

INTRODUCING NEWLY DOCUMENTED ROCK ART IN MIANEH COUNTY OF THE EAST AZARBAIJAN PROVINCE IN NORTH-WESTERN IRAN

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ABSTRACT: This essay seeks to conduct a short study for the first time of the classification of a number of petroglyphs in Mianeh County in the Eastern Azarbaijan Province. The north-western region of Iran is one of the richest regions in rock art; due to its abundant springs, landscape, and the specific lifestyle of nomads who regularly move around the same places. The petroglyphs were discovered 20 km west of Mianeh City on the right side of Tabriz Road, and are located on a black mountain in the Chupughlu region. One of the key challenges in the study of the petroglyphs in Iran and north-western region of Iran is their dating. Due to the lack of laboratorial equipment, they have not been studied yet. During the survey in 2016 of the Chupughlu region almost seventy sites were identified and are located at a distance of between 60–100 m from each other. Here we present eleven sites. The petroglyphs of Mianeh are among the most original and admirable petroglyphs that reflect parts of the life of the residents of this region in the past. The most remarkable images found through the petroglyphs consist of human, animal, and geometrical images

KEYWORDS: petroglyphs – Mianeh Area – Eastern Azarbaijan – Iran

Introduction

Petroglyphs and other kinds of rock art have a special place in the history of human culture and, from a historical point of view, they count amongst some of the most ancient arts in the world. These images are some of the most important archaeological documents that contain different data and information. So far, there is no clear answer to the question of the exact date of the creation of these works and even the motives of the creators of these images are hidden to us. Nevertheless, different hypotheses have been raised regarding the creation of such works. Petroglyphs are images that are drawn on the rocks whose surface is dark due to weathering by atmospheric factors. They are created via such methods as carving, scratching, pecking, and striking by heavy tools like metal objects and hammerstones.² Such images were drawn sometimes as individual motifs, or as parts of compositions or scenes. Although it is generally assumed that they date back to the prehistoric era, and most do indeed; recent studies

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2 Soltani 2010.

showed that many others might also belong to early historical eras and even later.³ a number of factors are taken into account in the selection of regions used in the creation of petroglyphs including existence of wells, springs, hunting grounds, and routes for the transfer of hunters.⁴

There is a number of different types of rock art including petroglyphs and paintings found throughout Iran.⁵ The history of the research concerning Iranian rock art dates back to the surveys of McBurney in the caves of Mirmals and Humyan in Lorestan Province.⁶ Since then, numerous and scattered research has been conducted in different regions of Iran by scholars interested in rock art.⁷ Amongst the most significant of these surveys, one can refer to those related to the sites of Marzbanik Valley⁸ and Negaran Valley in south-eastern Iran⁹; the site of Hozeh Mahi¹⁰ and the Dumbiya's site¹¹ in southern Iran; sites of Abdozou in Firoozabad¹² and Dasht-e-Morghab¹³ in north-eastern Iran; the site of Balandar¹⁴ in western Iran; Kermanshah Province¹⁵, Kurdistan Province¹⁶, rock images of Khare Hanjiran in Mahabad County¹⁷, rock images of Shahriri at Meshkin Shahr of Ardabil Province¹⁸, and Arasbaran rock images¹⁹ in north-western Iran. In the recent years various sets of rock art have been identified and their corpus is still being updated.

Among others, the presently discussed site is extraordinary by its diversity and scope. On the whole, there are numerous sites rich in petroglyphs in the north-western Iran but scholars still have yet to pay close attention to them and they remain neglected. Given the few studies that have been conducted on the rock art itself within this geographical area and the importance of this region through various eras, the introduction and analysis of the newly found petroglyphs appears to be necessary. We hope this study will serve as an effective step towards raising awareness about a part of the rock art of Iran and pave the ground for further studies.

The studied region

Mianeh County is located in the south-east of Eastern Azarbaijan Province. This region is surrounded with fertile and flat plains as well as rivers. It has a favourable climate, warmer

3 Fazel 2011.

4 Lahafian 2015.

5 For the relevant (pre)historical periods in Iran in general see Sarhaddi-Dadian et al. 2020; Davtalab et al. 2021; Sheikh Baikloo Islam 2021; Oveisi and Kavosh 2021; Sarhaddi-Dadian 2021.

