Archaeofauna 12 (2003): 193-201

Hunting tackle, animals and objects in rock engravings from Armenia

NINA MANASERYAN

Institute of Zoology, National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia,
7 Sevag Str., Yerevan 375014, RA

(Received *17 January 2003*; accepted *16 July 2003*)

ABSTRACT: Rock engravings represent a widespread and in most cases mysterious element of ancient human cultures. They are found all over the world, in places where human settlements were established in the past, both where hunting was developed as well as where cattle-breeders and farmers settled. Hunting tackle and objects related to the husbandry of animals from ancient Armenian populations are revealed in 675 animal depictions presented in this paper.

KEY WORDS: ROCK CARVINGS, HUNTING TACKLES, HUNTING WEAPONS, OSTEOLOGICAL REMAINS, PREHISTORIC AND PROTOHISTORIC POPULATIONS, ARMENIA

RESUMEN: Los grabados en roca representan un elemento ampliamente distribuido y con frecuencia misterioso relativo a las culturas humanas en el pasado. Se encuentran por todo el mundo en lugares en donde se establecieron asentamientos humanos, tanto en donde se desarrolló la caza como en donde se practicaron modos de vida relacionados con la producción de alimentos. Los implementos de caza y los objetos relacionados con la cría de animales en antiguas poblaciones de Armenia se nos revelan ahora en 675 representaciones de animales que presentamos en este trabajo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: GRABADO EN ROCA, IMPLEMENTOS DE CAZA, ARMAS DE CAZA, RESTOS OSTEOLÓGICOS, POBLACIONES PREHISTÓRICAS Y PROTOHISTÓRICAS, ARMENIA

INTRODUCTION

The Gegham and Siunik mountains of Armenia are rich in rock carvings, where the ideas, rituals and activities of primitive populations are expressed in a peculiar "language" incorporating some three to four thousand images of humans and animals.

Even a cursory analysis of these images on rocks, makes it immediately obvious that hunting was a primary activity in the life of these ancient populations.

Compositions from the so-called early period (5^{th}-4^{th} millennium BC, Martirosyan, 1981) are relatively restricted in number and diversity and incorporate images of one or two goats hunted without any hunting tools (Figure 1). Some human figures have hands raised to the sky, as if appealing to the hunting gods (Figure 2).

The diversification and specialisation of the hunting tool kit is peculiar only during the next period (3^{rd}-2^{nd} millennium BC), where the hunters are armed with bows and arrows, spears, shields, ropes, nets, bludgeons, traps, etc. (Figure 3).

