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## THE PICTOGRAMS OF AGH DASH, ZANJAN, NORTH-WESTERN IRAN

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**Abstract.** The western part of the Zanjan province in the north-west of Iran is a mountainous region. The wall surfaces of rockshelters in a limestone outcrop called Agh Dash bear painted designs. The Agh Dash pictograms are the only identified rock paintings in the north-west of Iran, and from the view point of variety of subject matter are somewhat different from other rock paintings of Iran. Most designs are geometric motifs which are painted in a variety of shapes. Presumed human, animal and botanical designs are also found in the Agh Dash complex. Because of the similarity between geometric paintings of Agh Dash and geometric patterns of the Chalcolithic period potteries in central, western and northern Iran it is likely that the paintings of Agh Dash also date back to Chalcolithic times.

### Introduction

For years it was thought that rock paintings in Iran are limited to Doshe and Mirmelas Caves in the western part of the country (Izadpanah 1969; Goff 1970), but archaeological investigations in the last decade led to the identification of new pictogram sites in other parts of the country. Some of the notable sites are Houmian (Adeli et al. 2001; Otte et al. 2003; Remacle et al. 2006) and Cheshmeh Sohrab Caves (Biglari et al. 2007) in western Iran, three rock art complexes in the north-east (Vahdati 2010), Eshkaft Ahou Rockshelter (Sadeghi 2002; Asadi 2007) and Fars area paintings in the south of Iran (Fazel and Alibaigi 2012; Ghasimi et al. 2010). Zanjan province in the north-west of Iran has, from the point of view of rock arts and in comparison with neighbouring areas, remained unknown. Except for one petroglyph site near Zanjan (Norollahi and Alilou 2011), almost no other site has been recorded from in this region. The Agh Dash pictogram site in the west of Zanjan province is one of the few major rock art corpora that are different from other known pictograms in Iran.

### The Agh Dash rockshelters

The rockshelters known as Agh Dash are located 75 km south-west of Zanjan, the main city of Zanjan province, in the vicinity of the village of Moghanlou (Fig. 1). The village is situated in mountainous terrain some 1200 m to the east of Agh Dash. The village and rockshelters are located in a valley that is restricted by mountains on the north and south sides. The rockshelter is on the southern slope of the valley with its seasonal river, at an elevation of 1439 m a.s.l. The rockshelters

occur in an outcrop of limestone, of 140 m length and an average width of 15 m, extending from east to west (Fig. 2).

Because of its bright colour, this rock is known among the local people as Agh Dash, which means 'white stone'. Different parts of the rock outcrop have small and large holes and grottos. Except for a few relatively deep and large caves, in the central and western part of the rock, which are suitable for sheltering, most of the caves and holes are too small



**Figure 1.** Map of Iran, the position of Zanjan in north-western Iran and approximate position of Agh Dash site.



Figure 2. View of Moghanlou valley and Agh Dash outcrop located on the southern slope of the valley.



Figure 3. View of the western rockshelters.

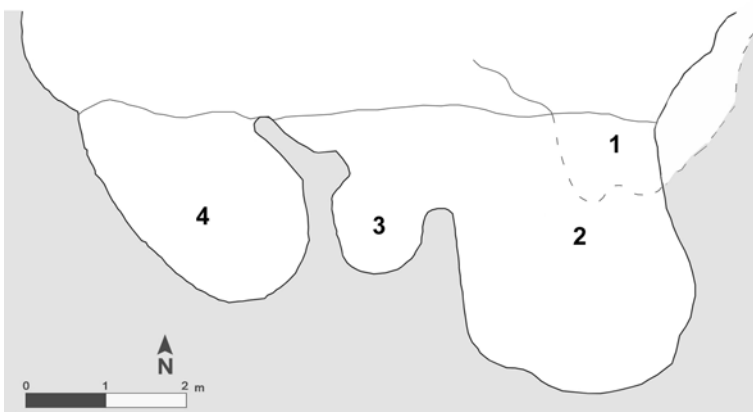


Figure 4. Plan of the western rockshelters.

and unusable for human habitation (Fig. 3). Some parts of the wall surfaces in the shelters are covered with paintings that indicate pre-Historic human presence in them. Also, some paintings have been covered by a layer of soot that was produced by fires inside the shelters. Nowadays, villagers are unaware of the pictograms in

Agh Dash and most of the damage caused by human presence in the past was unintentional. A few pottery pieces are distributed at the front area of the western rock shelters, dating back to the Chalcolithic era and the middle Islamic periods.

