

**INVESTIGATION, CLASSIFICATION AND ANALYSIS OF MOUNTAIN CEMETERIES IN GORGAN PLAIN
(CASE STUDY: SIAH MARZ KUH AND NERSU CEMETERIES)**

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Abstract: The present study aimed to investigate, classify and analyze Siah Marz Kuh and Nersu cemeteries. The study adopted a descriptive-analytical method relying on historical sources. The research population consisted of the Gorgan Museum. The data were collected using both library and field studies. The results showed that the majority of headstones in Siah Marz Kuh and Nersu cemeteries were upright (vertical) and made of sedimentary river slates. The inscriptions on the headstones were written using Naskh, Nastaleeq and simple-artless scripts. The inscriptions ranged in color mostly from dark to light grey. The intaglios carved in the headstones included circles resembling the moon and the sun (as a symbol of light), single- and double-sided comb, Turbah and beads, weaving supplies such as spindle, bobbin and shuttle as well as weapons such as gun, gunpowder container, sword and daggers.

Key words: Headstones, Inscriptions, Symbolic designs, Geometrical shapes

INTRODUCTION

The human fate is in the hands of an irreversible supernatural power. Death is a strict separation of terrestrial life into another world but not a continuation of it (Janson, 1980). In Iranian culture, a tomb and burial rituals have been particularly important in folklore beliefs. Despite the sources and works already acquired from the past, we still need to edge a long way before we can understand all these beliefs, rituals and their origins (Khosro Nezhad, 1995). From the first human civilizations developed in the world including in the Orient, people have strictly believed in the soul and its immortality. It is not wise to surmise that human did not attach any

importance to the body that contained the soul (Hassani, 2011). Headstones can be considered as the first written books in the world because they recorded the information about human life history, happy days, times of morbidity, profession and occupation of the dead. The inscriptions carved in the headstones reveal a rich culture throughout Iranian territory. Either in pre-Islamic or Islamic era, headstones were carved with indications of life in various shapes to reflect the truth in folklore frameworks (Charee, 2008). The present study investigates, classifies and analyzes mountain cemeteries in Gorgan plain including those in Siah Marz Kuh and Nersu villages.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study adopted a descriptive-analytical method relying on historical sources. A limited, specific research population was selected in order to have better precision in the obtained results. Thus, the cemeteries in the Siah Marz Kuh and Nersu villages were selected as the sample. The data were collected through field study including observation, photography, and extraction of designs and use of graphics software.

Mysterious mountain cemeteries

Of the ancient, plain, mountain and foothill categories of cemeteries, the mountain type is fraught with mysteries and deserves careful consideration. The type and shapes of headstones as well as their designs and symbolic signs are so mysterious that make theorizing very difficult. There are brilliant and grand

headstones in some of the cemeteries of the region including Siah Marz Kuh and Nersu villages. Below are some reasons cited for the existence of these cemeteries:

- It is likely that rebellious militants ended up retreating onto these mountains, sought shelter and lived there. They might have been buried there after their death or were besieged, killed and buried there.
- In the past, many defensive fortresses were built across the northern regions of Iran including the historical Gorgan. It is likely that these fortresses were destructed gradually but their cemeteries have remained to date.
- There were many mausoleums built in the mountains. It is likely that indigenous people used to bury their dead beside such mausoleums in order to seek blessing and forgiveness. In the mountain villages of the region, there are still several mausoleums around which cemeteries have developed. While the mausoleums have been demolished by frost and moisture, the cemeteries remain there.
- It is quite likely that different mountain regions and southern mountains of Gorgan were home to different tribes of herdsmen. They spent summer in the mountains but migrated down to the northern plains of Gorgan in autumn and winter. Later, many of these summer villages were abandoned but their cemeteries remained to date (Matufi, 2008).

A glance at the cemeteries in Siah Marz Kuh village

Siah Marz Kuh village is bound by Kalari Mountain to the northeast and by Shotorpa Mountain to the southeast. The village is three kilometers from Jameh Shuran Valley. Rudbar River flows through the village. It has a temperate mountain climate. The residential texture, with an altitude of 1900 meters, is dense and situated on the gentle slope of the mountain. People speak indigenous Katuli language and are Shia Muslims (Zendeh Del, 2007).

Fazel Abad lies 20 kilometers to the east of Gorgan and 10 kilometers to the west of Aliabad City. From the middle of Fazel Abad junction, an

asphalt road runs south toward the Alborz Mountains. Toward these mountains leading to Mohammad Abad Katul, Siah Marz Kuh is 40 minutes by car (4.5 hours walk) from Fazel Abad. Siah Marz Kuh is the last residential village in Mohammad Abad Katul region. Along this road, there lie respectively the mountain villages of Balachelli, Nersu, Xulin Dareh, Mayan, Alestan and eventually Siah Marz Kuh (alternatively pronounced as Sia Margoo and Siamak Kuh). In this route, two important points deserve attention: (1) Turkish names assigned to different places such as Giz Qal'e, Yuz Bashi, Bulagh Bashi, Huji (Haji) and Ulang; and (2) genuine Persian names inscribed on headstones and other locations. These names include Saam, Nariman, Fereydoun, Farkhan, Aflatoun, etc. (Marquart & Mirahmadi, 1994).