6 McBurney 1969.

7 Ghasrian 2007a; Ghasrian 2007b.

8 Moradi et al. 2013.

9 Sarhaddi-Dadian et al. 2015.

10 Mobarakabadi 2013.

11 Karimi 2018.

12 Ghassimi et al. 2014.

13 Karimi et al. 2016.

14 Sigari et al. 2017.

15 Lahafian 2015.

16 Lahafian 2015.

17 Ghasrian and Naderi 2006.

18 Horshid 2003.

19 Rafifar 2003.

than the neighbouring regions, offering a suitable basis for human activities attested from prehistoric times, and is home to numerous ancient monuments. However, little scientific exploration has been conducted on this region. The petroglyphs were found 20 km west of Mianeh City on the right side of Tabriz Road in the area known as Chupughlu region. The area is located at latitude of 37.48390° N and longitude of 47.51257° E [Fig. 1].

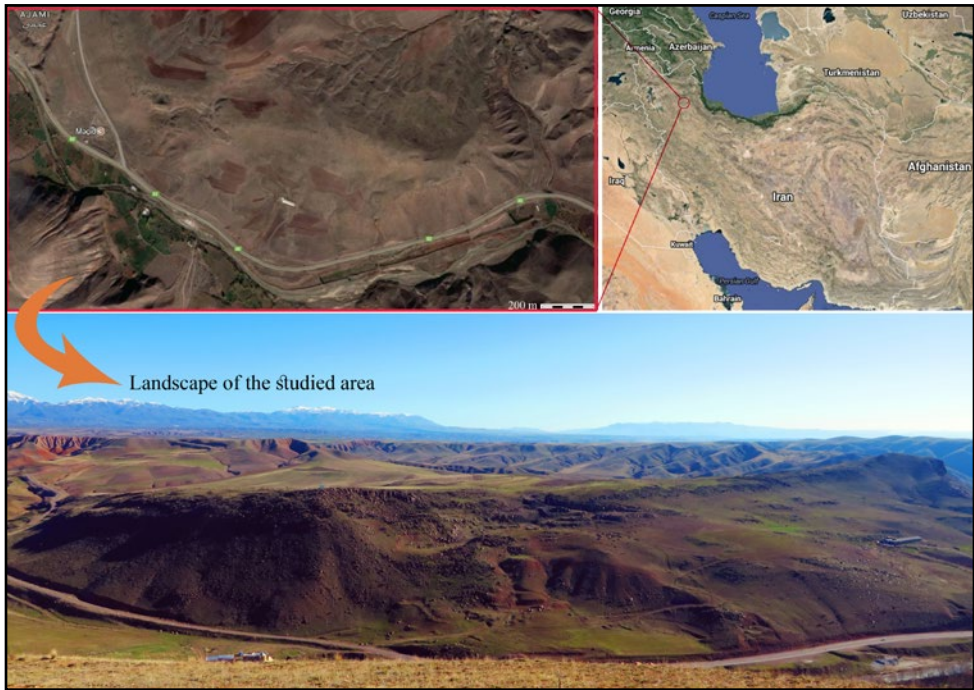


Fig. 1. Site of Petroglyphs of Mianeh County.

This region is home to numerous mountains and hills with smooth slopes. Most of its geological features are of Miocene origin and consist of fossiliferous limestone, marl, and volcanic rocks (andesite, basalt, dacite, rhyodacite) With the latter belonging to the calc-alkaline magma series, and they are related to the volcanism of the continental rifting.²⁰ This region was the place of residence for the nomads of prehistoric times until now and some of the indigenous residents call it the hunting ground due to its biodiversity. This region is surrounded by a river from the eastern and southern sides. Amongst its ancient monuments, one can refer to a cave and ancient paved route that was an offshoot of the Silk Road. Archaeological and archaeometric studies are likely to reveal numerous pieces of evidence for ancient activities in this region in future. Today the site of petroglyphs and its surroundings are used for farming, breeding poultry, and the grazing of the cattle. One can state that there is a totality of the required indices, as observed in Iran, for the presence of petroglyphs including the existence of hunting ground, spring, animal passage routes, and proper biome.²¹

20 Afshar 1965.
21 Farhadi 1997.

Results of the survey

In the course of the preliminary survey conducted in 2016 only the central part of the region around the poultry farming structure was explored (ca. 4–5 km²) due to its high number of works and some seventy panels were recorded. The survey was conducted by a team comprising four persons including one local resident. The survey itself was preceded by thorough research of literature pertaining to the history and geography of the region. In the course of the survey, the exact position, size, etc. of particular locations with rock art were recorded; the photographic documentation of the individual petroglyphs was taken. Figures of the petroglyphs were later drawn by an expert researcher. It was followed by typological and comparative analysis and interpretation.

