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## The burial tradition of Zoroastrians in southern Fars: Baghān, Khonj

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**Abstract:** *Fars province, located in the southern part of Iran, was the center of Zoroastrianism during the Achaemenid and Sasanian periods. The traditions and rituals of this religion were institutionalized in Fars over a millennium, and with the advent of Islam, the people of this region sought to continue these Zoroastrian traditions. The Zoroastrian burial ritual was one of the religious customs of the Zoroastrian community in this region, continuing well into the Islamic medieval period, particularly in the southern part of Fars. In this religion, the body, or “nesu”, had to be kept away from sacred elements such as earth, water, fire, and plants. For this reason, many Sasanian burials were placed in rock-hewn tombs located in mountainous regions. These burial sites are now commonly known as Ostoudan and Dakhmak. In this field study, for the first time, a number of lesser-known Ostoudan examples from the Zoroastrian tradition in southern Fars, specifically in the Baghān region of Khonj, have been identified and are introduced here.*

**Key words:** Ossuary, Ostoudan, Burial, Zoroastrian, Fars, Baghān, Khonj

### Introduction

The patterns of Zoroastrian burial rituals in different periods in Iran have been diverse, including burials in rock-cut tombs, *Ostoudans*, pit graves, permanent tombs, *Dakhmaks*, rock-cut tombs, jar burials, casket burials, and *Borj-e Khamushan*, towers of silence. A large number of ostoudans have been discovered around Persepolis, near the Istakhr area, the slopes of Mount Rahmat, and several others around Naqsh-e Rostam in the cliffs of Mount Hosein.<sup>1</sup> Before the bones were placed in the ostoudan, the body was laid out in an open area to allow the soul to depart. Louis Vanden Berghe divides burial structures into two categories: pits or bone receptacles and niches or ostoudans. He refers to the term pit or bone receptacle as a pit or cavity for the decom-

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<sup>1</sup> Trümpelmann, 1984; Huff, 1988, 1998.

position of the body.<sup>2</sup> Leo Trümpelmann believes that the cavities Vanden Berghe describes as “bone pits” are rectangular depressions carved into rocks, measuring 1.5 to 2 meters in length, 0.5 meters in width, and 0.5 meters in depth, with the human body fitting inside them, leaving only the limbs exposed.<sup>3</sup> These types of cavities, usually located near rock-cut tomb, have often been identified in the mountainous regions of Fars and along the Persian Gulf shores. Some of these sites include: Naqsh-e Rajab,<sup>4</sup> on the slopes of Mount Rahmat near Zangiabad,<sup>5</sup> in the Rahmat mountain area near the Istakhr,<sup>6</sup> on a platform at the foot of Mount Gondashlou,<sup>7</sup> on a large detached stone near Naqsh-e Rostam,<sup>8</sup> in the cut stone surface in Tang-e Khoshk near Siavand,<sup>9</sup> in Eqlid near Abadeh,<sup>10</sup> and above a fortress overlooking Bishapur,<sup>11</sup> as well as several along the Persian Gulf coast, including Siraf,<sup>12</sup> in Lamerd and Mehr counties in southern Fars,<sup>13</sup> Bandar-e Rig in the Genaveh district.<sup>14</sup> In some of the cavities in the Fars region, inscriptions in Sasanian Pahlavi script have been observed.<sup>15</sup>

In Zoroastrian beliefs, four sacred elements, or the “Four *Akhshij*” (water, earth, fire, and air), must remain untainted. Since an impure demon named *Nasuš* caused death, the corpse itself was considered an impurity. To prevent the earth from becoming contaminated, the dead were not buried in the soil.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, they placed the bodies of the deceased on mountains, mounds, and high places where *Dakhmaks* (towers of silence) had been constructed, allowing the bodies to be consumed by birds. Once only the bones remained and were considered “purified” from contamination, the bones were transferred to ostoudans (bone receptacles).<sup>17</sup>

The people of Fars refer to the niches carved into the rocks of mountains as ostoudans (bone containers). This burial practice, rooted in Zoroastrianism, was used during the Sasanian period, utilizing the surfaces of mountains and cliffs for burials, giving rise to a specific burial model known as ostoudan, meaning a place for storing bones. In the field survey, the identification of several of these ostoudans is of particular significance in the southern area of Fars, specifically in the Baghān region of Khonj.