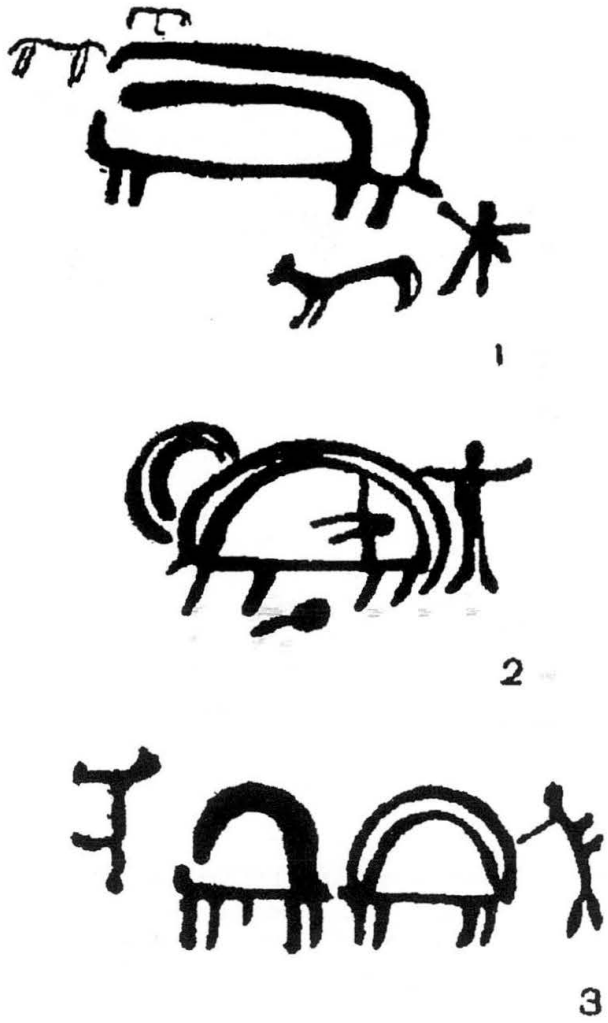

FIGURE 1
Compositions of the early period. Gegham Mountains, 5th - 4th Millennium B.C. (Martirosian, 1981).

FIGURE 2
Figures applying to the hunting saints (Martirosyan, 1981).

FIGURE 3
Diversity of hunting arsenal (Karakhanyan & Safyan, 1970).

In some compositions there are representations of poorly equipped hunters with bows, arrows and dogs (Figure 4). In a number of other compositions there are scenes of animals driven into enclosures (Figure 5), as well as depictions of various hunting strategies, such as the use of loops, lassos meant for animals' legs and occasionally for their horns (Figure 6). The most remarkable engraving from this period is probably the one representing a boomerang (Figure 7).

In one of the most interesting hunting scenes, running deer and goats are depicted as surrounded by hunters standing behind in a semicircle with bows ready to be used. Several dogs are seen attacking the herd from the front (Figure 8). Other hunting scenes include figures of 16 goats with semicircular long horns, a slim dynamic body and long legs, four cheetahs and four hunters (Figure 9). A hunter apparently lets three of the cheetahs attack the goats, two of them are in the centre, the other one having crossed on the goat's way. Another cheetah has taken the deer by its antlers.

FIGURE 4
Hunters with bows and dogs (Martirosyan & Israelyan, 1971).

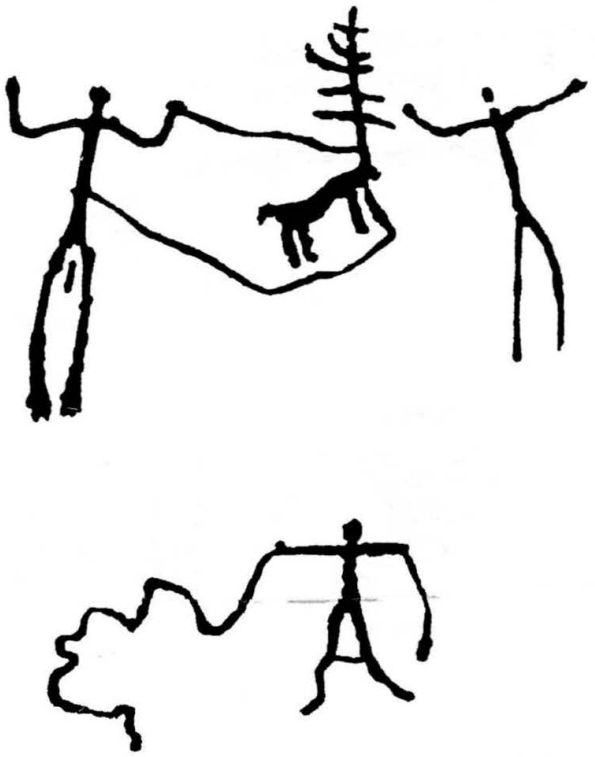

FIGURE 6
Diversity of hunting arsenal (Karakhanyan & Safyan, 1970).

FIGURE 5
Enclosures for animals (Martirosyan & Israelyan, 1971).

