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## Analyzing Architecture of Mithraism Rock Temples

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### Abstract

This analyzes the architecture of rock temples of West and Northwest of Iran, as well as factors influencing their formation. The creation of rock architecture in this area of Iran is influenced by the religious, geographical and political atmosphere of their time. Most of these structures are formed by dominated empires in the first millennium BC. And in some works we are observing their continuity in later periods and change in their functions. One of the reasons that have attracted man to mountain and rock in different schools was the religious structure of community. According to the sanctity of mountains and rocks in the ancient religions, especially in Mithraism, valuable temples and places of worship have emerged in the mountains. Their obvious characteristic is circular dome-shaped spaces; simplicity, arrangement of spaces and the way of creating light that correspond with the tradition of Mithraism in Iran. Mehr Temple in Maragheh, Dashkasan in Zanjan, and Qadamgah Temple in Azarshahr are the rock temples in northwest of Iran that signs and symbols on them indicate the performance of Mithraism duties in these temples. In the West of Iran, Cogan cave in Lorestan, considering the characteristics of Mithraism temples, in a period had function as a temple for the worship of Mithra. This research investigates architectural futures of these temples.

**Keywords:** Rock temples, Mithraism, Northwest of Iran, West of Iran, Worship, Sacred places.

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## **Introduction**

Perfect appearance of exploring the elements of nature and evoking the pure truth of the matter can be found in rock temples that have the dynamic qualities of native architecture and thinking to these areas reflects a nostalgic feeling. The formation of this type of architecture can be investigated from political, geographic and ritual aspects. In all possibilities, the first impression of architectural spaces has been granted to early human by caves. This was his first diagnosis of the power of an enclosed space, caused by natural walls that would prepare his spirit and thought to accept fundamental change of life (Bahar, 1998: 64). Of unique feature of this type of architecture are eternity and totality in comparison to other types of architecture as well as its profound respect towards religious beliefs. In fact, mountain or rock that has placed a cave or residential place inside it, has a power that can preserve history and culture. In addition to thinking about formation of rock architecture in terms of religious belief and respect for nature, creation of this architecture in terms of physical and skeletal aspects and its influence of geographical factors, are also important (Javadi, 1984: 83). The birth and spread of rock architecture often occurred in the first millennium BC, is evident in all parts of the world, especially in Iran. Rock architecture works of Median, Manas and Urartus from the eighth century BC, mostly have been dug in the West and Northwest regions of Iran. Rock architecture in Iran has certain distribution and diversity and also it has its own characteristics each region. This type of architecture is rooted in culture and traditions of each region and its expression can be seen in different ways (Shekari Nayeri, 1992: 4). In many religions, Temple is manifestation of macrocosm (the universe) and human is microcosm. In many religions, the location of Temple is selected on the basis of geographical features (sacred geography) and natural features of environment and associated of temples with some bodies of Nature (such as water, mountains and the sun) were considered to be the most important parameter in determining the location of temples. Location temple in many religions is based on the assumption that it should manifest the positive qualities of environment and counteract the negative effects. Building the temple as a cave in the mountains is another type of relationship of temples with sacred mountains. Such an approach can be seen in temples of religions such as Mithraism and Buddhism, early Hindu temples, the followers of Jainism and some ancient Egyptian temples. In Mithraism, rituals were ran in caves or cave views (Mehraveh). In these temples, sun and light had a significant impact on the direction and structure (Ghodusifar et. al, 2012: 43). Areas of West and North West of Iran, has long been the most important hotspot of human social presence, in which the formation process of ancient societies in prehistoric and historic times is quite obvious and deliberate. Meanwhile, mountainous areas that have led to the creation of rock works, are required a more comprehensive study. Due to the richness and abundance of these works, in this study, the

introduction of rock temples in the West and Northwest are discussed. All these rock works have emerged on the basis of their own logic. The desire for immortality in human has brought him to the mountains and rocks, to begin battle towards rock and to create spaces, helping to meet his goals.