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<sup>2</sup> Vanden Berghe, 1959.

<sup>3</sup> Trümpelmann, 1984.

<sup>4</sup> Kleiss, 1976: 137.

<sup>5</sup> Vanden Berghe, 1959.

<sup>6</sup> Gropp, 1969: 258; Jafari, 2007: 60-67.

<sup>7</sup> Stronach, 1966; Gropp, 1969; Huff, 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Stronach, 1966; Gropp, 1969; Huff, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Gropp, 1969: 243.

<sup>10</sup> Gropp, 1969: 238.

<sup>11</sup> Ghirshman, 1971.

<sup>12</sup> Whitehouse, 1971.

<sup>13</sup> Askari Chaverdi, 2013: 253.

<sup>14</sup> Tofighian & Bastani, 2009: 57.

<sup>15</sup> Gropp, 1969: 285.

<sup>16</sup> Ghirshman, 1971.

<sup>17</sup> Trümpelmann, 1984; Molleson, 2009: 29; Farjamirad, 2015.

## The *Ostoudan* Complex of Baghān

The village of Baghān, part of the Mahmileh district in the Khonj County, is located 45 kilometers from the county center (the city of Khonj) and 320 kilometers from Shiraz (the provincial capital) [Fig. 1]. The Baghān ostoudan complex is situated 2.5 kilometers north of the village of Baghān, in the Mahmileh district, on the southern slope of Mount Siyah (Deng), facing the plain with a southern orientation. The geographical coordinates are UTM: (39° R 070° 74' 06") longitude, 30° 638" 97 latitude, and an elevation of 634 meters above sea level.

The location of the Baghān ostoudan complex lies on the northern slopes of the village, known as Mount Deng, at the foothills where thick conglomerate layers are present. This setting provides suitable conditions for the carving of one of the most important Gurdakhmeh complexes in the southern Fars region. These rocky elevations are divided into various levels with gentle slopes by a deep valley created by the regional fault lines. Inside this V-shaped and steep-walled valley, large rock faces are ideal for the excavation of Gurdakhmeh, while the conglomerate layer and the smooth rock bed provide a suitable surface for creating ostoudans at this location.

The rock-cut tombs studied in this field research vary in shape and size. Some appear to be geometrically framed and rectangular, carved into the conglomerate layers, while others lack geometric structure and are merely large or medium-sized cavities dug into the soft and brittle conglomerate layers. In total, the studied site (the Baghān ostoudan complex) contains six ostoudans openings, which are aligned in a linear fashion from west to east. All of these openings are located on the rocky and cliff side faces of the mountain, facing toward south [Figs. 2-3].



Fig. 1. The location of the Baghān archaeological site in Khonj County, Fars Province, Iran (Source: Fars Province Planning and Budget Organization).



Fig. 2. Baghān ossuaries Nos. 1–6, arranged from left to right (Photo by M. Kiani, 2022).



Fig. 3. Close-up view of the Baghān ossuaries, numbered 1-6 from left to right (Photo by M. Kiani, 2022).

***Ostoudan No. 1:*** This ostoudan is located on the southern face and the rocky bed of Mount Siyah (Deng), at an elevation of 70 meters above the valley floor, facing the plain. The outer section of this ostoudan has been severely damaged over time due to erosion caused by rainfall and human activities, and much of it has been lost. Based on the available evidence, it can be said that this ostoudan originally had a vertically oriented, rectangular opening with a height of 1.5 meters and a width of approximately 3 meters. The upper part of the ostoudan opening was framed by a row of rectangular carvings, of which only a small portion remains visible today. Inside this carved rectangular frame, a row of triangular-shaped protruding decorations was carved horizontally above the entrance. Each of these triangular decorations measured 8 centimeters at the base. A large portion of these decorations has been destroyed, likely due to time and human activities, so that today only 10 of these decorations remain and can still be identified.