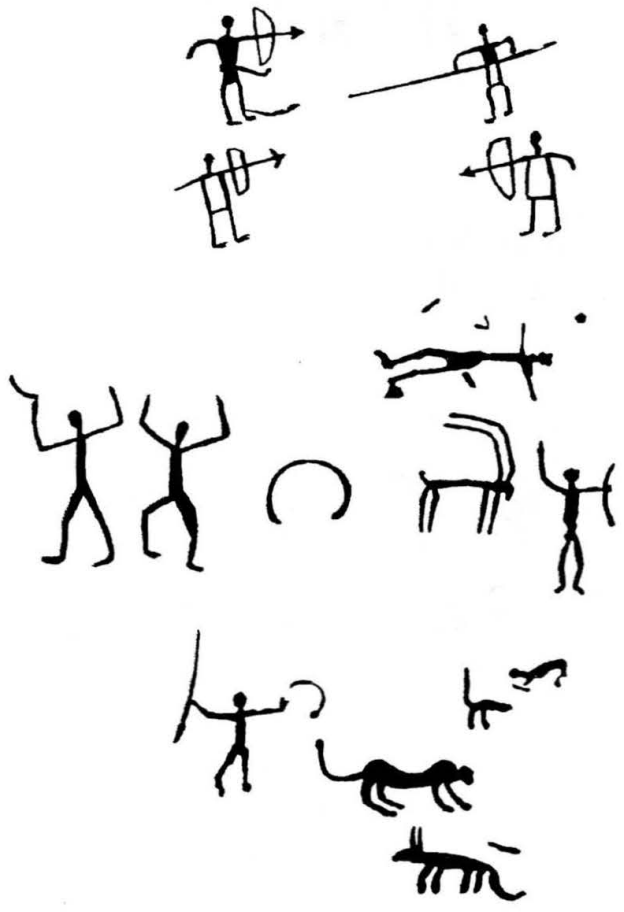

FIGURE 7
Hunting with boomerang (Karakhanyan & Safyan, 1970).

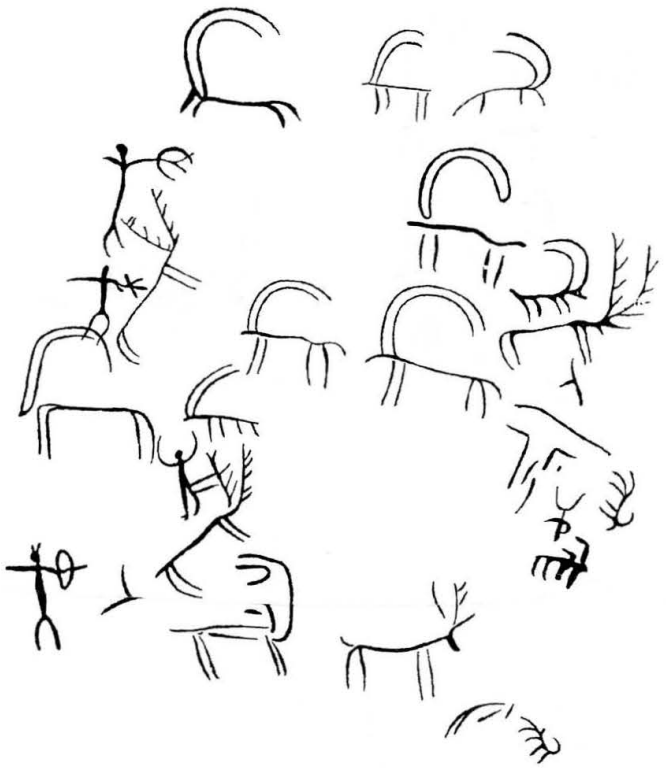

FIGURE 8
A hunting scene (Martirosyan & Israelyan, 1971).

One of the most common motifs is that of aurochs hunting. In Figure 10 it is possible to see a hunter throwing a rope to bind an aurochs' horns, and the animal fighting back. Another scene depicts an aurochs wounded by arrow and finished off by three spears (Figure 11).

