



KEYWORDS: *Interpretation – Shamanism – Writing memento – Hunting – Iran*

## WRITING MEMENTO OR SHAMANISM? TWO DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS OF IRAN'S ROCK ART

Sirvan Mohammadi Ghasrian

**Abstract.** Apparent similarities between hunting scenes of antelopes on tombstones belonging to the late Islamic period in vast western areas of Iran, especially in Kermanshah, Luristan and Ilam provinces, and those which are observed on scattered rock art sites in different regions of Iran have led to the assumption that skilful hunters who valued their hunting skills during their lives depicted these scenes to record memories. An interview with one of the few surviving hunters from the Bisotun area in Kermanshah, who before his death depicted an ibex hunting scene on his own tombstone commemorating his interest and hunting skills, provides support to this assumption. Obviously, this interpretation is completely different from the shamanism interpretation proposed about hunting scenes in rock art of Arasbaran in northwest of Iran.

### Introduction

Until recently, if a researcher wanted to study Iranian rock art, s/he would be able to obtain information only about some important sites such as Kouh Dasht area rock paintings in Luristan or Timreh in the centre of Iran, and there was scant information about other regions of the country. However, over the past decades, due to the efforts of the recent generation of researchers, much more information is available across the country, resulting in several theses and many published papers, both internally and in foreign journals (Ghasimi and Mohammadi Ghasrian 2012).

Generally it would be obvious from these publications that scholars have focused more on exploring, identifying and introducing the sites, while scant

attention has been paid to key issues such as dating or interpreting them. Among a few researchers who focused on the meaning of rock art, Rafifar (2007) has comprehensively investigated the meaning and interpretation of Arasbaran petroglyphs in northwest Iran. Comparing some Arasbaran anthropomorphs with those found in several rock art sites in northern neighbouring countries of Iran, like Armenia and Azerbaijan, he concluded that Arasbaran petroglyphs are connected to these and believed that they have been created by shamans, linking Arasbaran rock art to shamanism (ibid). But in our view the 'scenes' depicted in Arasbaran rock art are very similar to what is found in other sites within Iran (Fig. 1). The main features of Arasbaran rock art are the 'herds' of



*Figure 1. A group of motifs in Arasbaran rock art showing anthropomorphs and quadrupeds with the very same characteristics as figures in other Iranian rock art sites (after Rafifar 2007).*





**Figure 2.** Saravan petroglyphs in south-eastern Iran: anthropomorphs seemingly engaged in hunting, resembling Arasbaran rock art (after Sarhadi 2013).

quadrupeds and anthropomorphous figures beside them, resembling hunting scenes. Such groups are the most common in Iranian rock art and can be seen in more than 80% of sites. Rafifar mentions nothing about this and also ignored to mention the apparent similarities between Arasbaran 'hunting scenes' and other Iranian rock art, especially anthropomorphous Arasbaran rock art (Fig. 1), which is depicted exactly with the same technique as in other Iranian rock art sites, like Saravan (Heydari 2004; Sarhadi 2013) (Fig.



**Figure 3.** Purported hunting scene among Sang-e Mehrdad rock paintings, Kouh-Dasht area (photograph by L. Remacle).

2), central regions (Farhadi 1998), (Naserifard 2007; Mohammadi Ghasrian 2007), Khera Hanjran (Mohammadi Ghasrian and Naderi 2007), Luristan (Remacle et al. 2007) (Fig. 3), Kurdistan (Lahafian 2010, 2013) (Fig. 4), north of Khorasan (Vahdati 2011) and Hamedan (Beik Mohammadi et al. 2012). So if we accept the shamanistic interpretation of Arasbaran petroglyphs and Rafifar's belief that these motifs were engraved with ritual intentions, such assumption would need to be extended to other rock art sites in different parts of Iran. We are not in agreement with Rafifar that Arasbaran rock art is not connected with other rock art sites in Iran, but strongly believe that Arasbaran petroglyphs are linked with other sites inside Iran and, as Vahdati (2011) believes, Arasbaran petroglyphs do not reflect shamanistic intentions.