### Description

At the western end of Agh Dash rock there are four shelters alongside each other, with different shapes and sizes. They all face north and overlook the valley and the seasonal river (Figs 3 and 4). One of the shelters is level with the surrounding terrain while the other three are slightly higher. None of the shelters are very deep and because of the floor slope they are not suitable for permanent habitation. On the walls of all four shelters occur paintings, despite the uneven surface of the rocks. Most designs are in red and reddish-brown, probably of mineral pigments, some paintings are in light-red or reddish-orange. Since the designs are located in different parts and levels of the complex, we labelled the shelters located on the western end of the Agh Dash numbers 1 to 4 to describe their characteristics. Generally, the paintings in the western shelters can be classified into geometric designs, zoomorphs, anthropomorphs, plant-like designs and unclear designs.

*Shelter number 1:* this shelter has a width of 2.40 m and a depth of 2.60 m. As the shelter bedrock is level with its surrounding area and it was easily accessible to people, it has probably been used as a temporary shelter during some periods. Due to fires lit inside the shelter, a layer of grey soot has covered the walls and ceiling and most of the paintings have disappeared under this layer. However, remains of unclear red paintings are still visible. Their number and subject matter are not exactly clear, but it seems that some of them are geometric.

*Shelter number 2:* its dimensions are approximately  $2.95 \times 3.05$  m. Similar to shelter number 1, parts of the walls are covered with a layer of soot. On the uneven surfaces of the rock, red-coloured paintings can be seen. There are eight recognisable motifs, which include geometric shapes and unclear motifs. A circle with radial lines, combinations of oval and rectangle (Fig. 5), and designs of curved lines are

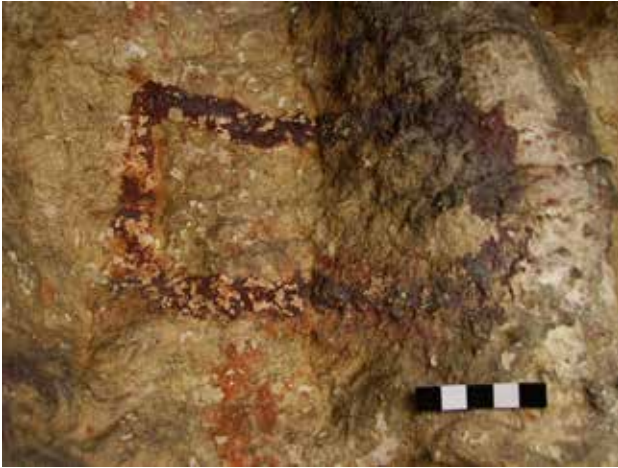


Figure 5. Combinations of oval and rectangle painted in shelter No. 2.



Figure 6. Diamonds and interlocking curved lines painted in shelter No. 3.

the most distinctive of all.

*Shelter number 3:* this shelter consists of two relatively shallow adjacent indentations. Unlike other shelters, this one does not have much depth. In fact, it is no more than a concave recess in the rock which was used as a place to paint. The width of the painted area is about 120 cm. The paintings are designed in two sections. The eastern part has a dense and complex geometric

and somewhat uncertain design. Paintings consist of interlocking curved lines. The western paintings consist of a collection of contiguous diamonds, all of which include a circle or smaller diamond in the middle (Fig. 6).

*Shelter number 4:* this is located at a higher level than the other western shelters. The main part of the shelter is 2.50 m wide and 2.70 m deep. The bedrock