Some images are realistically depicted and are easy to interpret, whereas others require a more careful analysis. Of particular interest is the composition of a lone hunter along with a dog, two goats, astral signs and an animal with palmate antlers and a long muzzle (Figure 12). This resembles an elk, which was not known to have lived in

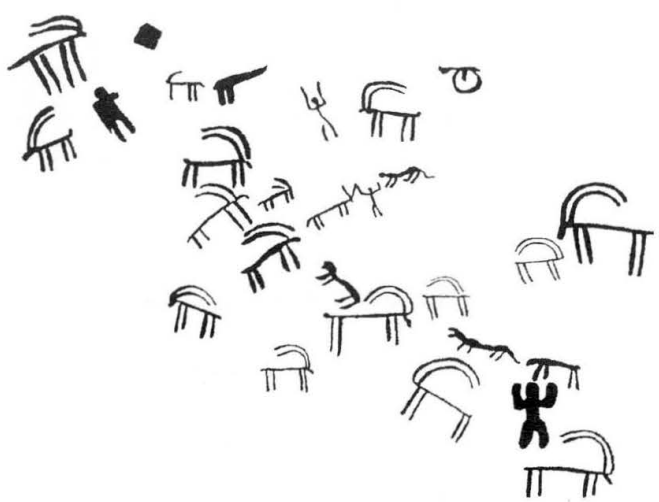

FIGURE 9
Hunting for goats (Martirosyan, 1981).

FIGURE 10
Hunting for aurochs (Martirosyan & Israelyan, 1971).

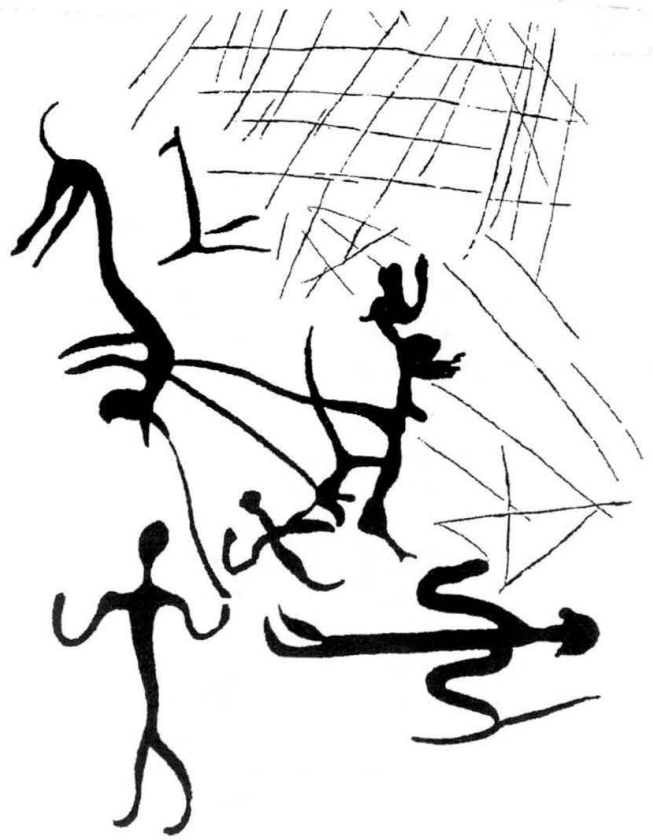

FIGURE 11
Hunting for aurochs (Martirosyan & Israelyan, 1971).

FIGURE 12
A unique scene: an elk! (Martirosyan & Israelyan, 1971).

FIGURE 13
A lion! (Martirosyan, 1981).

Armenia though reached to certain parts of the Caucasus during the Pleistocene (Vereschagin, 1959). Consequently the interpretation of this representation was initially controversial. However, osteological remains of elk found from excavations carried out at the Palaeolithic cave of Yerevan, and later on in the Noyemberyan region confirm the presence of this animal in the Armenian past and therefore the likelihood that the original interpretation of the carving was correct (Mejlumyan, 1988).