## **Theoretical foundations**

**1. Rock architecture:** Rock architecture means enjoying natural rock formations to create spaces tailored to the needs of man. This type of architecture is the result of the struggle and conflict between man and harsh nature, in order to create shelter and housing (Shahbazi and Montazer, 1992: 54).

In rock architecture, natural stone is the main body of the created spaces and other materials have a lesser role. Formation of spaces is the normal reaction to their performance and changes created by humans, is to meet their needs. In this type of architecture, formation of spaces begins from small space and gradually reaches to the large one and spaces are carved in the rock mass. Enduring of stones of these works has played a big role in the reconstruction of the history of civilized nations. In fact, humans, in terms of their history and culture, are more indebted to rock architecture than any other typical architecture. So if in the Iranian territory, there were no available rock architecture and rock reliefs, with their basic features, certainly the history of art and certain aspects of religious beliefs of our ancestors and forefathers would not be so clear and bright to us (Homayoun, 1975).

**2. Mithraism:** Before converting to Islam, different religions, including Mazdak, Buddhism, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Judaism and Mithraism were common in Iran that each of them had their beliefs, traditions and different worship places and each of them had their own unique architecture. But between them, followers of Mithraism, according to their certain ideas, for the construction of temple and their place of worship turned to mountains and caves. Because of their belief in the immortality and undying, they formed their architecture based on rock architecture and so it was, that today almost all architecture researchers attribute rock architecture to Mithraism (Borna and Balali Oskouyi, 2010).

One of the pillars of Mithraism has been based on invincibility and immortality of phenomena. Followers of Mithraism believed that the sun is invincible and immortal and this invincibility and immortality has driven them to sanctify mountains, because the mountain itself is stable, invincible and immortal (Shojadel and Alipour, 2005). Meeting the needs of worship in Mithraism was being accomplished in Mithraeum. According to this fact that followers of Mithraism believed that Mithra was born in cave or from stone and also that killing a cow by him was done in a cave. Caves were the first places that followers of Mithraism have used for worship and in the absence of a natural

cave, they would make one by making artificial caves underground and forming its entrance similar to natural caves. Design of Mithraeum was often rectangular and had arch-like roof. In larger Mithraeums plan was like three attached parallel corridors that the central corridor was wider and lateral corridors were made narrower with shorter ceiling. Under the roof of the caves, sometimes were colored as the color of the sky and were designed by stars, because the cave was a sign of the dome of the sky. The height of entrance was made short and the altar that was the most important part of the building was built at the end of the cave (Azad, 2005).

## **Instances of Research**

### **Rock temples in North West of Iran**

**1. Mehr Temple:** "Varjou" village, 6 km south of Maragheh in direction to Takab, and on the sidelines of an ancient way, has a historical cemetery that has been registered with the number 9416 in the national index and its works familiarize us with the ancient world up to 3 thousand years ago. In the local language, this village is called, "Varovie", which means "House of the sun" in Turkish language. Its meaning has a key role in understanding the concept of the series (Abbasi, 2004).

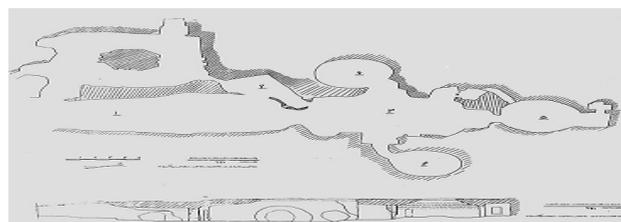
This building complex, like many other buildings in different periods, had different applications. About causes of the boom in rock areas including villages, castles and temples in the Islamic period, it has been stated in historical paper that king and rich people have inhabited in these areas because of fear of natural disasters. On the other hand, various divisions of the Sufis and mystics, following the retreat of the Prophet in the cave have come to these shelters. Temple has two major parts with quite complicated plan. The entrance width is variable from 4.70 to 7.20 meters that ends with low slope to inward. After the entrance corridor, central hall and spaces around it can be seen (Ghaie Moghadam, 2008). At the beginning of entrance, a square-shaped passage (probably belonging to the Islamic period) has been opened and a hexagonal rock column divides the space is into four part that on the top of each, there is a light well. Space organizing element in this complex is the central rectangular hall that is connected to triple domed parts of its surroundings by three access way. Circular room, which is one of the coolest parts of this Temple, has symptoms of Mithraic hierarchy and also effects of the extensions and Islamic decorations that are related to applicator of this part of the mosque. Recently in the East and West direction of complex, spaces have come out of the soil, which so far no action has been taken to identify them (Shekari Nayeri, 2006).