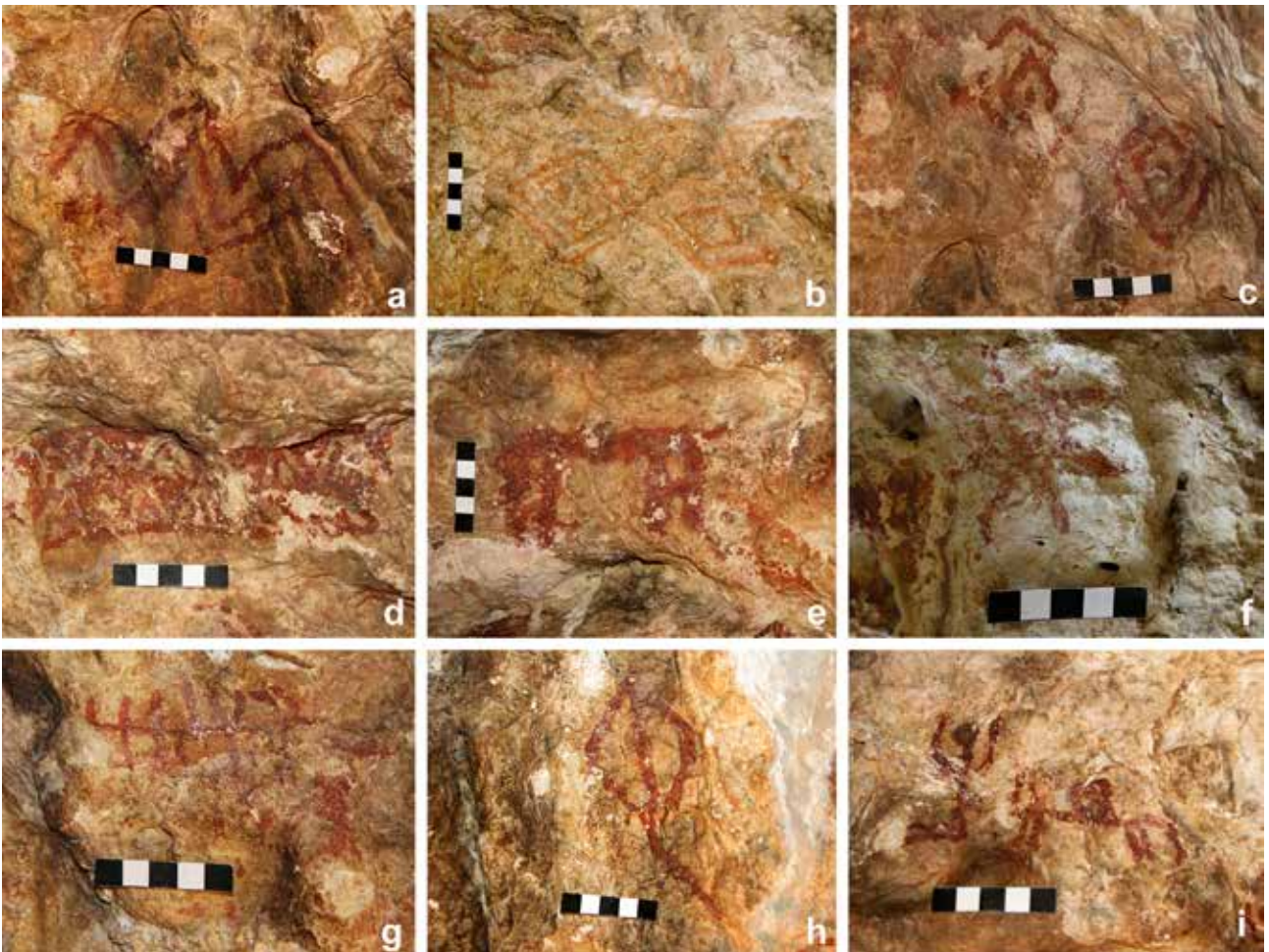


Figure 7. Pictures of various figures painted in shelter No. 4.



Figure 8. Entrance view of central shelter.



Figure 9. Anthropomorphic figure painted in central shelter.

is steep and the shelter height relatively low. The designs executed on the uneven rock walls are diverse and greater in number than in other shelters. Since the shelter floor is about 2 m higher than ground level and less accessible, and surrounding walls protect the shelter from sunlight and rainfall, the paintings of

the shelter are in better condition than others. The motifs are painted in light and dark red and include pictures of 'human', 'animal' and geometric patterns. In total 37 distinguishable motifs have been recorded in this shelter. The designs consist of diamonds (nested diamonds), contiguous diamonds, diamonds with a dot in the middle, zigzags, concentric circles, 'ibexes' with long horns, unknown quadrupeds, anthropomorphic figures, combination of zigzag and triangle; also octamerous star, a design similar to a water drop or flame, a design similar to a tree branch, a diamond-shaped design with a small line at the end and the middle of it like a kite, and an anthropomorph apparently kneeling and lifting his hands up. The latter is confronted by a quadruped whose head is drawn as two vertical lines and an object can be seen on the back of the 'animal' (Fig. 7).

*Central shelter:* this shelter is located almost in the middle of the Agh Dash rock outcrop, about 70 m from the western shelters (Fig. 8). The dimensions of this shelter are approximately 4.15 × 4.15 m. It is at a higher level than its surrounding ground. Due to sufficient space, this place could be used as a small residence. On parts of its walls, remains of painted designs are visible. Their number and diversity are less than in the western shelters. The main designs are nested diamonds, contiguous diamonds, anthropomorphic figures (Fig. 9) and unclear geometric designs.