We expect further studies to reveal more works; even the eastern mountain within this site, which is separated from the rest by the river, is very similar to the studied region and could yield more petroglyphs for further scientific investigations. In this paper, we have only focused on the eleven most remarkable panels in view of their role or theme.



Fig. 2. Location 1:
Panel with
the depiction of
a horse rider.

Location 1

One of the panels at the site was identified as the highest part of the site of Chupughlu. It depicts a single horse in gallop carrying a rider. It is estimated to have been drawn

with superficial scratching using some suitable tool. In this image the rider is carrying something in his hand at his waist, perhaps a hunting tool. The number of legs of the horse is higher than four, which seems to be an effort to show its movement and trot or it could be a way of showing the legs of the rider [Fig. 2].

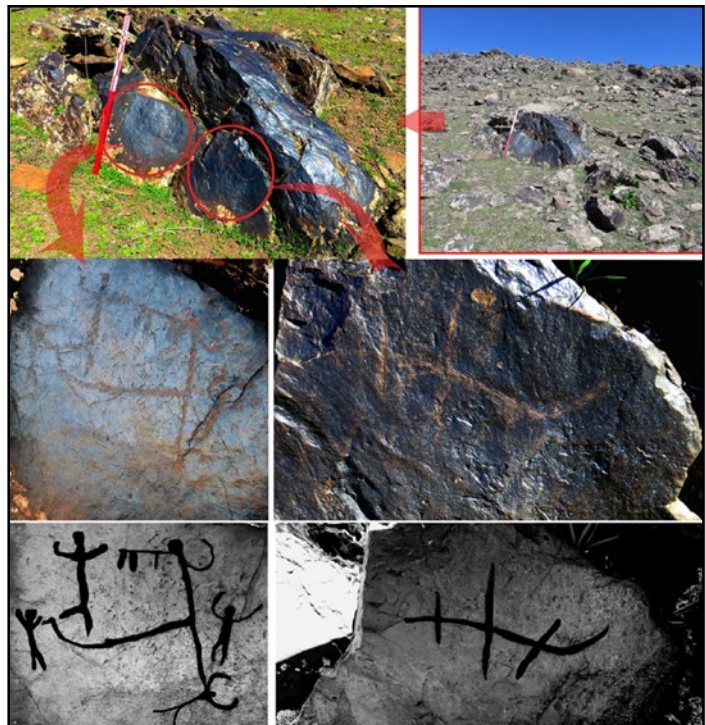
Location 2

Location 2 is situated almost in the middle of the Chupughlu. It bears a scene with a ritual. On one of its two panels, there are likely five dancing men drawn whose hands are pointing upward and have one of their legs up as well. One of the hands of the larger man who is at the centre is pointing straight towards the skyline. Two men are also drawn larger than the rest and these proportional differences appear to be an effort to depict a hierarchical perspective. On the other panel on the right hand, there is an unidentified depiction, which is probably related to the dance scene. The same motif was also found on two other panels of the Chupughlu region [Fig. 3].

Location 3

The panel at location 3 depicts a hunting scene. There are four male hunters and eight animal figures standing in line with the horizon, but two animals are have been drawn in a vertical position likely representing hunter's catch. It seems that the creator of this work struggled to render the hunted ruminants, which are unique. This panel has suffered from damage in some parts and certain depictions have been lost [Fig. 4].

Fig. 3. Location 2: Several views of the two panels with the probable dance and an unidentified image at the right side.



Location 4

The colour of the rock at location 4 is dark-blue and there is a hunting scene on it. The size of this panel is 1.5 × 4 m. There are seven images on the rock that include person on a horseback with animals. There is probably a dog next to the hunter and six other animals around. Unfortunately, the images are not clear on this panel because of the weathering damage which led to breaking off of major parts of the slate [Fig. 5].

