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پژوهشگاه علوم انسانی و مطالعات فرهنگی  
رتال جامع علوم انسانی



# Miniature Motifs on the Ossuaries of the Bandian Dargaz Fire Temple


Mehdi Rahbar<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Bandian Dargaz site in Khorasan, is one of the fire temples dating back to the Sasanian period. In this fire temple, carved miniature motifs including animals such as goat, deer, ram, cow, horse, snake, scorpion, wolf, fox, turkey, swallow and dove have been found. In this article, carved miniature motifs are examined and analyzed.

**Keywords:** Bandian Dargaz; Fire Temple; Miniature Motifs; Ossuaries.



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## Introduction

The Sasanian Empire was one of the ancient superpowers, since that era was one of the important periods of Iranian history, archeologists and historians have come up with many books and articles dealing with the same (see Rostami & Aryamanesh, 2020; Maksymiuk, 2021; Skupniewicz, 2021; Matloubkari & Shaikh Baikloo, 2022; Skupniewicz, 2022; Gugushvili, 2023). There is an entrance gate in the north-facing arcades of the Bandian Fire Temple that is 100cm in width, through which; people could enter Room "E" with 4.40×5.15m dimensions (Fig. 1). Except for the mentioned entrance, no window or skylight exists in this room; hence, the room is completely dark. The threshold of the gate is 20cm upper floor of the fire temple. Evidence shows that

this entrance was blocked with a wall in normal situations, but was opened and reclosed if required (Fig. 2).

There are some box-like compartments in the north, east, and west of this room (Fig. 3) that are highly similar to pottery coffins with semi-cylindrical lids remaining from the Parthian era. The difference is seen in the integrated structure of the lid and body. These chests or boxes are named ossuaries that are floored with stones and a plastered layer on them.

The ossuary deployed in the west front has a 4.40m length. The width of this ossuary is 85cm, which is covered with a crescent-shaped arch. The height of this ossuary from the room's floor to the end part of the ossuary equals 200cm. This ossuary is placed on six stands made of 40×40 and 40×20 clays. The stand's height is about

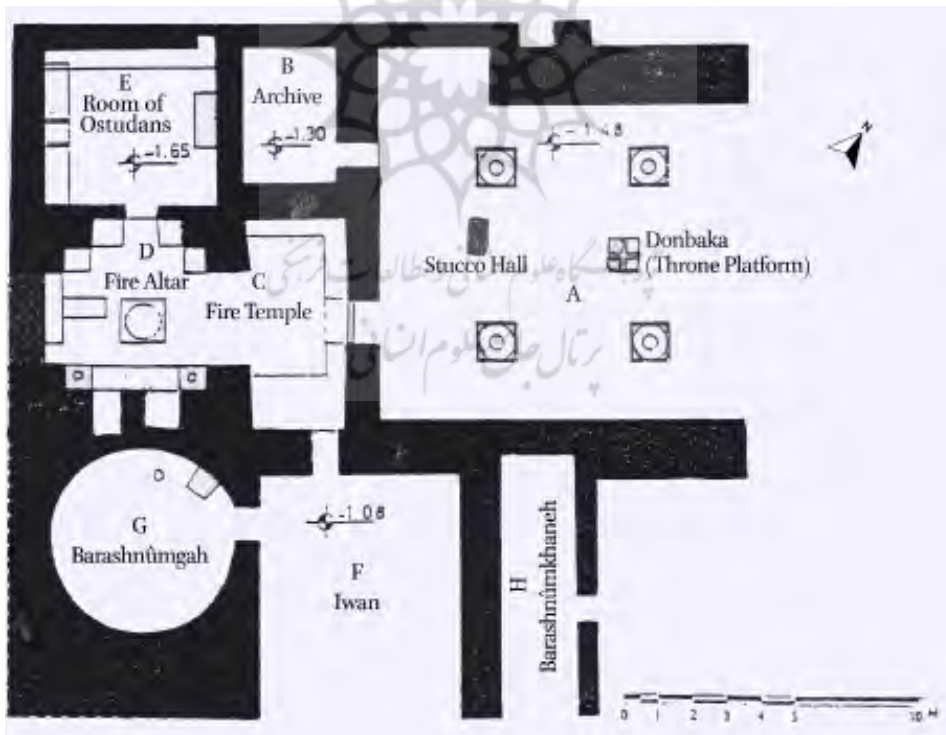


Fig. 1. Fire Temple of Bandian Dargaz



Fig. 2. The Entrance to the Ossuary' Room from the Northern Part of the Fire Temple



Fig. 3. The Interior of the Ossuary and the Remains of Ossuary Made with Plaster can be Seen on the Right Side of the Eastern Ossuary and the Remains of the Northern Ossuary can be Seen Above.

55cm (Fig. 4). The internal part of this ossuary has been divided into three unequal parts along with the length of walls with

5cm thickness. The length of the central part is only 65cm while side parts varies between 160cm and 165cm. A valve is de-