The interior of this ostoudan appears as a rectangular cavity with an internal depth of 2.5 meters. The connection between the floor and ceiling with the surrounding walls is not at right angles, but instead shows a slight curvature [Fig. 4].



Fig. 4. Baghān ossuary No. 1 (Photo by M. Kiani, 2022).

***Ostoudan No. 2:*** This ostoudan has an irregular, nearly circular shape with an entrance height of 1.35 meters, a width of 1.5 meters, and an internal depth of 1.2 meters. The outer section of the entrance has been completely destroyed due to erosion and is no longer visible. The interior of this ostoudan is shaped like a rectangular cavity with an arched ceiling, and it can be said that the carving inside the ostoudan has been well executed. The floor is flat, measuring 1.2 meters by 1.5 meters [Fig. 5].



Fig. 5. Baghān ossuary No. 2 (Photo by M. Kiani, 2022).

**Ostoudan No. 3:** The entrance opening of this ostoudan has a square-shaped vertical frame with a height of 1.2 meters and a width of 1.5 meters, with the upper part shaped in an arch. Since the external section and entrance of the ostoudan have suffered erosion and destruction over time, it is not possible to give a precise description of it. The interior of this ostoudan is shaped as a rectangular cavity measuring 1.4 meters by 1.2 meters, with an internal depth of 1.6 meters. The corners at the connection of the floor or ceiling with the surrounding walls are not at right angles, but have a slight curvature. Based on available evidence, the carving inside this ostoudan was done using a pointed pickaxe, with less attention given to surface finishing [Fig. 6].



Fig. 6. Baghān ossuary No. 3 and 4 (Photo by M. Kiani, 2022).

**Ostoudan No. 4:** This ostoudan is located along with ostoudan No. 3, almost adjacent to it. According to existing evidence, in the past, it was separated from ostoudan No. 3 by a stone wall from the natural bedrock of the mountain. However, at present, most of the wall separating the two ostoudans has been destroyed and collapsed. The entrance of this ostoudan has a vertical, nearly rectangular frame, with a height of about 1 meter and a width of approximately 50 centimeters. The interior of this ostoudan is a horizontal, narrow cavity with a relatively deep interior, measuring 2 meters in depth.

The carving inside was done with a pointed pickaxe, followed by a well-executed surface finish [Fig. 6].

***Ostoudan No. 5:*** The entrance of ostoudan No. 5 has a vertical, nearly rectangular frame. A portion of the bedrock of the mountain, due to its natural break, extends at an angle upward from the western corner of the entrance. The height of the entrance of ostoudan No. 5 is about 1 meter, with a width of approximately 40 centimeters. The interior of this ostoudan is quite similar to that of other No. 4, featuring a horizontal, relatively narrow cavity with an internal depth of 2.15 meters. The carving inside was done with a pointed pickaxe, and the surface was well-finished [Fig. 7].