### Conclusions

Agh Dash is one of the few outcrop rocks in this mountainous area that has many large and small caves and rockshelters. As mentioned, the Agh Dash rockshelters, especially in the western part, are relatively small in size, and because of the sloping floor and low height are not suitable for permanent human habitation. Sooty walls and the few pieces of pottery shards in front of the western shelters imply that some parts of Agh Dash were used as temporary shelter.

Some fifty designs are painted inside the western and central shelters of Agh Dash.

Regarding their subject matters, most of the images are unique in comparison to other Iranian rock art. Unlike most known pictograms and petroglyphs of Iran, which have subject matters that have been subjectively described as hunting scenes, animals, dance or religious scenes, the themes used in most paintings in



Figure 10. Parts of shelter No. 4 wall and pictures of various figures.

Agh Dash are quite distinctive. Except for some anthropomorphous pictures such as a figure in 'kneeling position' and several zoomorphic paintings, other presumed recognisable patterns are mostly 'geometric'. Regarding their subject matters, each design has its own subject and is not associated with other designs (Figs 10 and 11).

The lack of available laboratory methods for dating ancient rock paintings, applicable throughout Iran, also applies to Agh Dash. Although nowadays there are some methods for dating of rock paintings, rock art chronology in Iran is based on iconography, stylistic and comparative studies (Mohammadi Ghasrian 2007: 15). Scientific methods of dating rock art have not been used in Iran so far (Karimi 2007: 32). Although there are no distinct similarities between Agh Dash's paintings and other pictograms of Iran, a few of the pictures, such as 'ibexes' and anthropomorphous paintings (Fig. 11), are comparable to some known petroglyphs which some attribute to the pre-Historic period (Farhadi 1998: 271).

Although the majority of the paintings are geometric motifs and they are not like other Iranian pictograms, we can compare them with painted

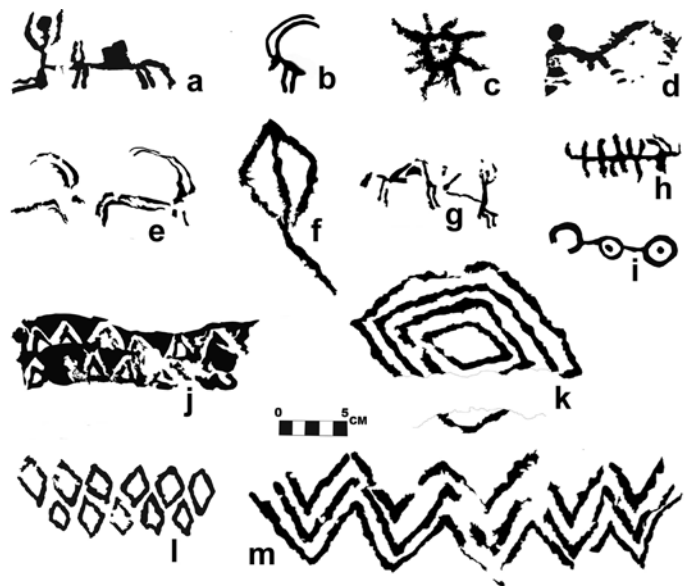


Figure 11. Drawings of anthropomorphous, zoomorphic and geometric paintings found in Agh Dash.

pottery. Agh Dash's geometric designs consist of diamonds (single or multiple, contiguous or apart, nested diamond or centre-dotted diamond), triangle (in combination with zigzag), zigzag, circle (concentric circles or dots surrounded by circles), straight or curved lines (Figs 7 and 11). Geometric designs on pre-Historic pottery in Iran are very common

from the Neolithic period up to Historical times. Undoubtedly, the largest and most diverse geometric designs have been used on pottery of the Chalcolithic period. Therefore, because of the widespread use of such motifs in Chalcolithic period pottery in central, western and northern Iran, and the resemblance of some Agh Dash geometric motifs to the patterns of this period, it is possible that the paintings of Agh Dash date back to Chalcolithic times.

Furthermore, some of the pottery pieces in front of the western shelters belong to the Chalcolithic period and are comparable with pottery from the nearest pre-Historic settlements to Agh Dash. A Chalcolithic occupation site is located near the village Moghanlou, approximately 1200 m from the Agh Dash. However, similarity of some geometric designs of Agh Dash with recent Iranian nomadic rug motifs is also undeniable. Patterns such as nested diamonds, contiguous diamonds, small diamond or a dot inside of bigger diamond and zigzag are very popular motifs in Iranian nomadic rugs (Tanavoli 2004; Hull et al and Barnard 1996; Yavari 2010). Perhaps such motifs, which have been incorporated in carpets and rugs of the Islamic periods, derive from pre-Historic geometric motifs.

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