Fig. 4. Western Ossuary

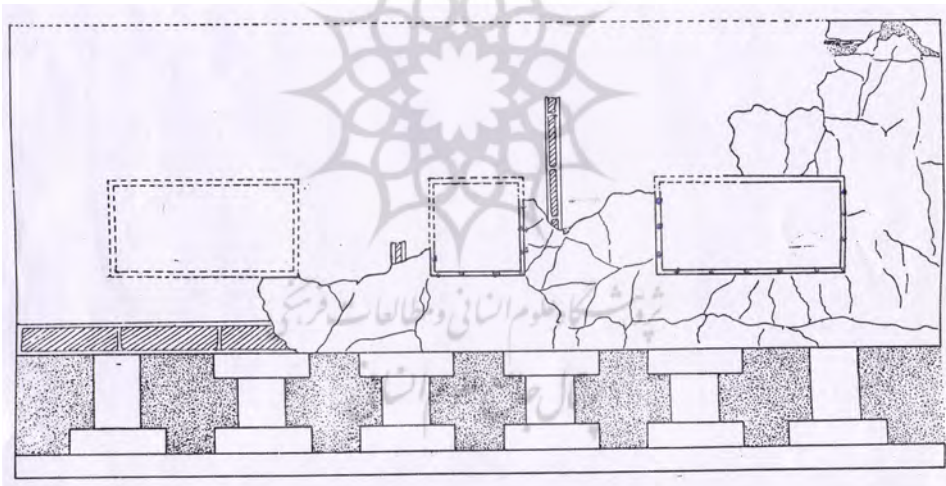


Fig. 5. Western Ossuary

ployed about 20cm high from the floor of the ossuary in each part, and the valve is surrounded by a gate frame that is 1cm deeper than the surface of the ossuary, whilst the width is about 2cm. Some small holes with a maximum 2mm diameter are created around the frame, with variable width at certain distances.

The dimensions of the central valve equal 35×36, while the valves deployed on two sides are 35cm high and 80cm long. The ossuary built in the east front of the room is smaller than the one deployed in the west part with 150cm and 70cm in length and width, respectively. Due to its small size, this ossuary lacks di-



Fig. 6. Eastern Ossuary



Fig. 7. Reconstruction of Western and Cube-shaped Ossuary

visions inside; therefore, it only has one valve like the one in the western ossuary. The height of this valve varies between 30cm and 35cm, while the length of the

valve of the eastern ossuary does not exceed 70cm (Fig. 6). Unfortunately, the ossuary deployed in the northern part is highly damaged and has no remnants ex-

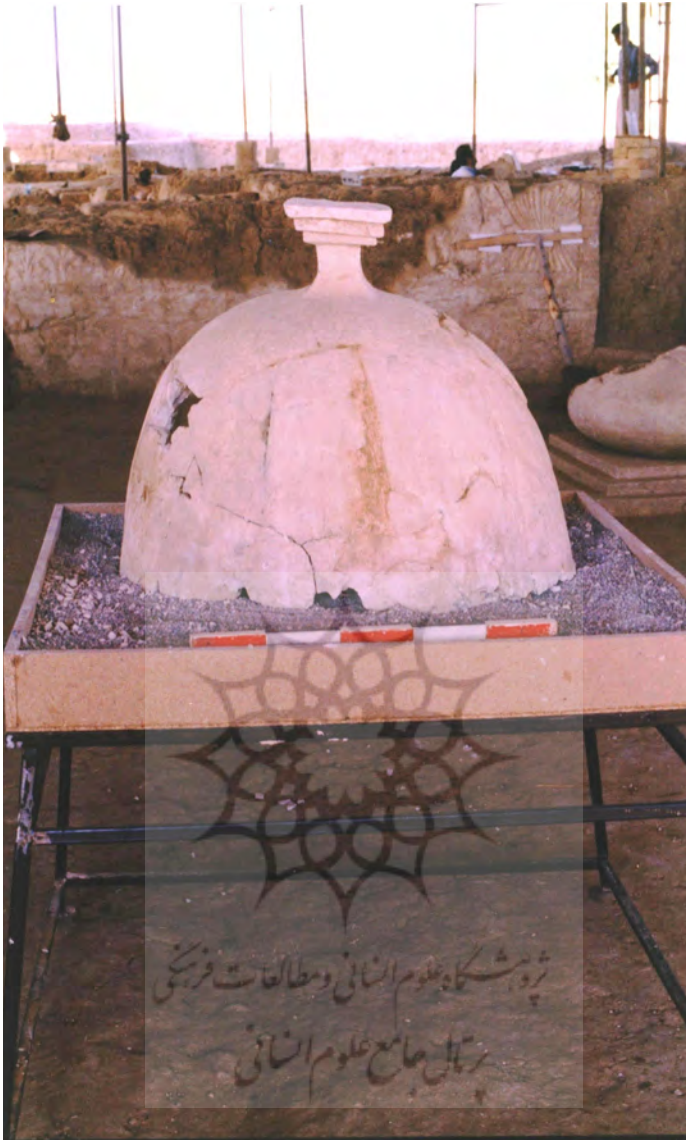


Fig. 8. Cube-shaped Ossuary Cap

cept for the collapsed parts of the body and rock slabs of the ossuary's floor (Fig. 3).

We found evidence of a cube-shaped ossuary inside this room that had a hemispherical cap and three-stair handle. The handle of this cap was completely similar to pedestals of the hall of Bandian Fire

Temple or the stand of plastered fireplaces inside alter (Fig. 6). This cap is similar to the cap of one of the ossuaries in Central Asia (Grenet, 1984).

The body of the cube-shaped ossuary of Bandian's Room "E" would have been probably made of clay, so it was destroyed but the plaster-made plate of the



Fig. 9. Remains of Cube-shaped Ossuary

upper part of this ossuary with  $70 \times 70$  cm dimension and 7 cm thickness was obtained (Fig. 9). The middle part of this plate is like a hollow circle. We could renovate the cube-shaped ossuary in Room "E" based on the acquire information and documents (Fig. 7).

The presence of ossuaries' rooms next to the fire temple has raised many debates. Philippe Gignoux confirms the viewpoints of some previous researchers without any debate and considers that ossuary cannot be placed near the fire, so it might be used for storage of border guard's food (See Gignoux, 2011). However, evidence shows that the bones remaining from human corpses were not considered impure when were removed from the flesh. "When the dead body is dried is no longer impure and contaminating," Mary Boyce writes about placing a human corpse near the fire referring to Vendidad. On the other hand, it has been allowed

to place human corpses within a three-step distance from the fire. Normally, the placement of human bone that is considered pure- within such distance should not be considered a religious prohibition and sin. Some believe that the placement and burial of bones in the ossuary has been a formal tradition to implement required cautions (Boyce, 1997: 407-413). In my opinion, the use of ossuaries has been cleverly matched with Zoroastrian teachings to prevent the expansion of cemeteries that destroyed the farmlands. Also, a tomb was reused several times despite ossuaries (Rahbar, 2012).

