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Study of Dash Complex, Petroglyphs in Meshginshahr, Northwest of Iran



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ABSTRACT

Petroglyphs have been the most basic of human art to express their feelings and views of the surroundings. This art from antiquity to the present day created in various forms on the surfaces of cliffs and demonstrate a kind of creators' livelihood. In Iran, we can found these petroglyphs in most mountainous regions that nomadic life flows in them. The complex of Dash petroglyphs with a large number of rock drawings is located in the North West of Iran (Azerbaijan), in the Basin of Qarasu River in Meshginshahr City. This area nowadays has habited by nomads and since all these motifs associated with the livelihood of these people, we can acquire evidence of primitive peoples who lived in this area by studying the pattern of these petroglyphs. Studying Dash complex based on archaeological survey and literature review we found that petroglyphs are classified into three groups: human, animal and geometric drawings. The results of the study revealed that in this region, Bovidae and human petroglyphs are the most common. It is worth mentioning that due to the lack of laboratory facilities, the dating of the petroglyphs is not possible and only the relative chronology can be used.

INTRODUCTION

According to many researchers, rock art or petrography is an obvious example of a universal art that goes back to the depths of human history. This type of art often is considered among the most important branches of the visual arts that show the first known effects of faith aesthetic and artistic nature of human ancestors in different parts of the world. Ancient petroglyphs that men has drawn for different purposes, including the accumulation of the oldest and most credible evidence that informs the anthropologists and archaeologists from the evolution of human culture and complex social structures of the past. This type of art shows that people consciously or unconsciously has proved their existence for us. This art is visible in the most parts of the world and it is an integral part of the history of humankind also it has continued generations of human societies and has been effective in human intellectual and artistic communities (Tolstoy, 1977: 55). They can be found in different places such as the walls of the caves and rocky shelters or on rocks located in the free places, and often appear in similar contexts (Bradley *et al*, 1994: 374).

Petrography art exists extensively around the world and in Iran we can found them in many places and areas. Extensive researches have led to the discovery of large complex of rock art, especially petroglyphs in most continents of the world that have been the subject of various articles and books. Each of these large complexes has individual and group designs and shows highest qualifications and symbolic mysteries of human evolution in the different periods.

During the last researches that have been conducted, generally, the rock art divided into four different groups: petroglyph, pictograph, cupules and geoglyph. Carved motifs, cupules and geoglyph were created by carving and engraving; but the pictographs are included drawings that are drawn with different colored materials and various tools such as wood and fingers at appropriate surfaces. Colorful paintings sometimes have been drawn with charcoal and soot on the walls of caves and sometimes by using a variety of mineral pigments such as ochre, hematite, limonite and manganese or other iron-containing minerals that produces red. (Mohammadifar & Azandaryani, 2015: 230).

History of research

North West of Iran (Azerbaijan) has been one of the most favorable geographic locations for housing and livelihood of humans in prehistoric that archaeological evidence verifies this. One of the most important of these findings is rock art that can be seen in the most area, especially in the Meshginshahr (area of Qarasu River). Because rock art is one of the methods to understand the habitat, livelihood, history, culture and beliefs, it is an interesting subject for researchers, and the abundance of rock art in Azerbaijan has led to pay special attention to this area.

In relation to this area, greatest and most important scientific work on the petroglyphs has been conducted by Rafifar which led to the book with title "Arasbaran rock arts"(Rafifar, 2002; 2004; 2005; 2009). He has reviewed completely and comprehensively rock arts of Liqlan of Horand and Qoshadaq of Varzeqan regions. Another Researches in this area that can be mentioned, are Shaharyeri (Meshginshahr) (Horshid, 2004; 2007), Dowzdaghi in Ahar (Kazempur & *et al*, 2011), Zanzan (Noorollahi & Alilu, 2011; Aali, 2014), Mahabad (savujbulaq) (Mohammadi Ghasrian, 2007), ShikhMedi (Kazemi & *et al*, 2016). Recent studies that were in relation to the identification and introduction of petroglyphs in the northwest of Iran have been conducted by Mohammad Kazemi, which in total 12 sites were studied and the results have been provided in the form of a master's thesis (Kazemi, 2014).