Of interest also is a scene where a group of hunters chasing a flock of goats accidentally come across a lion (Figure 13). The hunters are not taken aback by this appearance and two of them face the dangerous animal by pulling their bowstrings, whereas the other four surround the goats with the help of a dog, catch the legs of one of them and throw a lasso to a second one. No direct evidence of the presence of lions in Armenia has been found yet although the written sources indicate that lions were present in neighbouring Iran and Turkey, and that their distribution extended over the flatlands and foothills of Eastern Transcaucasia (Geptner & Naumov, 1972). Recently a lion mandible was found in association with some Iron Age burials (Lori berd, excavations directed by S. Devedjyan). It is therefore likely that the image in the rock carving described above reflects an actual episode from the real life of these ancient hunters.

Some unique images include very fine representations of bisons. In one case this animal is carved with short thick horns, in others these are longer (Figure 14). The figures express wonderfully

FIGURE 14
Bisons with short thick horns, and with long-shaped horns (Martirosyan & Israelyan, 1971).

the positions of attack typical of the bison. The feline-like animal in the left bottom appears to be a lioness.

By comparing different hunting scenes of hunting one can observe that different hunting strategies were adopted and various tools used. It appears that when the hunter is alone he normally kills its prey with a spear, an arrow and a rope (Figure 15). For team hunting there is widespread evidence on the use of spears and dogs as well as a tendency to drive animals into enclosures (Figure 16).

Other depictions might be more symbolic than anything else. Thus, Figure 17 is a wonderful scene of various ungulates apparently led by a

FIGURE 15
A lonely hunter (Karakhanyan & Safyan, 1970).

buck with remarkable antlers. The density of images is such that the hunter with bow and arrow and his dog are barely distinguishable. This composition perhaps intends to praise the brave hunter, who went hunting accompanied only by his dog.

Another composition is a scene of bàttúe hunting: five human figures (beaters) with hands up

FIGURE 16
A team hunting (Karakhanyan & Safyan, 1970).

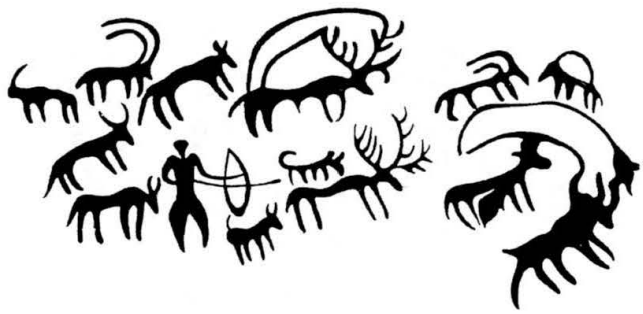

FIGURE 17
A brave hunter (Martirosyan & Israelyan, 1971).

make a circle, in whose center lies the victim, in this case a goat. (Figure 18).

FIGURE 18
A bàttúe hunting (Martirosyan & Israelyan, 1971).

As expected in many hunting scenes domestic animals are represented as having been of great help. In team hunting the beaters and the arrow shooters are often on the back of horses. Hunting with lassoes was possible only by riding horses. These had to be fast and enduring and were accompanied by dogs. Figure 19 depicts three hunters who have surrounded a goat. One of them is on foot, and the other two are on horseback. It seems that the beater, the one on foot, directs the horsemen equipped with bows and arrows to ensure that the goat is taken.