It is worth noting that though none of the bones was discovered from the ossuaries in Room "E", the presence of them cannot be rejected because these ossuaries were first constructed for border guards and their families, not for the public. Therefore, not much time has passed from the construction of this





Fig. 10. Mithras in the Hunting Ground



Fig. 11. Mithras in the Hunting Ground

building until the time of Firūz (Pērōz), Sasanian king when this fire temple was destroyed by Hephthalites, and perhaps no opportunity appeared for using ossuaries after the border guards of this region were changed or due to any other reasons (Rahbar, 2011).

#### Ritual Miniature Motifs on the Ossuaries

The carved motifs include some animals, such as antelope, deer, ram, cow, horse, snake, scorpion, wolf, fox, turkey, swallow, and pigeon that will be produced in following rows.

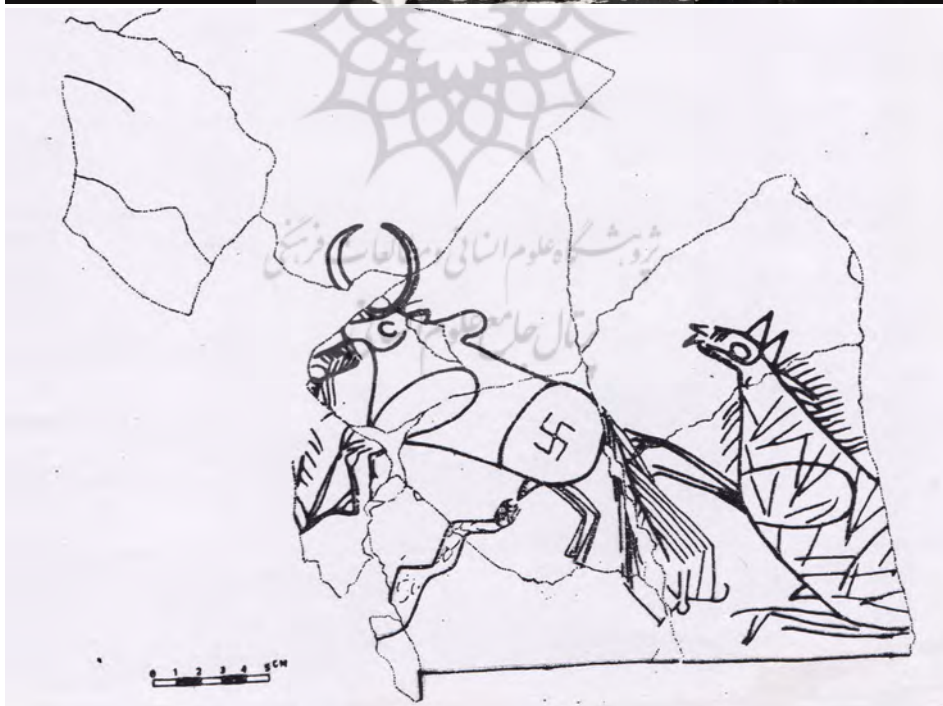


Fig. 12 & 13. The Attack of a Mythical Creature on a Cow

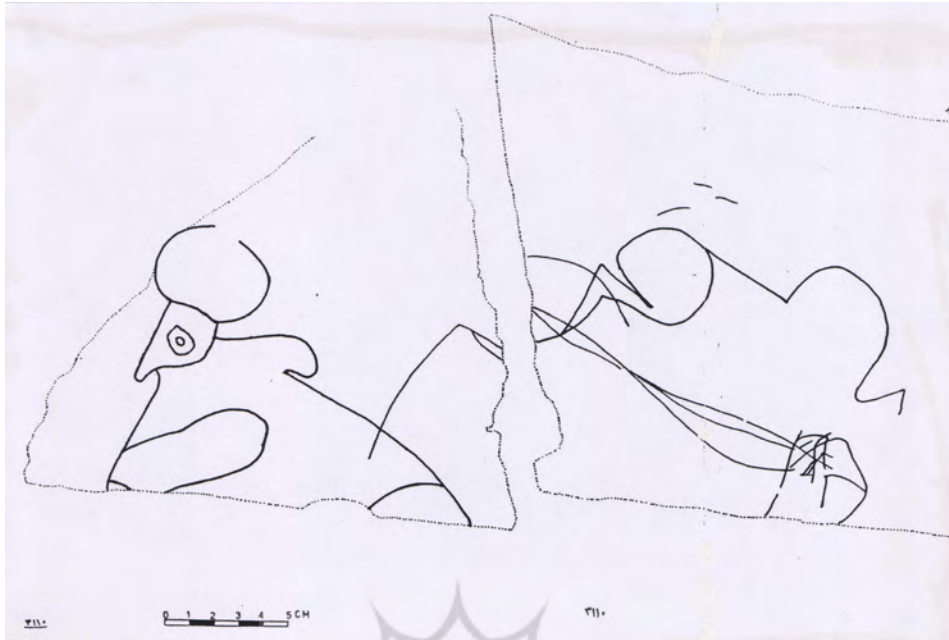


Fig. 14. Unfinished Humped Cow Motif

### 1. Hunter's Mithra Motif

Hunter's Mithra motif is one of the important scenes in this collection. The counterpart of this hunting scene is seen in the paintings of Dura-Europos Mithras Temple in which, Mithra is hunting animals on a horse. On the surface of Bandian's ossuary, Mithra is dressed in battle attire with a hat on the head and a ribbon tied behind the head while it is fluttering in the air. His clothes include a bust that looks like armor and tight pants tucked into a boot (Figs. 10 & 11). While Mithra is galloping forward, has pulled out a bow and hunted at least two animals. It seems that the hunted animals are deer. However, this motif may be among rare cases of the Sasanian era in which, the king is dressed in combat clothes when hunting. The motifs remaining from the Sasanian era; especially silver trophies indicate that kings are dressed in formal clothes,

