe to the Late Mesolithic, drawing on the discovery of portable rock art objects within the Late Mesolithic layers at the nearby site of Kam'ana Mogila 1. However, one cannot ignore that Holocene hunter-gatherers persisted in the North Pontic Steppe far longer than in many other parts of Europe (Kiosak *et al.* 2021). Ceramic-using hunter-gatherer groups are well documented in the vicinity of the site as well as in neighboring regions. Despite their use of pottery, these communities remained primarily reliant on hunting, fishing, and gathering. Sites from the Dnieper Rapids area, for example, have yielded a rich assemblage of fishing tools and ichthyological remains, supporting the notion that a fishing-oriented economy was not limited to the “classic” Late Mesolithic, but extended into later periods (Kotova *et al.* 2021). Furthermore, the stratigraphic sequence at the Kam'ana Mogila 1 site is complex enough to warrant reconsideration of some Late Mesolithic material culture, potentially re-attributing it to earlier Mesolithic phases (Kiosak *et al.* 2023). Taken together, these factors blur the chronological precision of the proposed rock-art attributions. In reality, these petroglyphs could have been created by any Holocene hunter-gatherer group – as early as the Preboreal and as late as the early fourth millennium BCE, just before the first reliable signs of agriculture appear in the Steppe (Motuzaite Matuzeviciute 2020).

Another aspect of the book that raises important theoretical implications and a range of unresolved methodological questions is the author's insistence on framing his study within a metamodern perspective (Radchenko 2024). The book indeed carries a substantial philosophical weight – one of its clear strengths. However, engaging with archaeological material is something archaeologists have done for centuries; it is not inherently tied to object-oriented ontology. Similarly, evaluating interpretations by weighing arguments for and against is a standard methodological practice, not necessarily an instance of “bootstrapping and scaffolding”; critiquing earlier scholars does not by default constitute deconstruction. In fact, much of the research presented could be adequately described within the more modest methodological frameworks of, for example, processual archaeology. Nonetheless, the author

chooses to situate his methodological inspiration within metamodern and post-anthropocentric theoretical paradigms – and that is, of course, his prerogative.

That said, one must also consider the broader context of Ukrainian archaeology, where theoretical development has long been hindered by dogmatic Marxism and intellectual provincialism (Anthony 1995). The reception of processual archaeology is still incomplete, let alone any widespread engagement with post-processual or post-humanist approaches. From a discipline that, in some ways, remains not far beyond the nationalist paradigms of Kossinna, it is questionable whether we can meaningfully leap into ultra-contemporary metamodern theory. Perhaps we should try – but it is fair to ask whether our field is yet at a stage where such a leap is methodologically grounded. This unfinished theoretical evolution may explain why the author incorporates into his metamodern framework elements that could be fully coherent within processual or post-processual thought.

Summing up, the book makes a valuable contribution to the field of prehistoric art studies, offering original insights into the interpretation and chronology of rock art at Kam'ana Mogila. The author presents complex archaeological material in a clear and accessible way, making the study of rock art approachable to both specialists and general readers. By situating Ukrainian rock art within wider prehistoric contexts, the book helps integrate Eastern European sites into global discussions of symbolic behavior and early art. Moreover, the book sets a new standard for scholarly thought, skillfully linking empirical research with methodological reflection – something rarely encountered in Ukrainian archaeology until now. In doing so, it prompts a re-examination of entire branches of

regional prehistory, raises challenging questions, and clearly exposes the limitations of earlier approaches to rock art – and to archaeology more broadly.

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