Strangely enough, horse and dogs are not the only animals used as an aid to hunting. There are very interesting hunting scenes incorporating cheetahs (Figure 20). Since ancient times the cheetah's natural abilities to hunt and to be easily tamed have induced people to use them for hunting deer, gazelles and other ungulates but such practi-

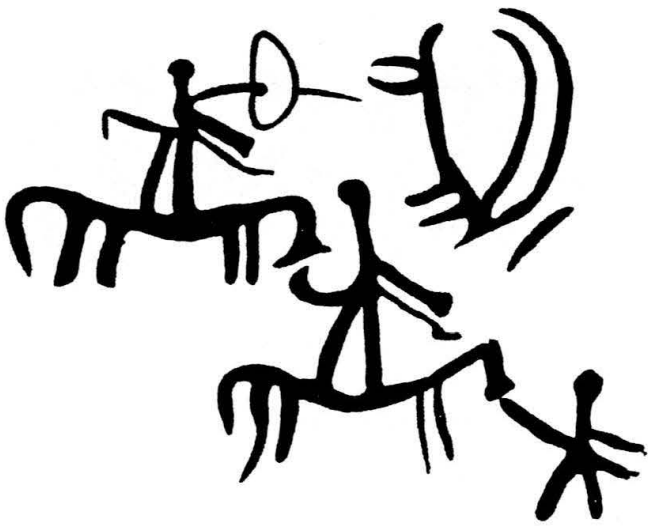

FIGURE 19
Hunters riding horses (Martirosyan & Israelyan, 1971).

FIGURE 20
Hunting scenes with cheetahs (Karakhanyan & Safyan, 1970).

ce is rarely depicted. A cheetah in a trap (Figure 21) probably represents a direct illustration for this kind of use.

FIGURE 21
A cheetah in a trap (Karakhanyan & Safyan, 1970).

It is worth noting that there is in these engravings a prevalence of depictions of "non-aggressive" hunting where the chase does not end with the killing of the animal. The capture of moufflons, goats and aurochses (when the animal is not too severely wounded) may have been encouraged by the need to improve the domestic herd with crosses with their wild relatives. The range of animals (aurochs, bison, red deer, elk, goat, moufflon, boar, leopard, cheetah, and lion) is typical of all these compositions. It is interesting that the primitive artists depicted faunal elements that were typical of the local areas where they lived. For instance, in the Gegham mountains there are images of seven species of waterfowl (swan, pelican, cormorant, duck, goose, bustard, and crane) that undoubtedly inhabited the river banks and lakes in that area (Figure 22), while at Siunik all these species are absent. Conversely, in Siunik there are more images of leopards, bears and boars (Figure 23).

What is relevant here is that the content of all these images can be confronted with the archaeozoological materials found in archaeological excavations and monuments from the area. Hunting was of great importance for the life of the people who carved those images and the analysis of these depictions can help us in reconstructing the development of hunting strategies over time. If in the

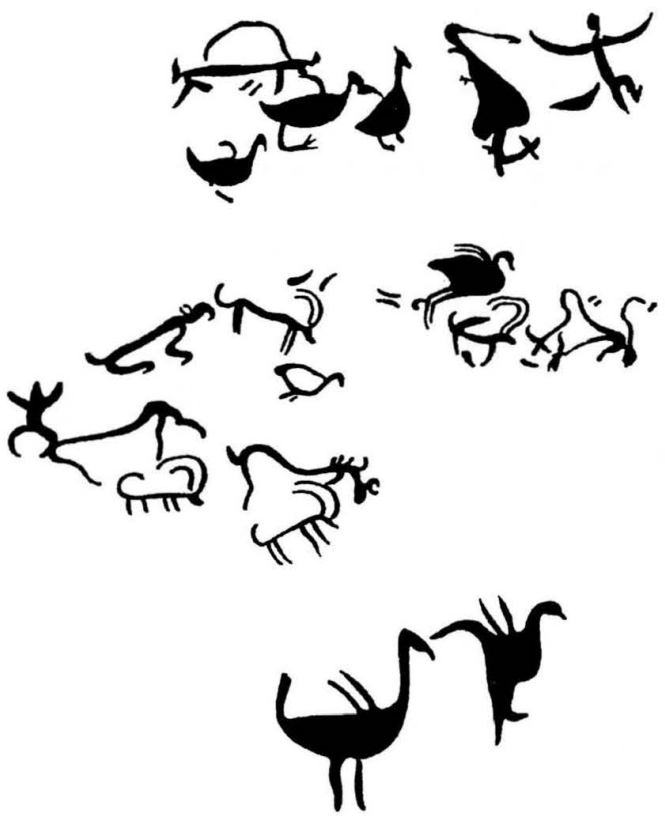

FIGURE 22
Humans, birds and mammals in rock carvings (Martirosyan & Israelyan, 1971).