not battle uniforms. In Bandian, Mithra's clothes fully look like the dress of a Parthian warrior dressed in a battle suit that came from Dura-Europos (Ghirshman, 1991: 51; Fig. 63). Meanwhile, it also looks like the combat suite of Artabanus V in the battle with Artabanus V in Firoozabad. His bow is highly similar to the bows seen in some motives carved on the dishes that remained from the Sasanian era. These bows consist of two semicircles or almost semicircles their distance- the part taken by hand- is straight and horizontal. The bow is taken with the left hand, the armor is pulled with the right hand and the arrow is thrown. When Ferdowsi talks about Bahram's hunting in *Shahnameh*, he points to Persian or Kayani bow. Procopius writes, "Almost all Iranians are decent shooters and all more skilled in this technique rather than others. However, they say that their arrow

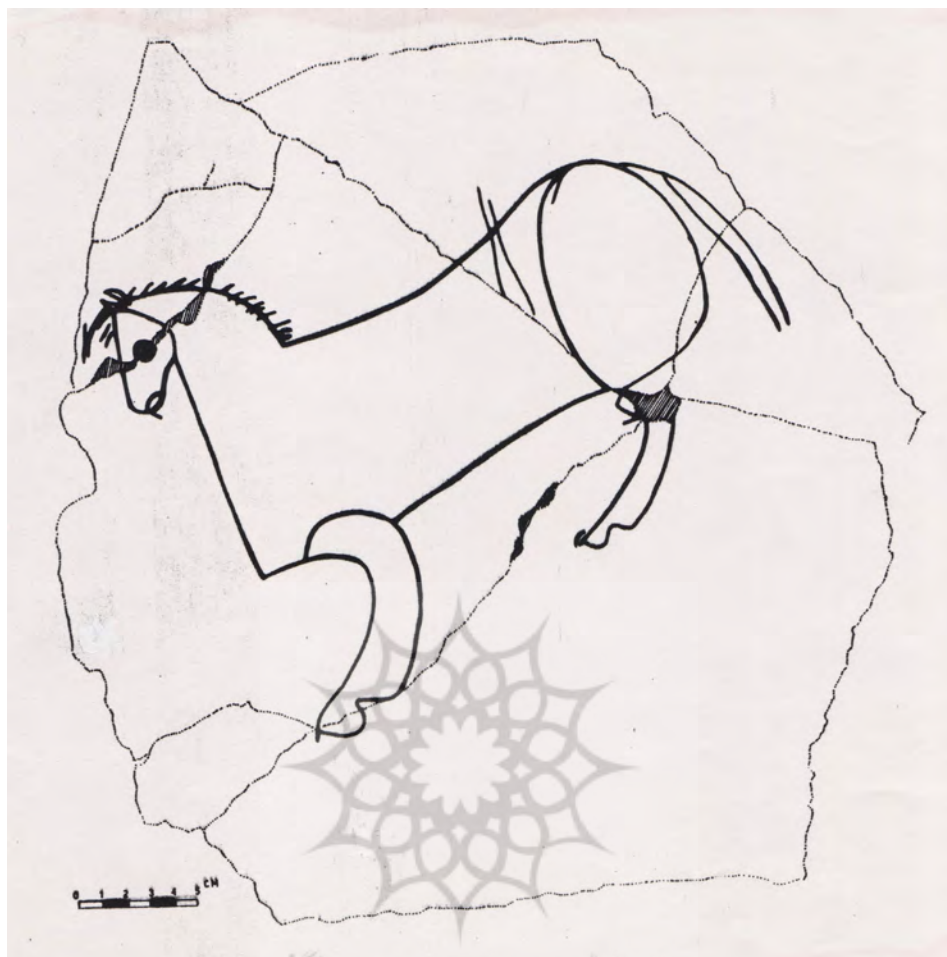


Fig. 15. Motif of a Horse that has Suddenly Stopped

does not have power because bowstring is not stretched enough" (Christensen, 1998: 489). It is worth noting that the bow in hand of Mithra in the hunting ground on Bandian Ossuary is of Persian Bow kind.

Behind Mithra and in the reverse direction of his movement, a Turkey with its three chicks is moving. Another motif seen in this hunting ground is a ram with a stalk of wheat in his mouth running away from a wolf that attacked it (Lukonin, 1994: 215). The wolf that is smaller than the ram has stood on its feet and bites the

short tail of the ram. There is a sign on the ram's rump that is not clear (Fig. 12). An antelope with long crescent-shaped horns and a stalk of wheat on the mouth is seen under the scene. Meanwhile, a fierce snake is biting the goat's snout from the opposite side (Fig. 12). There is another antelope with long horns carved on its left side of this antelope. There are two other animals with unfinished motifs in front of this antelope. The bent horns of one of the animals remind the motif of antelope. The anterior part of the body of a strange animal is seen in the left corner

