

# The petroglyphs of Dowzdaghi, Northwestern Iran

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**ABSTRACT** – *This paper deals with recording and interpreting a complex of petroglyphs at Dowzdaghi in the northern part of Iranian Azerbaijan in Northwestern Iran. The assemblage can be divided into four sub-assemblages; the designs and images depicted on the surfaces of isolated boulders usually constitute a panel and sometimes individual motifs and inscriptions. The investigations have revealed more than 400 carved and scratched drawings on rock boulders on Mt. Dowzdaghi. The main themes include anthropomorphic figures, animals (ibex, with long elaborated curved horn, deer, dog, horse, bull, ram, fox, snake, alligator, and hedgehog), hunting scenes, Arabic and Persian inscriptions, and symbolic designs.*

**IZVLEČEK** – *V članku se ukvarjamo z dokumentiranjem in interpretiranjem kompleksa petroglifov na lokaciji Dowzdaghi v severnem delu iranskega Azerbajdžana v severozahodnem Iranu. Skupek lahko razdelimo v štiri podskupine; vzorci in podobe, ki so upodobljeni na površini posameznih skal, običajno predstavljajo plošče, včasih pa posamezne motive in napise. Pri preiskavah smo ugotovili več kot 400 izrezljanih in izpraskanih risb na kamnitih skalah na gori Dowzdaghi. Glavne teme upodobitev so antropomorfne figure, živali (kozorog z dolgim, dobro izdelanim ukrivljenim rogom, jelen, pes, konj, bik, oven, lisica, kača, aligator in jež), lovski prizori, arabski in perzijski napisi ter simbolične upodobitve.*

**KEY WORDS** – *Mt. Dowzdaghi; Azerbaijan; Iran; rock carving*

## Introduction

Rock art involves marking the land by people who do more than wander around a politically neutral, open landscape (David, Lourandos 1998). Carved rock art has been found in at least three quarters of the rocky regions of the world. They can be found in a variety of places, such as on the walls of caves, rock shelters, or on block stones at open-air sites, but it often appears in similar contexts (Bradley et al. 1994). Traditionally, those images which are depicted in association and constitute a group are called 'panels', and individual markings and images labeled as motifs. Because this rock art is no longer a part of living culture, we have no first-hand information about either the tools or the methods employed to produce these rock engravings; as it is possible, however, to cut identical markings by striking the rock surface with a sharp-edged hard stone, it appears

likely that those who made ancient rock markings used similar tools. In archaeological terminology, 'rock art' is used to refer to any man-made markings on natural stone. In the general, rock art falls into two major categories, petroglyphs and pictographs. In Iran, petroglyphs are more widespread than pictographs, which are preserved chiefly in dry regions, inside caves, and under overhanging cliffs. Several assemblages of these petroglyphs from all over Iran have recently been published in a special volume of the journal *Bastanpazhuhi* (2007) which is dedicated to rock art studies in Iran (Vahdati 2010: 10). The history of rock art studies in Iran dates back thirty-seven years, to when some pictograms were re-discovered by Izadpanah at the Dushe and Mir Mallas rock shelters in the Kuh Dasht region (western Iran) (Izadpanah 1969). In spring 2011, the ar-

chaeologists studying the Zarkhane site (a prehistoric site near to rock carvings), before starting excavations, made a random survey of the region that led to the discovery of this complex. The discovery of the Dowzdaghi rock carvings in the Qaredagh Mountains formed part of a campaign spanning the last decade to identify the distribution patterns of rock art in the region and show the great potential of northwestern Iran for further research (*Rafifar 2002; 2004; 2007; Horshid 2004*). In terms of the number of carved surfaces, Dowzdaghi is one of the largest petroglyphic complexes in the northwest of the Iranian plateau.

### Site location

The complex of Dowzdaghi (Mountain of Pigs) is located 120km east of Ahar in Eastern Azerbaijan province, in the vicinity of the village of Dashbolagh garros, which can be considered the nearest residential center to the Dowzdaghi rock art (Fig. 1). The complex of rock carvings, known locally as 'Yazli Dareh' is located N 38° 39' 59", E 47° 27' 25" and 1400m amsl., around Mt. Dowzdaghi in the Qaredagh range. The assemblage of Dowzdaghi rock carvings is a huge and precious volume of rock art in this region; it is a scatter of blocks of stone of various sizes, including various dimensions from 2x3cm to 60x70cm. This complex is dispersed over an area over 2km long and 2km wide, and can be divided into four sub-assemblages, designated with the numbers 1 to 4. All four assemblages are situated around Mt. Dowzdaghi (Fig. 2).

### Petroglyphs of Dowzdaghi

The complex contains over four hundred carvings, which can be divided into five groups: the groups include anthropomorphic figures, animals, hunting scenes, Arabic and Persian inscriptions, and symbolic designs (Figs. 3-7).

*Anthropomorphic figures:* the first group comprises a few human images. The main feature of this group is the conventional gesture in such drawings of humans raising one of their hands.

