Carvings of shamans entering rock cracks may link to Siberian initiation rites

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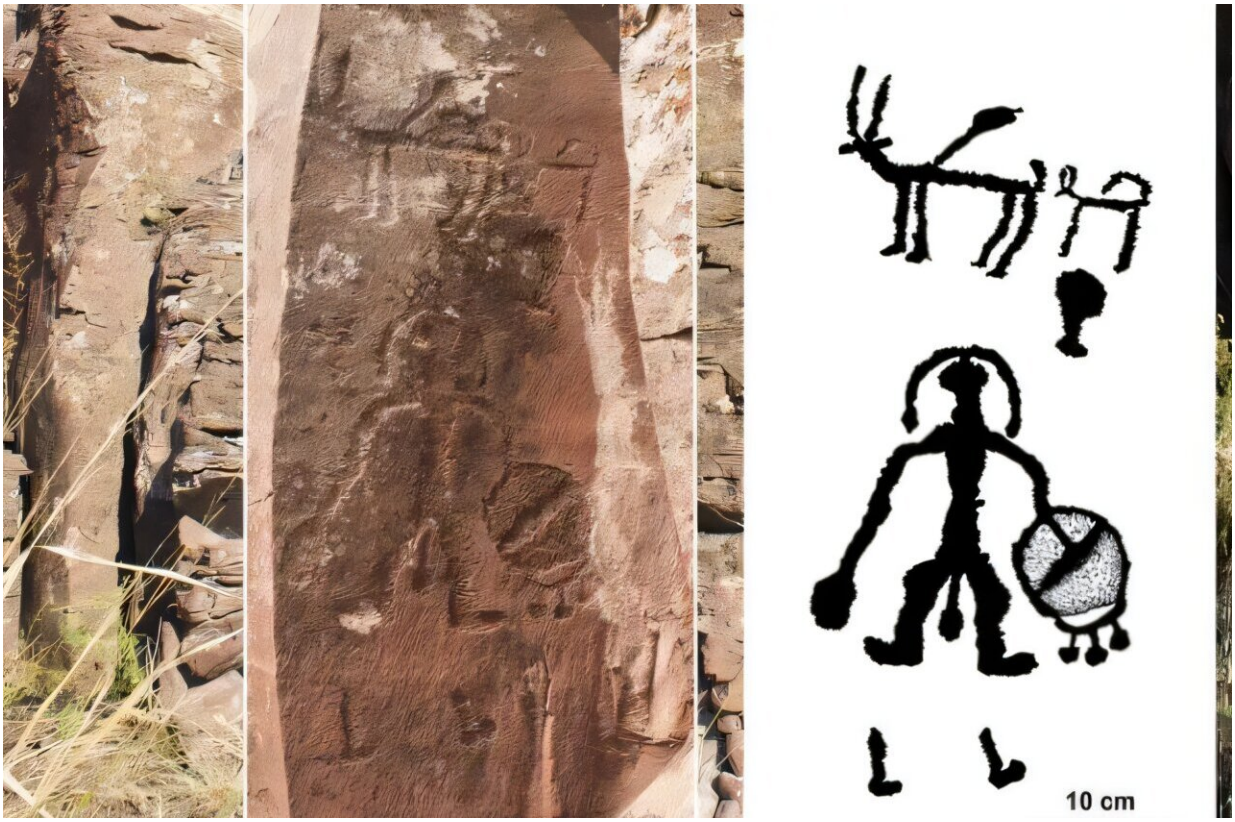

Ilinskaia Pisanitsa petroglyphs including a shaman and some animals within a crevice. Credit: Andrzej Rozwadowski

In the rugged landscapes of southern Siberia, rare images of shamans disappearing into the cracks of mountains can be found. Hundreds of

years old and their artists long gone, their meaning remains a mystery. But perhaps an echo of their purpose can still be found in the stories and beliefs of the artists' descendants.

Siberian rock art has been studied for decades, but it has rarely been linked to the diverse and rich cultural histories of the people who made it. However, a recent study published in *Time and Mind* argues that images of shamans may link back to initiation rituals, in which novices are sent into the heart of the mountains.

This journey of discovery began in the mountainous region of the Minusinsk Basin, where Andrzej Rozwadowski, a professor at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poland, came upon a rock carving of a shaman.

"This petroglyph had been published many times by local archaeologists," he said, but no one ever mentioned the rock crack the shaman was running into. "I was, quite frankly, shocked."

The crack in the rock at Ilinskaia Pisanitsa. Credit: Andrzej Rozwadowski

The rite of the drum

Shamans are a cornerstone of Siberia, with the very word "shaman" originating from the local Tungus language, the study said.

The iconic Siberian shaman is often seen wearing a cloak adorned with pendants and swaying ribbons, as well as a decorated headdress. But, according to the study, their most distinguishing feature is a drum.

For the Khakas, an ancient culture that has called parts of southern Siberia home for centuries, the drum forms part of an important initiation ritual.

According to Rozwadowski, the drum is "hidden inside a mountain, and [that] a person wishing to become a shaman must enter the mountain itself." Here, he will encounter his ancestors and receive his drum from them.

And yet, despite this rich cultural history, the role of shamanism in Siberian rock art has barely been recognized.

A female Khakas kam (shaman) holding a drum, photograph taken at the end of the nineteenth or beginning of the twentieth century. Archive of the Minusinsk Regional Museum of Local Lore named after N. M. Martianov. Credit: *Time and Mind* (2026). DOI: 10.1080/1751696x.2026.2680039

So when Rozwadowski came across the carving of a shaman in a rock crack at Ilinskaia Pisanitsa, he wondered about the parallels. This encouraged him to dig deeper into local histories and look for other shamanic art.

"It is quite possible that, had I not made that earlier 'discovery,'" he said, "I would not have noticed this unique combination of petroglyphs and the rock cavity at this second site, in Oglakhty."

Oglakhty, located north of Abakan in Siberia, is home to beautifully carved rock art, some of which may depict ancient ice age animals. Among its more recent art are 17th- and 18th-century carvings by the Khakas.

Among them are three shamans, one of whom has an upper body replaced with a drum. He is running toward a crack, his foot about to disappear into it.

Two more shamans appear close by, one whose foot touches a crack, as if he has just emerged from it, his body replaced by a circle and dot decorated with flowing ribbons. The other man is standing nearby, holding a shaman's staff, possibly a novice yet to receive his drum.

The parallels between the rock art and ancient rituals were striking. "When I discovered this pattern in Oglakhty, I felt that I'd finally succeeded," Rozwadowski said. "It was a great feeling."

Siberian rock art, it seems, was "not just about the images themselves, but also about the rock, its unique features such as crevices," Rozwadowski said.

Though he cautions against overinterpretation, Rozwadowski wants to continue his research in Siberia. Sadly, when Russia attacked Ukraine, his work had to be suspended. "I don't know if I'll be able to return there in the future ...," he said.

But he has not lost hope; his discovery has motivated him, and he is already working on another paper. And so he said, "The story will continue ..."

More information: Andrzej Rozwadowski, Kam and drum: new evidence for the use of rock affordances in shamanic petroglyphs in southern Siberia, *Time and Mind* (2026). DOI: 10.1080/1751696x.2026.2680039

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