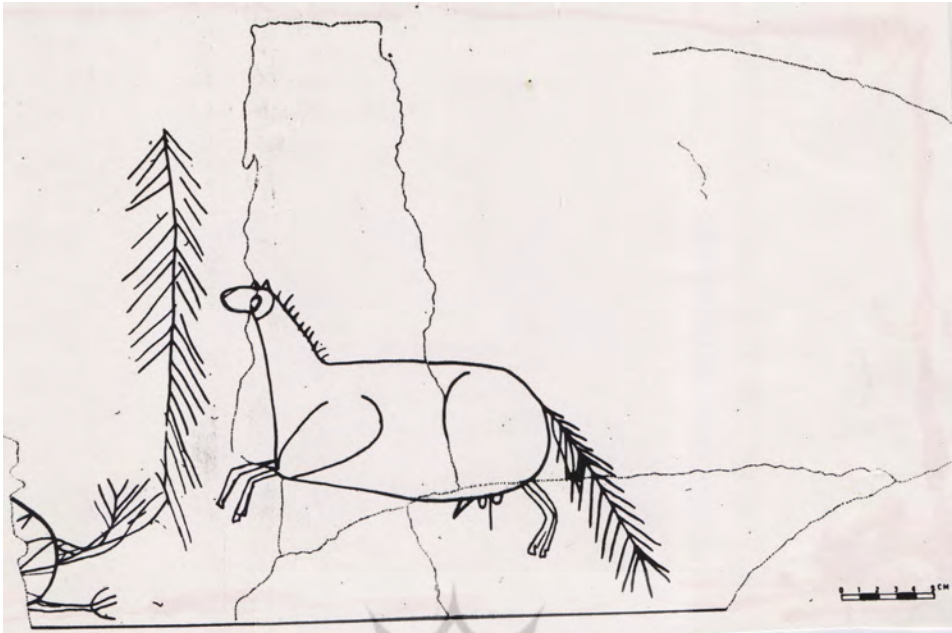


Fig. 16. Motif of a Horse Whose Tail Looks Like a Stalk of Wheat and is Chasing a Mythical Creature

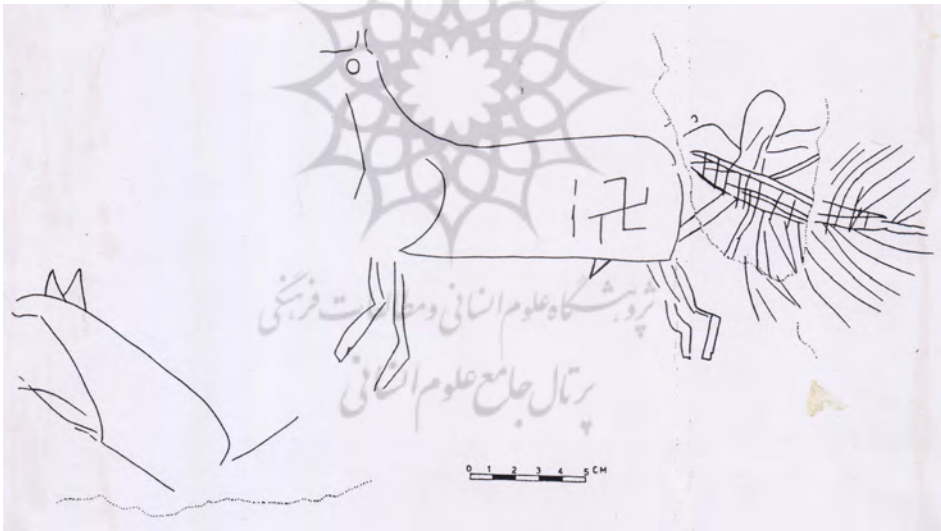


Fig. 17. Motif of a Deer Chasing a Fox or a Wolf

of the scene whose posterior part of the body is damaged due to the destruction of the ossuary. The ears and neck of this animal look like the ones of a dog. This animal has raised its delicate hands that look like a bird's legs and transferred the

weight of its body onto two legs attacking an animal, which is not seen in the image. Another fictional animal jumping around is seen in the central part of this scene. This strange animal has a three-branched tail with narrow hands with a

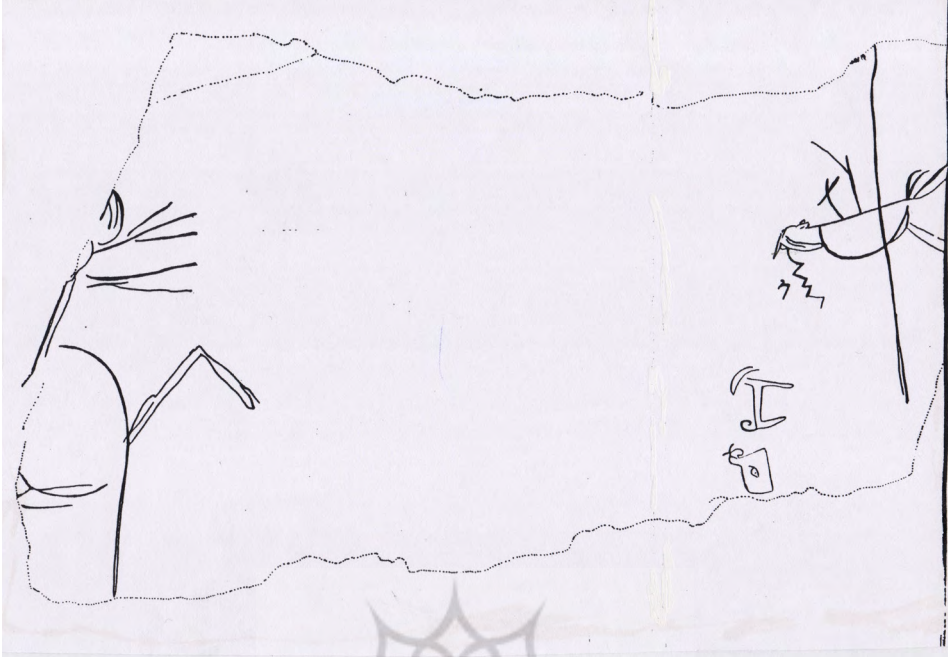


Fig. 18. Motif of Swallow, Mountain Goat and Sheep

hen leg-like motif at the end part. This animal has small ears but a wide muzzle and penetrating eyes. The triangular penis of this animal indicates its sex. Four hunted animals are carved in the right corner of the scene. Two animals are running in opposite ways under the scene. The animal that is running away towards the right hand is a deer with twisted horns, a small head, and a narrow muzzle. The animal in the opposite direction also has tall horns. His penis is triangular and looks like an antelope. An antelope and ram are illustrated in the upper part of the scene. Both animals are moving toward the left hand. The ram that has a wheat stalk in its mouth is moving from the right hand to the left of the scene. The last animal with an incomplete motif carved on the upper part of the hunting ground is a legendary and mythological creature. The end part of