Observing hunting scenes of antelope herds on tombstones of the late Islamic period cemeteries in vast areas of Kermanshah, Ilam and Luristan provinces and their apparent similarities with probable hunting scenes of antelope herds depicted in rock art sites throughout the country led us to perceive the meaning and interpretation of the rock art differently. This perception was created when an interview was conducted with one of last remaining hunters in Bisotun, the late Aziz Morad.

#### Writing memento or shamanism?

Aziz Morad, known as *Mir-Shekar*, was one of the survived hunters of Bisotun area in Kermanshah,



**Figure 4.** Qorwa petroglyphs, Kurdistan. Quadrupeds and anthropomorphs are very similar to those at Arasbaran (after Lahafin 2010).





**Figure 5.** Interview with the late Aziz Morad describing the scene depicted on his rock tombstone. On it one can see Aziz Morad while hunting and these words on the bottom of the scene: 'The memory of Aziz Morad, Mir-Shekar'.



**Figure 8.** Hunting scene on a recent Islamic period tombstone in Luristan area (photograph by L. Remacle).

who had before his death engraved on his own tombstone a scene depicting him hunting (Fig. 5) and had requested his relatives to lay it on his grave. Fortunately, before he died we could meet him and conduct an interview. Reliefs and scripts on the tombstone grabbed our attention, which included his hunting scene followed by: 'The memory of Aziz Morad, Mir-Shekar'. Aziz Morad had been interested in hunting from his youth and due to his

exceptional ability in hunting, people knew him as a *Mir-shekar* (a title given to exceptional hunters). When



**Figure 6.** Two sides of a rock tombstone presenting hunting scenes of the recent Islamic period, Bisotun area.



**Figure 7.** Hunting scenes of the recent Islamic period on tombstones in Bavolin village, Harsin area.

he was asked why he had chosen the hunting scene to carve on his tombstone, the answer was only one word: '*Yadegari* (writing memento). I am honoured by my ability in hunting throughout my life', he said.

After our examination of other tombstones of Bisotun and other regions of Kermanshah as well as neighbouring provinces, including Luristan (Figs 6–8) and Ilam, we found out that the tradition of engraving hunting scenes on tombstones is not just limited to Bisotun; but is also common in the western provinces during the late Islamic period. Questioning local residents showed that they were still interested in





**Figure 9.** Someone created a quadruped image in the memory of Sheikh Mohammad 266 years ago; Timreh area (after Farhadi 1998).

hunting and cared about it. Yet, if a hunter was asked about shamanistic rituals, like the process of electing a shaman, his way of dressing, falling into trance or an altered state of consciousness and way of communicating with other worlds, he had no idea. Therefore we assume that the main reason behind apparent hunting scenes of antelope herds observed in the rock art sites across the country seems to be only the intention of the hunter to

record his interest in hunting on a rock as a memory. At the one hand in many ancient and recent petroglyphs, like in Timreh rock art (Fig. 9), northern Khorasan or Hamedan (Fig. 10), the intention of writing memento seems clearly evident. Shamanic interpretation about a large number of rock art sites in areas like central Asia (Francfort 1998; Devlet 2000, 2001; Rozwadowski 2004), South Africa (Lewis-Williams 2001) or North America (Whitley 1998) is apparently supported by ethnographic studies in those areas where shamanic costumes still exist among tribes. A person who obtained the position of a shaman had an ability to communicate between a three-tiered structure of a worldwide shamanic cosmos (Devlet and Devlet 2002). His way of dressing is different from other people in the tribes. Also, special features like x-ray style, solar-headed figures and the mentioned tiered structure of the cosmos (Devlet and Devlet 2002; Rozwadowski 2004; Kosko 2002) may be observed in the rock art. In some regions, especially in central Asia, the locations of creating rock art had been ritually important for inhabitants (ibid). None of the mentioned issues have been identified about Iranian rock art so far. Also, Islamic and historical literature shows no signs of shamanism among Iranian religions during Islamic and Historic periods. The same



**Figure 10.** Possible hunting scene in Hamedan area rock art, similar to Arasbaran. Beside the rock art is the name of its creator and the date it was made (1978), shown by arrows (after Beik Mohammadi et al. 2012).



situation can be assumed for pre-Historic times, as archaeological evidence up to now is not suggestive of rituals related to shamanism in Iran.