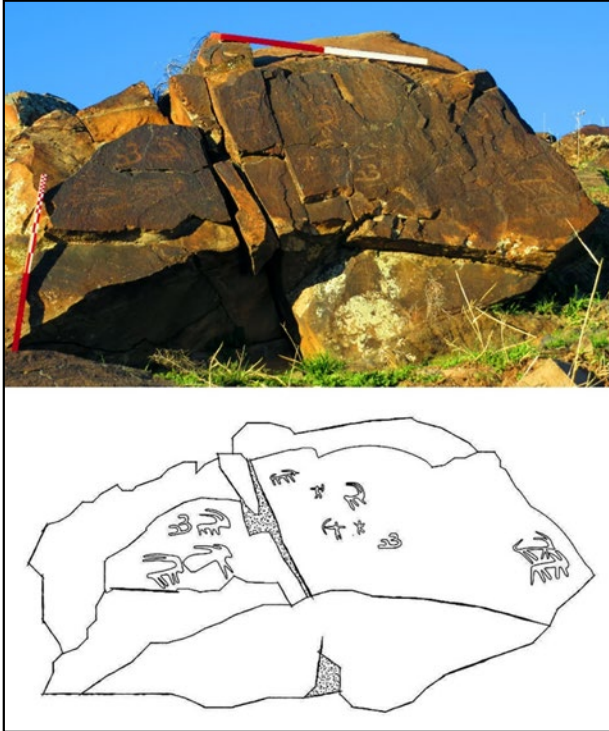


Fig. 4. Location 3: Panel with the scene of the hunting with two goat-like animals lying on the ground in vertical position.

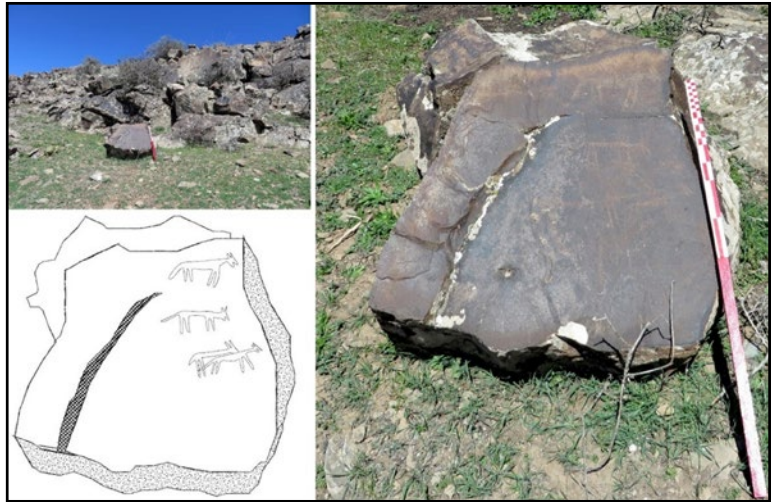


Fig. 5. Location 4: Panel with horse rider and animals.

Location 5

The panel at location 5 shows four animals standing on the eastern side of the panel in a line below one another. The image of the animal on the top is clearer, more precise, and of higher quality. The two lower animals are depicted standing beside each other. There is no difference between them in the patina. This panel is located almost in the centre of the eastern side of the Chupughlu [Fig. 6].

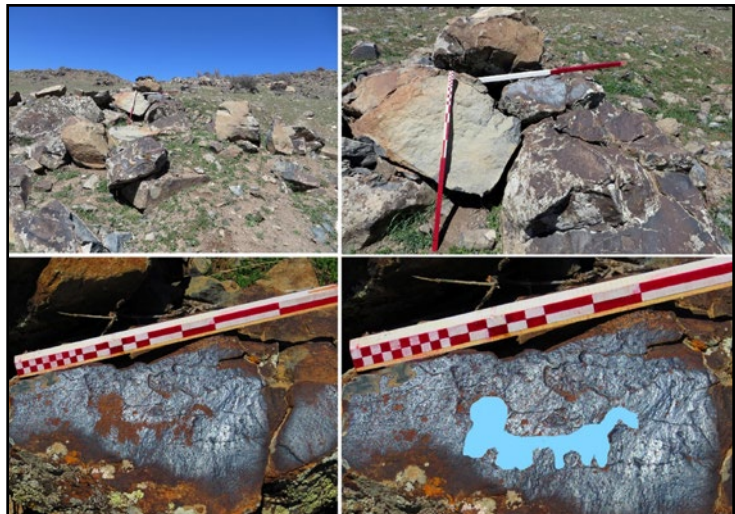
Fig. 6.
Location 5: Panel
with four wild
animals.



Location 6

There is damage to the panel at location 6. It is situated in the western part of Chupughlu Mountain. It probably represents a set of motifs, probably animals. However, they are now not clear enough for more certain identification due to the effects of precipitation. It seems to have been created by an engraving technique. This image, despite its unclear state, does not appear to be an accidental or natural feature [Fig. 7].