In the entrance of Siah Marz Kuh (which is to the north), there is an old cemetery whose headstones are mostly demolished. At the end of the village (toward southeast), the second ancient cemetery lies on a scenic hill where some of the old headstones of the Safavid era have endured despite the devastating mountain frost. The characteristics of the headstones in this cemetery are as follows:

- More than one-third of the headstones have been demolished by severe mountain frost. The fatal frost in these regions has long been notorious and reported in historical records. For example, the English reporter in Australia wrote in April 20, 1919 that heavy snow in Siah Marz Kuh flattened 200 houses so that around 20000 Tomans cash and commodity belonging to people remained buried under snow (Afshar & Darya Gasht, 1984).
- The oldest headstone in this cemetery dates back to the Safavid era with a date inscription of 1010 AH belonging to a person with Kuhi surname. However, older headstones have been demolished and disintegrated.
- Most of the headstones only carry the name of the dead and their fathers' names. There is scarcity of headstones displaying surnames and tribal affiliation. However, the names of a few tribes such as Mollaghasemi and Tajari could be seen on the headstones. Indigenous elderly believe that the important descendants of this tribe include Mollayan, Abbassian, Dehghanan and Daylamian. The Mollayan tribe is further divided into Safar Khani, Moazeni, Mollaghasemi and Moghasemi orders (Matufi, 2008).

- Headstones are made of river and mountain stones. The latter is called 'Chakali' by the natives. In local dialect, Chakal means high hill or small mountain.
- The inscriptions on the headstones are often written using simple-artless scripts (for lay people), but Naskh, Nastaleeq and Thuluth scripts (for aristocrats) are also used in headstones.
- The headstones lack any considerable artistic ornaments. However, they display a few symbols, ritual and totemic signs that are not unrelated to tribal signs. The most conspicuous signs are single-sided comb, double-sided comb, circles resembling the moon or the sun (as a symbol of the sun and light), Turbah, beads and weapons. Most of the stones have the double-sided comb on them, which could have been a tribal totem carved in the headstones of dead women.
- In the majority of headstones, the date of death contains a few extra zeros or a small diacritic among numbers. The reason is not known though. This, however, is also seen in other old cemeteries of the villages across Mohammad Abad region and a few other cemeteries in Gorgan.
- Interestingly, in the second cemetery (southeast of the village), the majority of luxurious headstones belong to women who might have been thanes' daughters or mothers, sisters and wives to the thanes or big ranchers (Matufi, 2008).

Characteristics of the headstones in Siah Marz Kuh cemeteries

In terms of physical characteristics, the majority of headstones were upright (vertical) and made of sedimentary river slates. The inscriptions on the headstones were written using Naskh, Nastaleeq and simple-artless scripts. The inscriptions ranged in color mostly from dark to light grey. The intaglios on the headstones included circles resembling the moon or the sun (as a symbol of light), single-sided and double-sided combs (probably as a tribal totem that were used for men and women, respectively), Turbah and beads (as a symbol of the dead's piety).

A glance at Nersu village cemetery

Nersu village lies 18 kilometers southwest of Katul County. It is neighbor to the abandoned village of Caylo to the north, Giz Qal'e to the south, Balachi village to the east and Xulin Dareh

to the west. Nersu altitude is 1300 meters. Regarding its appellation, different ideas have been voiced:

- Nersu is a compound word comprising Ner (meaning manger or trough) and Su (meaning water). Thus, Nersu meant a location where the sheep flocked to drink water.
- The owner of Nersu was Saam's father who was called Narim or Nariman from which the word Ner might have been taken and transformed into Nersu over time.
- Nersu is alternatively referred to as Netersu, which was called Abdul Cheshmeh in the past.
- Nersu was pronounced as Nerseh in the middle Persian and Nirnu in Avesta, which means the angel of revelation (Nazari, 1996).

Nersu is one of the most popular summer resorts to Katul residents as well as people living in other villages and cities in Golestan province. Nersu cemetery that is located at the entrance of the village (westward) is very large stretching in a west to east direction. A large number of headstones are furnished with intaglios such as weapon (gun, sword, gunpowder container and dagger) and weaving supplies including spindle, bobbin and comb. Although the headstones were made of mountain slates (Chakali), they were mostly broken into pieces (Matufi, 2008).

Characteristics of the headstones in Nersu cemetery

In terms of physical characteristics, the headstones in Nersu cemetery were upright and the same as those in Siah Marz Kuh cemeteries. They were mostly made of sedimentary stones and ranged in color from dark to light grey. The inscriptions on the headstones are written with Naskh and Nastaleeq scripts. The intaglios carved in the headstones included single- and double-sided comb, weaving supplies including spindle, bobbin and shuttle (probably indicating that the dead was a weaver), and weapons such as gun, gunpowder container, sword and dagger (probably communicating that the dead was a warrior).

RESULTS

The study aimed to investigate, classify and analyze mountain cemeteries in Gorgan plain including Siah Marz Kuh and Nersu cemeteries. The results reveal that Siah Marz Kuh has two old cemeteries with the majority of headstones being broken into pieces due to frost. However, some of the headstones dating back to the Safavid era have remained intact despite the frosty, mountainous climate of the region. The majority of headstones only display the name of the dead and their fathers' names. There is scarcity of headstones displaying surnames and tribal affiliation. All headstones are made of either river slates or mountain slates. The inscriptions on the headstones are often written using simple-artless scripts (for lay people), but Naskh, Nastaleeq and Thuluth scripts (for aristocrats) are also used in headstones. There are no considerable artistic ornaments on the headstones though they are furnished with a few symbols, ritual and totemic signs that may be related to tribal symbols. The most conspicuous intaglios are single-sided comb, double-sided comb, circles resembling the moon or the sun (as a symbol of the sun and light), Turbah and beads. Interestingly, in the second cemetery (southeast of the Siah Marz Kuh village), the majority of luxurious headstones belong to women who might have been thanes' daughters or mothers, sisters and wives to the thanes or big ranchers.

The ancient cemetery of Nersu village is very large lying in a west to south direction. A large number of headstones have intaglios such as weapon (gun, sword, gunpowder container and dagger) and weaving supplies including spindle, bobbin and comb. However, the headstones being made of mountain slates have mostly broken into pieces.

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