**Figure 1. Circular room in Mehr Temple and the light well on the top**

**Reference: Recognition Mehr temple in Maraghe. October -2011**

Architecture of Mehr temple, according to the writings and historical narratives, include elements that its examples can be seen in the architecture and decoration of the next Iranian periods. It is said that on the roof Mithraeum, motifs of Mithraism culture such as sun as the source of earthly blessings has been drawn that its works with other motifs still remain in later periods (Varjavand, 2002). Underground architecture is also known as Mithraism Temples, because it evokes the cave that Mithra was born in and also making dark halls and illuminated halls, approves the rules of Mithraism temples. So that it is said, passing through them and reaching to bright spaces, is reminiscent of the Mithraism journey. Follower should, after austerity and traversing the darkness, prepare himself for reaching the hierarchy of light (Mokhlesi, 1992). Mithraism has spread from the Parthian era to the 4th century AD and Roman domination in European countries. However, about its birthplace, that with the assumption of many researchers is Iran, few signs have remained. Discovering the Mehr temple in Maragheh of Iran is an important document that explains the history and civilization of Iran (Shekari Nayeri, 2006).



**Figure 2. Plan and section of Mehr Temple**

**Reference: Rock temples in Iran. Monthly Art Magazine, Issue 17.**

**2. Dash Kasan rock temple (*Shirin and Farhad*):** Dash Kasan rock temple is placed in the province of Zanjan and distances ten kilometers southeast of Soltaniyeh and in the East of village "Weir" on the mountain. In the naming of "Dash Kasan" must be stated that "Dash" is a Turkish

word, which means rock and "Kasan" means abrasive. Together they mean stonemason, which is taken from the quarry near that location and it has long been used till today (Mirfatah, 1997: 241).



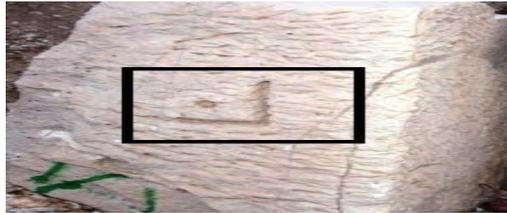
**Figure 3. Exterior view of Dashkasan Temple**

**Reference: Archives of Zanjan Cultural Heritage**

The building has been made in an area of 614 square meters and is surrounded by stone walls. Plan of temple, covers a rectangular area with length of 400 meter and its width from north to south, fluctuate from 300 meters to 50 meters. The main area of Dash Kasan Temple, where all the artifacts decorations belong to, has a large court yard, in which remaining of a swimming pool can be seen that surely during the boom of the temple, had a specific ritual application (Tabouti, 1998).

The main area of the building, which also effects so mysterious, is a fusion of Islamic art and Chinese decorations, two massive dragons that each has hidden secrets in their magical maze, and central character of the temple is based on them. Islamic ornamentation such as beautiful arabesques, eye-catching Muqarnas and accurate frames, has given the temple a glorious manifestation. In the courtyard, there is a cave on the southern side of the rock wall and two caves in the eastern and western sides. Between these three caves, beautiful mentioned carvings have been painted. But the symmetrical double dragon that each are measured about 3.5 meters with their frame, have more attraction (Mirfatah, 1997: 243). Dragon motifs, arcades with arabesques and floral decorations, and stone Muqarnas, reflect the good taste of patriarch sculptresses. But the main map that looks like a cross or swastika, and its three caves that are comparable to Taq-e Bostan caves, draws a far more ancient history for this unique and valuable work in mind the of viewer (Golzari, 2001). A group of archaeologists and experts classify this area to the period before Islam and time that Mithraism had the most important speech in the sphere of religion. Among those who believe in Mithraism of the temple, is Dr. Massoud Golzari, archaeologist and university professor, who states "building was built at a time when Mithraism was common in Iran and the most important for that is the cross shape of temple". It seems that the swastika was the symbol of the sun