Fig. 7. Location 6:
Panel with the
probable image of an
animal.



Location 7

The panel at this location is situated on a huge rock on the eastern side of the Chupughlu Mountain. Now, this panel is severely damaged, and a deep crack has divided the whole image. The visible part of the image contains a hunting scene in which a man has a bow and some arrows in his hands and is hunting a goat-like animal. Another animal was likely depicted on the other part of the panel [Fig. 8].



Fig. 8.
Location 7:
Panel with
a hunting
scene.

Location 8

The panel of location 8, 4 m long and 1.5 m high, is situated on the south-eastern side of the mountain near the apex. It contains two parts; on the left side, there is an image of a goat-like animal while on the right side there is a depiction of a mixed human-animal. Similar motifs have been found in the petroglyphs of Suenguen at Arasbaran [Fig. 9].²²



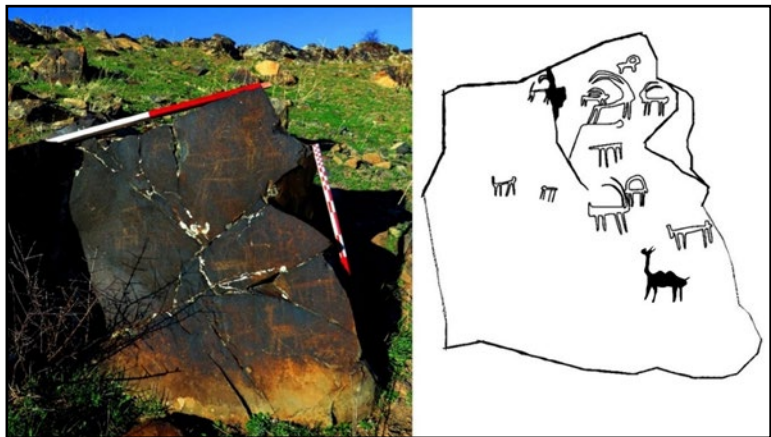
Fig. 9.
Location 8:
Panel with
a mixed image
of human and
animal.

22 Raffar 2003.

Location 9

The panel at location 9 with dimensions of almost 1×2 m is situated to the south-west of the central part of Chupughlu. This panel consists of images of twelve various animals some of which have been carved over other images. It shows that the images may have been rendered at different times as is evidenced also in the varying appearance of the figures and various techniques used. Most images on this panel represent depictions of goat-like animals. There are other unidentified motifs, and an interesting depiction of a camel with two humps. It is the Bactrian camel species originating in Central Asia and as such it represents evidence of the cultural relations with this region.²³ Similar examples of this species of camel have been reported from south-east Iran²⁴, and Khorasan²⁵ [Fig. 10].

Fig. 10.
Location 9: Panel with various types of goat-like animals and Bactrian camel at the south-western part of the site.



Location 10

The panel at location 10 is found on a broken lump of rock with dimensions of almost 2×2 m. It is situated on the apex of the mountain and due to harsh climatic conditions and severe erosion, it was divided into several parts. There are three securely identified images on the panel: a geometric motif on the right side consisting of rectangular representations similar to squares, a member of an uncertain ruminant species in the centre and a horned animal drawn with triangles on the left side [Fig. 11].

Location 11

The colour of this panel is dark brown with dimensions of 1×1 m. It is located in the eastern part of the mountain and includes depiction of a probable ruminant animal and a man and some wavy lines. There is an unidentified object over the depiction of the man, which was carved in a later era [Fig. 12].