The geographical location of Dash area

Rock arts of Dash complex have located between two villages (Chapaqan and Dədə Beyli) in Meshginshahr of Ardebil on geographical location $38^{\circ} 33' 45''$ and $47^{\circ} 51' 07''$, with a height of 1100 meters above sea level in the south of the Qarasu river (Fig 1). Dash in Turkish language means stone and here, it is referred to a mountain with an oval shape with abundant boulders that stretches from the east to west between two villages. The mountain has covered with different sizes of flat boulders that it's smooth and granite surface has been considered by hunters and herdsman in the past and now. This factor in conjunction with human aesthetic sense and creativity has led to creating beautiful works of livelihood, nature and their community's beliefs.

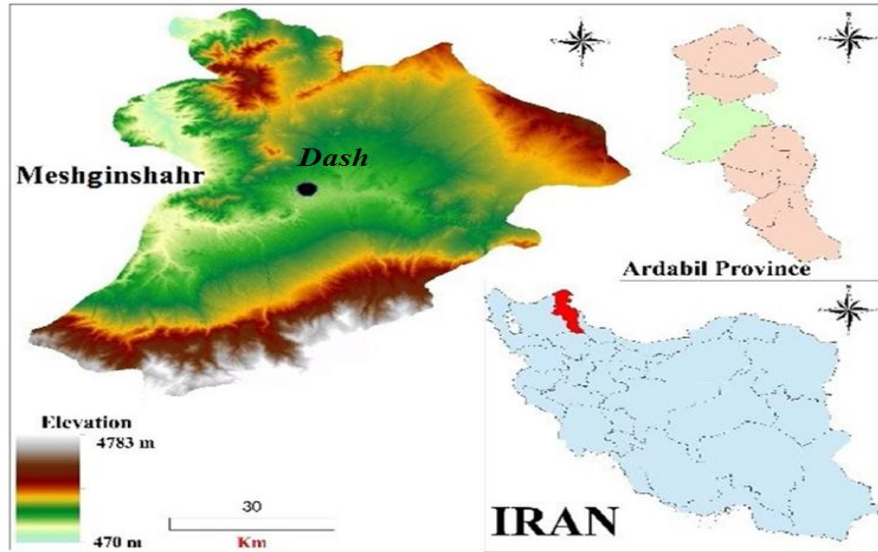


Fig. 1. The geographical location of Dash, Northwest Iran (Kazemi, 2014:149).

Investigation on petroglyph in Dash

Area of Dash has located in the vicinity of different water sources such as seasonal rivers or streams that lead to the Qarasu River and Sabalan Mountain in this area has provided an exceptional opportunity to establish human societies. One reason to this is abundant water resources and a lot of pasture that make an appropriate environment for nomadic herdsman and also, wilderness area that is home to many wild animals such as mountain goat and ram, was perfect place for the hunters. All images in this complex have been created by carving and applying successive strokes or scratches on the stone with a sharp object. Some motifs are performed with same method but in filled form. The size of motifs are different with each other and varies from 3 to 20 cm. Despite the fact that the motifs are on the same scene, their color and depth are different and due to time passing and the influence of natural factors, the erosion makes their depth on the same level with the cliff surface, or others have been converted to the background color of cliffs and aren't easily visible.

The complex includes 23 tablets (slates) (Fig 2) and 77 motifs that are visible on the smooth cliffs in hillside diffusely. In general, motifs include animals, humans, plants and geometric or symbolic signs and symptoms that are classified into three groups: the animal (45 motifs), human (19 motifs) and geometric (13motif) groups (Fig 1).