### Conclusion

Iranians have always been interested in hunting. An evident example of such an interest, even among royal families in the Sasanian period, is seen in Taq-e Bostan bas-relief in Kermanshah. The scene illustrates the king while hunting with his retinue (Fig. 11). Until the last couple of decades, in many villages the tradition of hunting by the villagers through making noise to drive the prey was common. Today, many regions in Iran, especially central areas like Timreh (Farhadi 1998), in which rock art exists, are territories of wild animals that have been declared as wildlife reserves. Here, the remains of cairns incorporating skulls of game animals are still observed (Fig. 12) (ibid.). On the other hand, a large number of rock art sites have been found in caves and rockshelters or similar locations that are not easily accessible. Most rock art in Iran is geometric and so small that it can only be observed from a short distance. In most cases, the technique of making motifs is very simple and schematic, not artistically comparable to the Taq-e Bostan. Based on the above mentioned, we assume that the people who are interested in hunting, were skilled hunters and valued it among their societies tried to record it on the rock. So our general interpretation of anthropomorphous images engraved besides zoomorphic motifs, not only in Arasbaran rock art but also in other rock art sites in Iran, is of hunters narrating their preoccupation with hunting – not about shamans participating in hunting as assumed for Arasbaran petroglyphs. Our view differs greatly from Rafifar's but has some similarities with Farhadi's view about Timreh area rock art (Farhadi 1998). Remember again that Rafifar has only investigated the similarities between a few human motifs of Arasbaran rock art with a few human motifs from several sites in Armenia and Azerbaijan, while completely neglecting clear similarities between the former and other rock art sites throughout Iran. Finally, it should be noted that rock art in Iran not only consists of apparent animal motifs and hunting scenes, but also includes geometric motifs, which are not relevant in this framework. Also, our proposal is only based on comparing tombstone motifs of certain regions of the country and reviews just a particular historical period. However, we are not sure



**Figure 11.** Hunting scene on the Taq-e Bostan bas-relief, Sasanian period (photo: Kermanshah I.C.H.O.).



**Figure 12.** The remains of a masonry structure built recently by hunters for hunting, Timreh area (after Farhadi 1998).

to what extent this assumption can stand against future comprehensive and purposeful studies across Iran.

#### Acknowledgment

I am really grateful to Dr Fereidoun Biglari for interesting me in studying Iranian rock art. I also would like to thank Dr Sajjad Alibaigi, Dr M. Khanmordi and K. Beik Mohammadi for their help and useful advice during writing of the paper, and the RAR referees for their help.

Dr Sirvan Mohammadi Ghasrian  
Department of Archaeology  
University of Tehran  
Enghelab Square  
Tehran  
Iran  
mohammadi.sirvan@gmail.com