23 Mukhareva 2007.

24 Moradi et al. 2013.

25 Vahdati 2011.

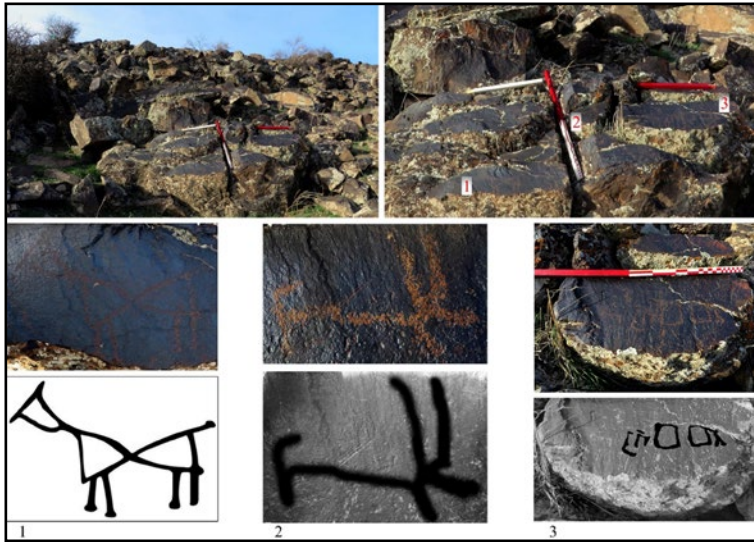


Fig. 11.
Location 10:
Several views of the
panel with animals
and geometric
images.



Fig. 12.
Location 11: Panel
containing images
of goat or deer,
a man and an
unidentified object.

Discussion and conclusions








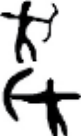
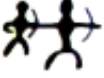











The petroglyphs of Mianeh are presented in this paper for the first time. However, the exploration of this region has not been conducted owing to the lack of required conditions. Due to the diversity of panels, they appear to be unique to the wider region. Amongst the most important themes in this region one can refer to dancing and hunting. We can classify the images under study into animal motifs, human motifs, geometrical motifs, and unidentified motifs. It is assumed, the creators of these works recorded parts of their lives, culture, and rituals within their environment. The majority of the images depict goat-like animals – or other horned ruminants – in various forms, which are a common motif featured in the ancient myths and rituals of Iran from the prehistoric to the historical eras.²⁶ They are comparable with similar pieces of rock art in the north-western Iran and Armenia [Tab. 1].²⁷ All images of the petroglyphs have been created by the means of carving or scratching with a hard object but there are also examples, which were painted. The images as a whole can be divided into three types: scratched, carved, and painted. The technique used in the creation of the designs is similar to other parts of the world.²⁸

Mianeh County with prehistorical and historical sites along with geotouristic landscapes is a region with significant potential in the field of tourism and cultural heritage, which have been sorely neglected. The petroglyphs of Mianeh County, which are regionally unique in light of their diversity, scope, and specific features in the studies of rock art. The rock art of Chupughlu is now, however, at risk of severe endangerment from human activities and environmental factors and many of the panels in the Chupughlu region have already been damaged, much of it caused by natural erosion processes. Most importantly, the difference between day and night temperatures in this area during the winter and summer over time causes cracks to appear on the stone surface and eventually, with the development of deep fissures, some parts of the petroglyphs exfoliate. Thus, parts of petroglyphs become incomplete and the probability of further damage increases, for some of them to the point of being unidentifiable. Some of the panels seem also to have been displaced. Following the expansion of farming lands, these petroglyphs might have been damaged by the farmers. Moreover, during the documentation of the images some signs of vandalism were detected on the petroglyphs in the form of new images that compromise their original appearance. In general, the conditions of the site are inappropriate today and the pieces of rock art are exposed to existential threat. There is an urgent need for a comprehensive plan for the recording of these ancient monuments. The only solution for their preservation is the introduction and adoption of governmental measures.

26 Root 2002; Moradi et al. 2014; Sarhaddi-Dadian et al. 2015; Karimi 2018; Azizi et al. 2011.

27 Tokhatyan 2015.

28 Bednarik 1998.

Mianeh County, Iran	Meshkin Shahr County, Iran	Arasbaran, Iran	Hanjiran, Iran	Uraman District, Iran	Republic of Armenia	Gobustan District, Republic of Azerbaijan
	 (Horshid 2003, fig.4)	 (Rafifar 2003, fig. 1)	 (Ghasrian and Naderi, 2006, fig.2)	 (Ghassimi 2007, fig. 3)	 (Tokhatyan 2015)	 (Farajova 2011, fig. 3a)
	 (Horshid 2003, fig.4)			 (Ghassimi 2007, fig. 24)	 (Tokhatyan 2015)	 (Farajova 2011, fig. 15)
				 (Ghassimi 2007, fig. 25)		 (Farajova 2011, fig. 3b)
		 (Rafifar 2003, fig. 1)	 (Ghasrian and Naderi 2006, fig.2)		 (Tokhatyan 2015)	 (Farajova 2011, fig. 3b)

Tab. 1. Comparison petroglyphs from north-western Iran with neighbouring regions.

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