FIGURE 23
Pigs and other mammals (Karakhanyan & Safyan, 1970).

earlier representations we only have simple hunting scenes, later images provide evidence for the use of more complex strategies, such as the driving of animals into enclosures, bàttúe hunting, and hunting on horseback. A wider array of tools is also represented in later times, including bows and arrows, spears, darts, shields, bludgeons, hatchets, and ropes as well as traps, hunting holes, lassoes, nets and snares.

We must also mention that some scenes seem to incorporate essentially magical or ritual elements, with the performance of particular actions, which were probably supposed to enhance success during the hunt (Figure 24). In some cases, humans are depicted with special masks and imitating typical animal movements in a sort of dance. It is possible that during these performances specific characters of particular animals – such as strength, adroitness, carefulness and wisdom – were praised. On perspective this is a still underdeveloped field of analysis and it is hoped that as our knowledge on these sources of information become deeper so will the links with "conventional" archaeozoological research.

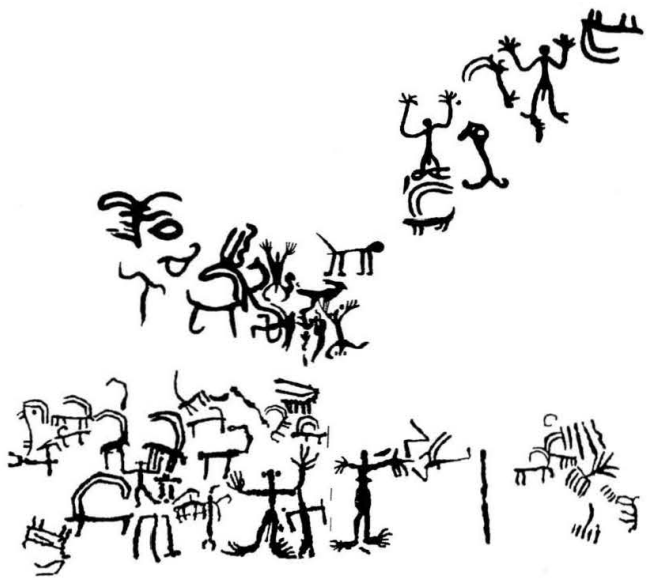

FIGURE 24
Magic scenes (Karakhanyan & Safyan, 1970; Martirosyan & Israelyan, 1971).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank Mrs.Karine Gevorgyan and Mrs.Anahit Khachatryan from NAS RA who helped with the translation and the general preparation of this paper.

REFERENCES

GEPTNER, V. G. & NAUMOV, N. P. 1972: *The mammals of the Soviet Union*. Vol. 2, part 2. Moscow.

KARAKHANYAN, G. O. & SAFYAN, P. G. 1970: *Rock carvings in Siunik*. Issue 1. Publishing House of Acad.Sci.ArmSSR, Yerevan.

MARTIROSYAN, A. A. 1981: *Rock carvings in Gegham mountains*. Issue 3. Publishing House of Acad.Sci.ArmSSR, Yerevan.

MARTIROSYAN, A. A. & ISRAELYAN, A. R. 1971: *Rock carvings in Gegham mountains*. Issue 2. Publishing House of Acad.Sci.ArmSSR, Yerevan.

MEJLUMYAN, S. K. 1988: *Holocene fauna of mammals in Armenia*. Publishing House of Acad.Sci.ArmSSR, Yerevan.

VERESCHAGIN, N. K. 1959 Mammals of the Caucasus. Developmental history of the fauna. NAUK(Presses of the USSR Academy of Sciences), Moscow (in russian).