#### REFERENCES

- BEIK MOHAMMADI, K., M. JAN JAN and N. BEIK MOHAMMADI 2012. Introduction and analysis of new found petrography motif of B set of Sofla Arges (Malayer-Hamedan). *Name-ye Bastanshenasi* 2(2): 121-140 (in Persian).
- DEVLET, E. 2000. X-Ray style anthropomorphic rock art images and mythological subject of obtaining the gift of Shamanising. *Archaeology. Ethnography and Anthropology of Eurasia* 2(2): 88-95.
- DEVLET, E. 2001. Rock art and the material culture of Siberian and central Asian shamanism. In N.S. Pierce (ed), *The archaeology of shamanism*, pp. 43-54. Routledge, London and New York.
- DEVLET, E. and M. DEVLET 2002. Siberian shamanistic rock art. In A. Rozwadowski and M. Kosko (ed.), *Spirits and stones, shamanism and rock art in central Asia and Siberia*, pp. 120-137. Eastern Studies Institute, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan.
- FARZIN, A. 2005. *Lursitan tombstones motifs, a research on motif and theme of Luristan tombstones*. ICHO, Tehran (in Persian).
- FARHADI, M. 1998. *Museum in the wind, report of new finding from Taimreh region*. Allameh Taba Tabaei University Press, Tehran (in Persian).
- FRANKFORT, H. P. 1998. Central Asian petroglyphs: between Indo-Iranian and shamanistic interpretation. In C. Chippendale and P. S. C. Taçon (eds), *The archaeology of rock art*, pp. 302-313. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- GHASIMI, T. and S. MOHAMMADI GHASRIAN 2012. The history of rock research in Iran. In Y. Hassanzade and S. Miri (eds), *Eight years of archaeology in Iran*, Vol. 1, pp. 377-405. Pazineh Publication, National Museum of Iran, Tehran (in Persian).
- HEYDARI, M. 2004. *Saravan rock art. Avay-e Bastan, special issue of Baluchestan petroglyphs*. Sistan and Baluchestan University, Zahedan, Iran (in Persian).
- KOSKO, M. 2002. Shamanism: an essential component of the Kazakh worldview. In A. Rozwadowski and M. Kosko (ed.), *Spirits and stones, shamanism and rock art in central Asia and Siberia*, pp.13-27. Eastern Studies Institute, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan.
- LAHAFIAN, J. 2010. Cupules in Kurdistan rock art. *Rock Art Research* 27(2): 177-183.
- LAHAFIAN, J. 2013. Rock art in in Kurdistan Iran. *Arts* 2: 328-349.
- LEWIS-WILLIAMS, J. D. 2001. Southern African shamanistic rock art in its social and cognitive contexts. In N. S. Pierce (ed.), *The archeology of shamanism*, pp. 17-39. Routledge, London and New York.
- MOHAMMADI GHASRIAN, S. 2007. Sangetoon, a new rock art site in central Iran. *Rock Art Research* 24(1): 59-64.
- MOHAMMADI GHASRIAN, S. and R. NADERI 2007. Khera Hanjiran petroglyphs, Iran. *Bastanpazhuhi, Persian Journal of Iranian Studies (Archaeology)* (special issue on rock art studies) 2(3): 62-64 (in Persian).
- NASERIFARD, M. 2007. *Rock museums-rock arts (Iran petroglyphs)*. Navay-e Danesh Press, Arak, Iran (in Persian).
- RAFIFAR, J. 2007. Some indications of shamanism in Arasbaran rock carvings. *Documenta Praehistorica* 34: 203-213.
- ROZWADOWSKI, A. 2004. *Symbols through the time: interpreting the rock art of central Asia*. Institute of Eastern Studies, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan.
- REMACLE, L., M. LEJUNE, J. ADELI, S. MOHAMMADI GHASRIAN and M. OTTE, 2007. New field research on Houmain rock art, Luristan Province, Iran. *Bastanpazhuhi, Persian Journal of Iranian Studies (Archaeology)*( special issue on rock art studies) 2(3): 9-15.
- SARHADI, F., 2013. Pictograph and petroglyphs of Saravan (Sistan, Baluchistan, Iran). *Ancient Asia* 4(3): 1-8.
- VAHDATI, A. A. 2011. *Stone canvases: a preliminary report on the study of two rock art complexes in north Khorasan Province, northeastern Iran*. ICHHTO, Tehran.
- WHITLEY, D. S. 1998. Finding rain in the desert: landscape, gender and far western North American rock art. In C. Chippendale and P. S. C. Taçon (eds), *The archaeology of rock art*, pp. 11-25. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- ZENIVAND, M. and R. TAJBAKSH 2011. Introduce, survey and study of petroglyphs of Tang\_E Bahram Chubin, township of Dare\_shahr, Ilam. *Kand o Kav* 4(3): 40-55.