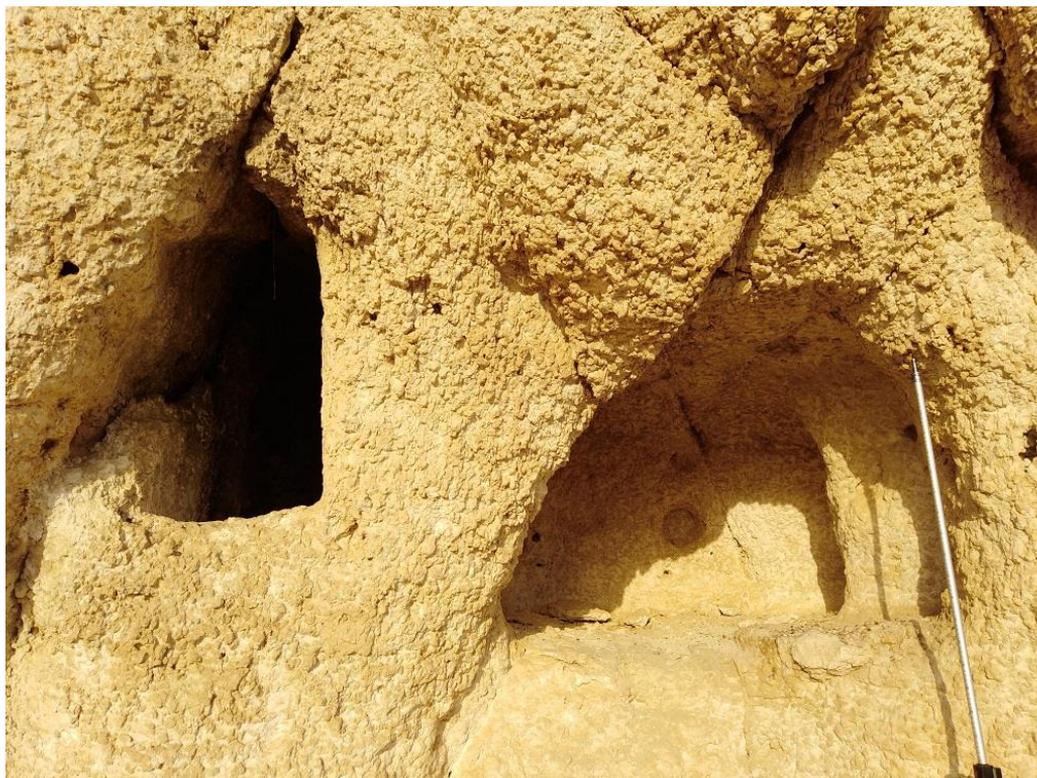


Fig. 7. Baghān ossuary No. 5 and 6 (Photo by M. Kiani, 2022).

***Ostoudan No. 6:*** This Ostoudan has an irregular, nearly circular arch shape. At the far end and inside this ostoudan, traces of small, round cavities can be observed. A part of the eastern inner wall of ostoudan No. 5, in accordance with the natural formation of the mountain, protrudes as a vertical, prominent wall. Currently, the entrance height of ostoudan No. 6 is 1.2 meters, with a width of 1.5 meters and an internal depth of 1.25 meters [Fig. 7].

## Conclusions

The ostoudans of Dasht-e Baghān, which were carved into the rock faces of the mountains, were used for burial purposes. These ostoudans were considered the main storage for bones that were transferred from the Gurdakhmehs (rock-cut tombs). Carved into the heart of the rocks and the stone walls of the mountains, they share common features with other regions of Iran, especially in the Fars region. The unique and distinct architecture of the ostoudans in Dasht-e Baghān is characterized by their arched ceilings and protruding entrances above the ostoudans. The outer facades of the niches of these ostoudans feature grooves designed to direct rainwater away from the ostoudans, preventing water from entering the interior.

Regarding the dating of these sites, based on the triangular decorations on the facade of Ostoudan No. 1 in Baghān, as well as the arched ceilings and the dimensions of the internal space and entrance, these ostoudans can be compared with numerous examples of niches or rectangular cavities carved along the shores of the Persian Gulf (such as Tang-e Khūzī, Sang-e Chelegah Khāledeh, Shaldān, Haraj, Tang-e Bandari, and Beyram), as well as those in the rock faces of Mount Hossein, Rahmat, Zeydon, Ayub, and Zaghe in the Persepolis region of Fars.<sup>18</sup> Since such burial structures in the southern Fars region are associated with Zoroastrian burial traditions and dated back to the late Sasanian period,<sup>19</sup> it is likely that these ostoudans were also used during this period, in accordance with Zoroastrian rites.

Although many pre-Islamic burial traditions continued into the early Islamic centuries, the presence of religious continuity and the artistic cohesion evident in the decoration of these ostoudans, along with the proximity of pre-Islamic archaeological sites such as Guri fortress and Aqrab castle, strongly suggests that these ostoudans belong to the pre-Islamic period, particularly the Sasanian era. Even if these ostoudans were later used during the Islamic period, they would have been considered a continuation of ancient traditions, especially Zoroastrian burial practices in this region. Therefore, based on the available evidence, it is highly probable that the ostoudans in the Dasht-e Baghān region dated to the late Sasanian period.

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<sup>18</sup> Askari Chaverdi, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Askari Chaverdi, 2013.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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