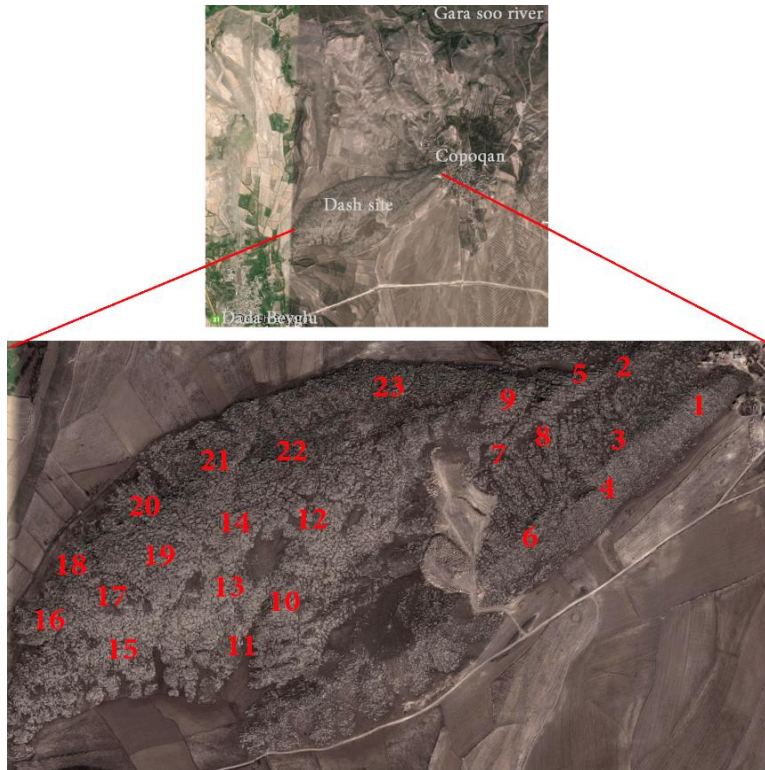
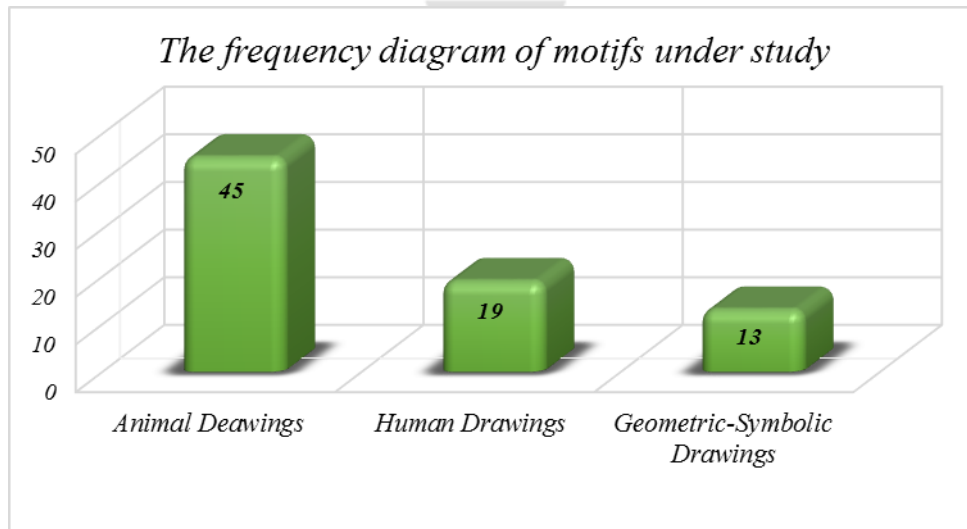


Fig. 2. Location of petroglyphs.



Graph 1. The frequency diagram of drawings under study.

Table 1. The division of Dash petroglyphs.

A study of Dash petroglyphs			
Drawings	Divisions	Number	Total
Animal	Ibex	30	46
	Deer	5	
	Stag	4	
	Wild Animals	3	
	Ram or Cow	2	
	Unknown	2	
Human	Open hands	1	18
	Quadrille	3	
	Individual Dance	2	
	Standing or moving still	2	
Geometry	Disorderly shapes	3	13
	Circles	6	
	Straight lines and curves	4	
Total	77	77	77

Animal motifs

By studying petroglyphs in Dash area, it is cleared that all drawn animals were in relation to topic of livelihoods, hunting and daily life of human. In-Dash complex, animal motifs are in the majority and among them, caprinae have a large number and generally has been shown abstractly. These motifs are divided to six category including: Ibex (30 motifs), 2- Deer (5 motifs), 3- stag (4 motifs), 4- Wild Animals (3 motifs), 5- Ram or cow (2 motifs), 6- Unknown (1 motif). We can see the motifs of animals in general states of poses, stationary, moving, fighting with each other and in the row behind each other. According to archaeological findings, the goat motifs had seen almost in all ancient spots. In fact, in prehistoric times, people have been considered the goat as an embodiment of one of the profitable symbols nature (Bakhturtash,

1977: 9). Between motifs, we can see animals with elegant body and elongated horns that seem to be of deer and elk (Fig 3). The motifs of dog or wolf have drawn in various sizes and different types. This set of animal motifs has apparent similarity with other sets of Azerbaijan's motifs like ShikhMedi (Kazemi *et al*, 2016), Meshginshahr (Kazemi, 2014), Dowzdaghi (Kazempur *et al*, 2011), Arasbaran (Rafifar, 2002; 2004; 2005; 2009) as well as north areas of Aras river in Republic of Azerbaijan such as Gemikaya (İmat *et al*, 2012; Babayev *et al*, 2014) (Fig 4).