the tail of this animal includes a mass of lines and its legs are similar to birds' feet. This animal is standing on its two legs. The gesture and movement of this animal indicate the probability of an attack on another animal (Figs. 11 & 12).

## 2. Mythical Creature Attacking Cow

Another piece of the plaster-made coating on the ossuary that includes several pieces shows a strange animal attacking a cow (Fig. 12 & Fig. 13). While this animal is putting its weight on two feet, its two hands are touching the cow's tail. The organs of this creature are a combination of various animals. This creature has two triangle-shaped ears and a muzzle like one of a dog and hands similar to birds' legs. It has big eyes a tongue out of the mouth, spiky hair on the back of the neck and a chest that looks like the horse's mane indicating the anger of this strange

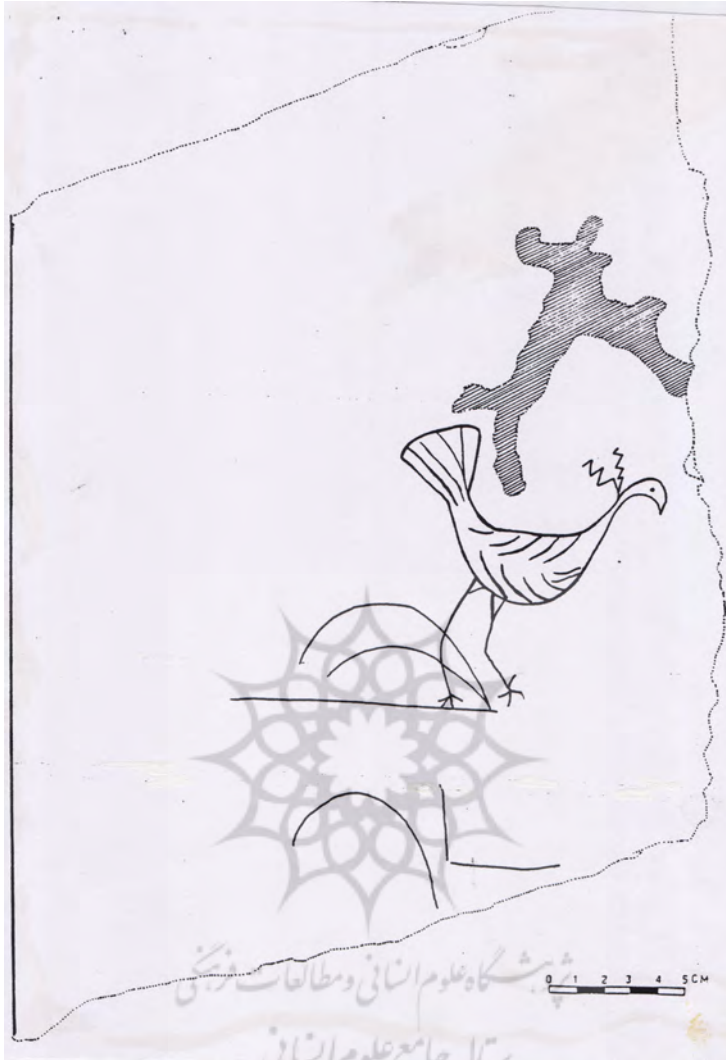


Fig. 19. Motif of a Dove with a Ribbon

creature. A cow is running away in front of this fictional creature. The cow has two crescent-shaped horns with a hump-like appendage on the back of its neck. A swastika motif is seen on the buttock or rump of the cow and its long and fluffy tail reaches the ground; meanwhile, a snake is biting the cow's udder.

### 3. Humpback Cow Motif

Another motif carved on the surface of

the ossuary is the initial image of a cow, with its horns reminding the crescent moon. This cow also has a hump-like appendage on its back (Fig. 14). On the right hand of this motif, another unfinished animal is seen, probably a cow.

### 4. Horse Motif

The motif of a horse with a naturalist head, neck, and mane is carved (Fig. 15). This is the largest motif of this collection



Fig. 20. A Wolf Attacks a Cow in the Presence of a Snake



Fig. 21. A Wolf Attacks a Cow in the Presence of a Snake

and has a 25cm length but the length of the Mithra horse in the hunting ground is only 10cm.

### 5. Trotting Horse Motif

Another piece of the ossuary coating has 30×60cm dimensions and two animals are illustrated on the left side of the plate





Fig. 22. Cow and Horse Saddled on Ossuary with Scorpion and Swastika

(Fig. 16). One motif shows the image of a horse. It seems that this horse is chasing a mythical animal. Only the anterior part of this animal remains, showing the rump and tail with fluffy hair and two legs like the legs of a hen. The motif of the hen leg for a big animal is the symbol of a mythical evil creature. Therefore, it can be assumed that, unlike the common case in which, an evil creature was chasing an Ahurian or Ormazdian animals, and a symbol of some Gods, including Miθra, Anāhitā, or Tištrya is chasing an evil animal in this motif.