*Animals:* the second group of petroglyphs in our study includes many carvings of animals, the great majority of which can be identified as ibex. The ibex are depicted with long elaborately curved horns, longer than we would expect to encounter in a closed environment. Among the animal imagery, apart from ibex, animals such as deer and ram predomi-

nate. The other animals are horses, bulls, dogs, Bactrian camels, foxes, snakes, alligators, and in one case, a hedgehog swallowing a snake. It is noticeable, although horses occur, that they are shown without riders or other human figures. Animals are often accompanied by abstract designs and invariably drawn in profile; in some cases they seem to be in motion.

*Hunting scenes:* these drawings are widely distributed and can be recognised in many rock art sites throughout the Iranian Plateau. Hunting scenes usually feature mounted hunters; in this complex, the scenes depict hunting on foot and with hounds in several cases. In some panels, the hunters are carrying weapons resembling bows.

*Arabic and Persian inscriptions:* there are some Arabic and Persian inscriptions in this complex, whose dating must not be prior to the Late Islamic era.

*Symbolic designs:* some conventional drawings can be seen that certainly and meaningfully symbolise something. Some of these drawings are in the form of crosses. These symbolic designs have been employed to complete the concepts of different scenes and to convey the ideas more precisely (*Rafifar 2007*).

### Chronology

Chronologically, the lack of absolute dating techniques for such finds meant that we had to rely on the main criteria of relative dating, including an iconographic study of the images and the degree of repatination of the carved surfaces. The patination and varnish on only some panels of the petroglyphs in this complex indicate that the Dowzdaghi rock art was carved at different times, and that a uniform dating for all panels is obviously not possible. The existence of different styles in rock carvings underlines a complex process of execution during different phases. However, the lack of stratigraphic relations between the drawings does not allow us to describe their chronology. The complex was in use for a long period, possibly from prehistoric times to the Late Islamic era. The existence of an Iron Age site at Zarkhane near to the rock carvings shows the presence of a human population in this region at least from the Iron Age.

### Discussion and conclusion

If our observations were confined to isolated panels of carved rock, there would be no reason to regard them as particularly significant, but the same pat-

terns are repeated around the entire Mountain, so what seemed to be an isolated pattern may be regarded as a more coherent system. However, there is a strong probability that all the drawings in this complex are conventional. It has not been the purpose of this paper to offer a detailed discussion of the ideology that may lie behind the Dowzdaghi carvings. Our objective has been far simpler: we have attempted to introduce this complex to indicate the great potential of this area of Iran for further research on rock art. More interpretations must await further work in the field. In conclusion, it should be mentioned that since the Dowzdaghi carvings were created in the open-air, a large number of petroglyphs

have been destroyed by the effects of the sun, wind, atmospheric precipitation, seismic activity, and cycles of hot and cold weather, so that many images are badly worn and some unrecognisable.

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Fig. 1. Map showing location of the site in NW Iran.



Fig. 2. Southern view of the site showing distribution of Dowzdaghi petroglyphs.

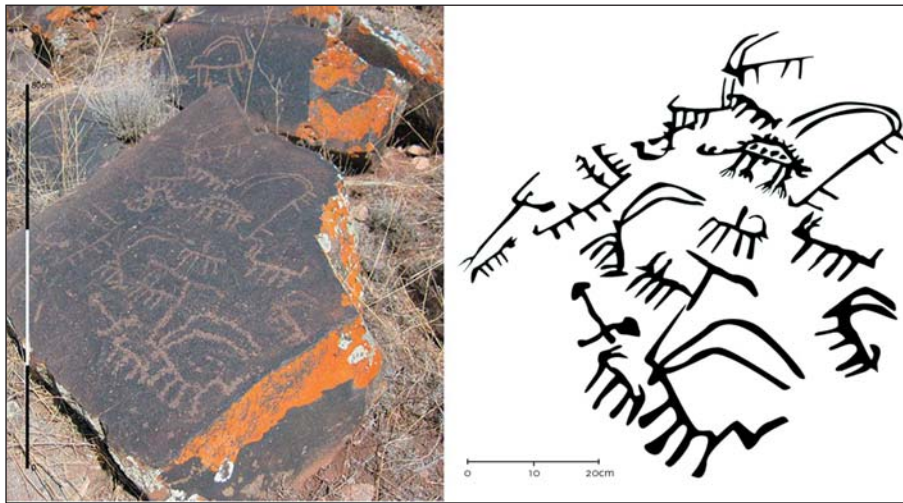


Fig. 3. View of the main group of petroglyphs at Dowzdaghi.



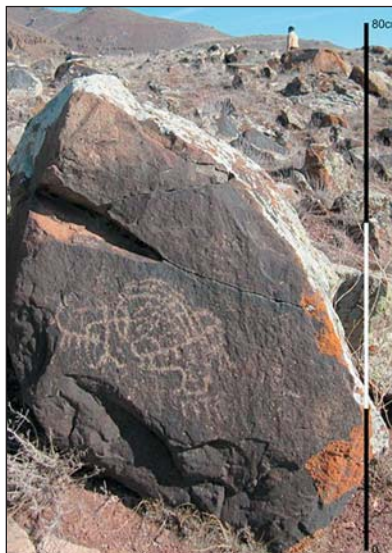
Fig. 4. A human carrying a bow, with a hedgehog swallowing a snake.



*Fig. 5. Long curved horn ibex; the degree of patination is significant on this motif.*



*Fig. 6. Huge block of stone with symbolic design.*



*Fig. 7. Small panel with hunting scene.*



0 10 20cm