Fig. 3. Samples of animal drawings in Dash.



Fig. 4. Animal drawings in Gemikaya of Nakhchivan (İmat *et al*, 2012:216; Babayev *et al*, 2014:12-18).

Human motifs

Human motifs, after animal motifs, designate the highest number between Dash complexes that has engraved in different modes such as: perform ceremonies or dancing (Fig 4), walking or standing and etc. Body shape, particularly the hands and uplift shoulders in group motifs, implies a special ritual. The researchers have considered these motifs as dancing and ritual ceremony just like designs that have been drawn on prehistoric pottery of Iranian plateau (Farhadi, 1998: 49).

In addition to dancing figures, other modes can also be seen. One of the main findings of Dash complex is a colorful painting that has painted in red on the surface of cliffs. According to the used color, probably, this motif has drawn with iron oxide compounds, which has led to

production of red ochre. The main theme of this motif is not clear, but it looks like human. Generally, these motifs show the image of three women in childbirth or in the supine position (Fig 5). Two of these motifs is related to human motif, but the third, barely seen and almost has disappeared. Like this motif –not seen in Qarasu river basin motifs- it can be seen in Gobustan complex in Azerbaijan (Rüstəmov: 1944). On the left side of this person, there is another motif that is walking towards him. Although the state and legs and body of person are quite fit together, but his hands are very long and narrow so that are kept like a prong insides of person. This motif is a rare motif among Qarasu river basin because we can see human motifs with long legs on other sites, but the motif of man with outstretched hand can be seen only in this area.

Another interesting motif, which individually has drawn on tablet number 6, is the motif of an animal like a ram or rabbit. But if we precisely look at it, we can observe 4 men who are participating in a ritual ceremony. If this painting has drawn with awareness and meaning something, we can say that the sketchers were experienced masters of art (Fig 6). Overall, human motifs in this area are comparable with some of them at Gobustan complex, more than any other areas (Fig 7) (Aktaş, 2012: 13; Rüstəmov: 1944).



Fig. 5. Tablet No. 8 of Dash.

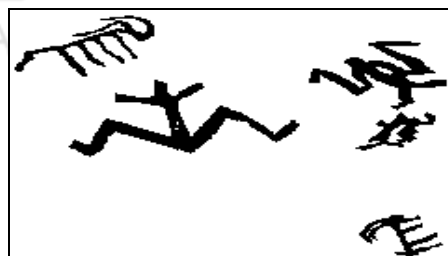


Fig. 5. Tablet No. 7 of Dash.



Fig. 6. Tablet No. 6 of Dash.



Fig. 7. Human drawings of Gobustan (Aktaş, 2012:13), Human drawings of Gobustan (Rüstəmov 1944).

The geometric and symbolic motifs

In general, geometric patterns are visible on 7 tablets that the most interesting motifs of them are in tablets 12, 19, 22 and 23 (Fig 8). Tablet 12 includes 68 small circles created by the pounding, and together have created an oval shape (Fig 9). Motif of tablet 19 is also very similar to the tablet 12. In this motif, 43 circles in different sizes have located together and make elliptical shapes like tablet 12. In the east of this motif a straight, thin line has drawn in the north – south direction and again it is similar to the tablet 12.

The motifs that were noted above as a hollow circular pattern called Cupules that in Dash complex, have created in different sizes and depth of 2 to 20 cm. Researchers have considered them as rain collector, a container for ritual cooking, a place to collect blood of the sacrifices, bowel for dyeing as well as symbols of the constellations (Fərəcova, 2007: 54). According to the depth of the Cupule motifs in Dash complex, we can consider numerical functionality to them.



Fig. 8. Samples of geometric drawings in Dash.