#### 6. Motif of Fox or Wolf and Deer

The artist has left the motifs of this scene incomplete. The animal in front is seemingly a fox or wolf (Fig. 17). The animal has an elongated and oval body with two long triangular ears and a narrow muzzle

that puts the weight on two feet and with all its might is running away from a deer that is chasing it. According to myths of the Zoroastrian religion, Wolves that are considered evil animals gather in one place and shape one wolf. Zoroastrian must fight against wolves and kill them, so Druj of Quadrupeds will be destroyed (Hinnells, 1989: 77).

#### 7. Swallow, Antelope, Ewe Motif

Three motifs, including one bird, one antelope, and one ewe are seen on this plaster piece. Also, an image of an incomplete animal, probability a cow, is observed (Fig. 18). A bird-looking left side is carved on the bottom part of this piece. Rooster and swallow are among the useful animals that are not allowed to be killed in Sūt-kar-Nask (Pourdavoud, 1976: 321). Motifs of two animals are seen in the small size of

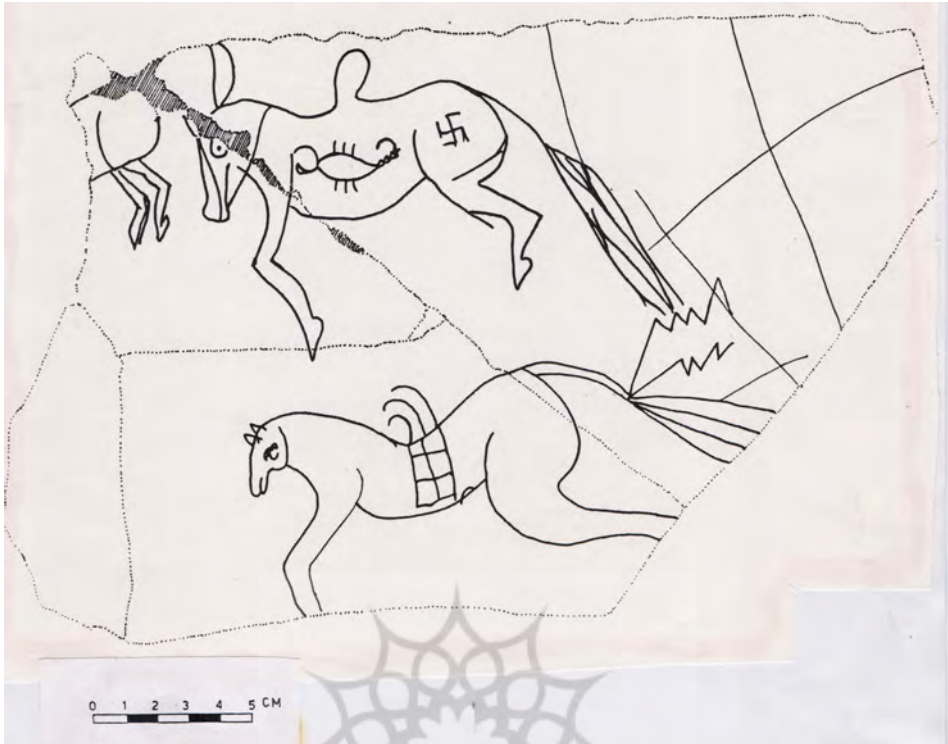


Fig. 23. Cow and Horse Saddled on Ossuary with Scorpion and Swastika

an antelope or dog and also an ewe. There is a baby inside the ewe's belly.

### 8. Pigeon Motif

Swan, hawk, rooster, peacock, and pigeon are among Ahurian or Ormazdian birds (Razi, 1992: 93). Hashem Razi considers the motifs of cow, pigeon, broken cross, and sun circle (Swastika) as Mithra symbols (Razi, 1992: 445), but Lukonin introduces some birds such as pigeon as the symbol of Anāhitā (Lukonin, 1994: 157). The bird carved on this piece of ossuary looks like a pigeon because of its long legs, wide tail, and short beak. There are two wavy strips on the neck indicating its Ahurian nature (Fig. 19).

### 9. Wolf Attacking Cow

This piece is made of several plaster

pieces of ossuary having important motifs. This piece may be related to that part of the ossuary's body, which the valve is placed in the right hand. The height of the western ossuary's valves is about 35cm. The remaining part of the smooth edge of the last piece is the same size; therefore, this piece belongs to the body of the ossuary in which the valve is placed (Fig. 21).

In the central part of this piece, a cow is moving toward the left side (Fig. 21). Its penis is triangular indicating its male sex. The animal is running away while a wheat stalk is in its mouth. Its tail looks like a wheat stalk. The wheat ear that is the symbol of good victory over evil and life blessing is grown from the tail of the cow that Mithra sacrificed (Hinnells, 1989: 130). There are images of two ani-

mals on the left hand of the cow motif that are incomplete due to damaged ossuary. One motif indicates an image of a goat though the head of the animal is destroyed. Remnants of another motif seen on the left hand indicate an animal that may be a mythical evil creature. Although the front part of the animal is not seen in this image, its legs look like the wolf's.

In the right corner of this plaster piece, a wolf is attacking a cow and biting its buttock. The penis of the wolf is also shown in a triangular shape indicating its male sex. His tail is a little similar to the cow's but its difference is seen when more attention is paid. The tail of evil creature is straight but its end is illustrated in cluster shape (Fig. 25). The cow is running away from the wolf is fat. The difference between the legs of a wolf and a cow's hooves is well shown in this image. Unfortunately, the head of the animal is destroyed. A snake is seen on the upper part of the scene that tries to reach the scene. The snake is helping the wolf to kill the cow (Fig. 25).

#### 10. Motif of Cow and Horse

Other miniature motifs include a hump-backed cow and a horse without a rider but saddled (Fig. 22 & Fig. 23). The cow is carved on the left-hand while is galloping. The motif of a broken cross or the symbol of a round sun with clockwise movement is seen on the left rump of this animal. An image of a big scorpion exists inside the stomach of this animal. In the relief of Mithra in Europe, a scorpion is seen attacking the cow to take its life.

Another motif of this collection is seen in the lower part of this cow's mo-

tif, and a saddled horse without a rider is carved that is galloping leftwards. The movement of this horse is in line with the movement of the cow described above. The horse is considered a mythical and Ahurian or Ormazdian animal. The ribbon in this image confirms the artist's purpose for creating a ritual work, not a horse used in everyday life. According to the seventh and eighth paragraphs of Bahram Yašt, a beautiful horse, with yellow ears and a golden bridle is the symbol of Bahram that has believed in Zoroastrianism (Coyajee, 1974: 47). "After Zarathustra was born, the baby was put in the way of cows and horses to be killed under their legs but the bellwether did not let horses and cows passing over the baby. Therefore, wizards' tricks did not work and Zarathustra remained alive" (Hinnells, 1989: 14). In the Tir Yašt, Tištar appears as a white and beautiful horse with golden ears and bridle (Jafari, 1966). On the other hand, the Ādur Gušnasp Fire Temple is given as a gift to Anāhitā due to the boiling watery spring next to it, and the name of this fire temple is derived from the name of a horse especially the white horse belonging to Anāhitā (Faravashi, 1991: 187).

#### Conclusion

The carved motifs include some animals, such as antelope, deer, ram, cow, horse, snake, scorpion, wolf, fox, turkey, swallow, and pigeon, which are divided into two categories of Ormazdian and Ahrimanian animals based on the classification introduced in the Zoroastrian religion. Snake, scorpion, wolf, and fox are among evil animals (Xrafstar), and other animals were classified as Ahurian

or Ormazdian animals. Why such motifs must appear in a dark and invisible environment?

Gignoux considers the plaster-made boxes as a place for storage of border guard's food and assumes the small holes around the frame of valves for proper air conditioning of food storage inside them (Gignoux, 2008; Gignoux 2011; Rahbar, 2004). It should be asked why the food warehouse must be placed in a fire temple that must be accessible daily, while this room is almost far from reach. In addition, the evidence shows that the entrance of this room was blocked with construction materials.

It seems that Room "E" has not been accepted as an ossuary due to the wrong perception of Zoroastrianism, which classically implies that the placement of a human corpse and even the ossuary near the fire is religiously prohibited. This emphasis may not be reliable without considering the distance constraint. Mary Boyce determined this distance equal to three steps based on her studies. On the other hand, this researcher does not consider the human bone impure. She says that after the flesh is wasted, the human bones are collected and put in the ossuary just to respect the deceased and take the required precautions (Boyce & Grenet, 1996: 753). Therefore, we still consider E room a room for ossuaries.

A Relief of Mithra while killing a cow is always seen inside Europe's Mithraeum. There are also exists snakes, scorpions, and dogs. These scenes are interpreted as follows: Mithra kills the cow that took shelter in a cave. The magic of creation occurs after the cow's death. Healing plants grow from the cow's body

and the earth becomes green. The vine grows from the cow's body and wheat grows from its tail and spinal cord (Hinnells, 1989: 130). Snake and dog come to the bleeding part of the cow, drink it, and grow up (Razi, 1992: 213).

Scorpions are among the evil animals that attack the cow's testicles under the order of evil to take the cow's life and kill it (Razi, 1992: 218). Pourdavoud interprets the snake as a killer and fatal agent (Pourdavoud, 1976: 178).

Almost all available interpretations of Miθra are based on the motifs carved on the European Mithraeum. Scorpion and snake are present when Mithra kills the cow. Some believe that Roman soldiers brought Miθra from Iran to Europe. However, others, including Boyce believe that Iranian Miθra has no relation to the cow sacrifice (Boyce & Grenet, 1996: 753). Comments of Iranian researchers about Mithra are based on the perceptions of European Mithraeums. In European Mithraeums, Mithra is seen in Phrygian cap and customs of the Parthian period while inserting a sting into the cow's body. No similar scene of Miθra has been seen in Iran but there are several documents, including a sculpture of a cow and a hawk sitting on its back discovered from Kalgeh in Masjed Soleyman, or there is another image of a cow stumbling and a hawk sitting on its back while inserting its claws in the body of the cow (Zare, 2010). It seems that the human character of Miθra has been replaced with the hawk as a symbol of Miθra (Zare, 2010).

Some believe that the Relief of Apadana Staircase of Persepolis in which, a lion attacks a bull is similar to the scene in which Mithra kills the cow (Hami,

1976: 143). If this presumption is right, Mithra has been replaced with a hawk and lion in Iran. According to what we know about Miθra motifs so far, these are highly different from European Mithraism motifs. Nevertheless, there are some common points between these two motifs. In Iran, the cow killed by Mithra is not the case but the presence of wolves griffons, snakes, and scorpions attack not only the cow but also other animals, including deer, antelope, and ram. The interesting point is that some Ahurian or Ormazdian animals have chased evil animals. In Fig. 10, an antelope is chasing a griffo, a horse is attacking a griffon, and a deer is chasing the wolf in Fig. 17.

The killing of the cow by Mithra is interpreted as rebirth through growing

wheat and other plants. It is for the first time emphasized the wheat ears in the tail of some animals, such as cows and horses in Bandian's motifs. In some cases, the wheat ear is seen in the mouth of Ahurian or Ormazdian animals such as antelope, cow, stag, and ram. New cases were discovered from the motifs carved on the surface of Bandian's ossuary that may change the previous interpretations of Mithra. However, the ritual aspects of Bandian's motifs can be surely emphasized. Regarding the hunter Mithra and the battle between Ormazdian and Ahri-manian animals and presence of griffon and Swastika, as well as the scorpion inside the cow's belly, it can be believed that all motifs of this collection have been shaped for the myth of Mithra.

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