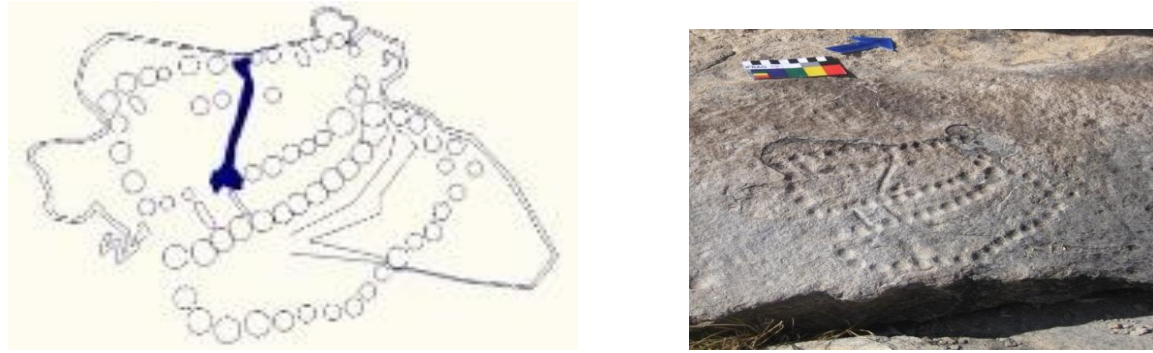


Fig. 9. Tablet No. 12 of Dash.

Chronology

One of the most fundamental problems in the study of rock engravings is chronology and dating that we can solve it by sampling, laboratory and interdisciplinary studies. Unfortunately in Iran due to the lack of accurate laboratories, precise dating cannot be achieved, but by doing comparative studies, relative dating can be achieved (Mohammadifar & Azandaryani, 2014: 249). Habitats and ancient hills in the Qarasu river basin can be the important and decisive factor in explaining the historical and cultural position and timing of their creation. Depth and color difference and erosion of motifs are the factors that can be helpful in determining their creation date and chronology. But the most important method of chronology is laboratory studies. Unfortunately in Iran due to lack of precise laboratory equipment, in this way exact dating cannot be achieved. Another type of dating includes studying of the motifs. The narrative motifs that evoke a specific topic can determine an extended timeframe. For example, a man riding a horse is related to time after the domestication of the horse. This is true for any war equipment in the scenes (Ibid: 248). The chronology comparative method is also important. By comparing the patterns of rock arts in south of the Aras River with motifs of northwest of Iran we can see a lot of similarities especially in ShikhMedi (Kazemi *et al*, 2016), Süngün (Qara Dagħ) (Rafifar, 2002), Lyqlan (Rafifar, 2009) and Shahr yeri (Horshid, 2004; 2007) and north Aras, such as Gaghamay (Martirossian, 1981) and Gemikaya (İmat *et al*, 2012; Babayev *et al*, 2014; Baxşəliyev, 2006) and Gobustan (Rüstəmov: 1944; Aktaş, 2012; Farajova, 2011).

CONCLUSIONS

Cultural and archaeological artefacts of Azerbaijan are so rich and virgin that will allow researchers to study in the most historical context and gain valuable results in human history. In the meantime, to Qarasu river basin with specific conditions and strategic areas to live in primitive societies should be given a special state. In addition to the ancient hills that have been identified in the area of the Qarasu river basin, other areas such as complex of petroglyphs on the surfaces of rocky or large boulders that have been created, are particularly important from the cultural - artistic perspective of archaeology and as well as the numerous animal motifs in the study area indicate environmental conditions.

Motifs of Dash complex have images of people, animals, symbolic and geometric drawings and dance scenes, which probably have ritual aspects. Each motif has special drawings which implies a particular meaning. Ritual dance scenes are used in many world's rock arts which reflects the fact that humankind has common thoughts and influence each other throughout history.

It can be said that rock arts of northwest of Iran have a lot of similarities with motifs of south and north of the Aras River. According to the findings, petroglyphs of Qarasu have a rich background and related to the communities and nations that have experienced progressive stages of life, from nomad and herds to hunting. Hence, according to the evidence and comparisons, it can be concluded that rock arts of Qarasu river basin like motifs of Shahr yeri and Shikh Medi are survived from pre-history that continued to this day with special characteristics. In Qarasu river basin all categories are in tribal areas or adjacent to it, and villages near them have created recently and interesting that this people still tend to migrate in small intervals. So we can conclude that creators of these motifs have been nomadic herders and these motifs can be a reflection of their livelihood.

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