cycle (Mithra cycle) and is the most important symbols of Mithraism (It should be noted that in Mithraism believe, symbolic role swastika with four spokes, symbolizing the four elements: water, earth, air and fire, that are four symbol of creation). The Swastika has been found first time around Khuzestan and was related to five thousand years BC. Mithraism characteristic of cemetery reflects the geographic extent of North, North West and West of Iran as the source and gathering place of Mithraism and shows its spread in area (Bakhtourtash, 1977).



**Figure 4. Swastika on the rocks of the Dashkasan**

**Reference: Archive of cultural Heritage, 2013**

In the intervals of the seventh century AD onwards and in the golden ages of Sufism, many underground catacombs, has been converted into a convent and angle and a good place for isolation of Sufis. Perhaps it can be said that Dashkasan Temple has been turned to monastery, in passing time. Dashkasan Rock Temple, whether is temple or monastery or shrine, it is a valuable work that introduces us the type and specific style of architecture of pre-Islamic and Islamic periods. It should be regarded as a national work and its incomplete drilling remains should be completed (Mousavi, 2005).

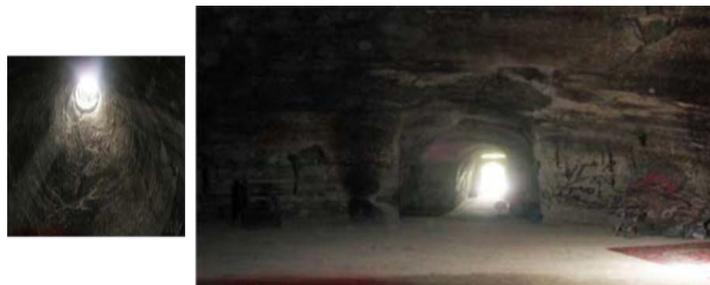
**3. Qadamgah Temple:** Forty kilometers to Azarshahr in the direction of Maragheh, in the sub path to the Dinabad village, in the highlands north of the village and within walking distance of the old cemetery, this temple was created in the rock. The outside perspective of temple is very simple and at first glance may not even attract the attention of passersby. This perspective is a small opening beneath a rock shelter. Aforementioned rock is gray to white and is sedimentary rocks type. Beneath the rock a river flows and small waterfall pours into it.



**Figure 5. Entrance of Qadamgah Temple**

**Reference: Rock temples in Iran. Monthly Art Magazine, Issue 17.**

After passing through the entrance we enter to the main corridor of the temple. The length of corridor is 80.7 and the width is 1.6 meter. Hallway ceiling has been prepared as cradle. Corridor of temple leads to a room with 3.5 \* 4 meters long and width. From the room by climbing a step with a width of 60 cm and a height of 30 cm we enter to the main area (Ahmadi, 1996). The main area of the Qadamgah Temple is one of the coolest and most attractive spaces that can be thought about an ancient edifice. This space that totally is drilled in the cave is a cone with a base diameter of 15 to 15.70 meter. Cone height is 12.30 meters and diameter of light well is 105 cm. The walls have been cut on a regular basis from the bottom to top of the cone. Only on the right body of the entrance corridor we face with simple carvings of a small altar.



**Figure 6. Interior and light well space of Qadamgah Temple.**

**Reference: Rock temples in Iran. Monthly Art Magazine, Issue 17.**

The sanctuary consists of a rectangular frame, in which a sharp curve and three depressions have been dug into Muqarnas, it represents that the creation of this sanctuary belongs to very new era and does not match with time of creation of Temple not in term of proportion and not in term of formation. At the top of the cone, light well has been created with diameter of 105 cm, to supply light inside the building (Varjavand, 1976).

Totally it must be said that despite simple and without ornament cuttings in Temple, the use of the golden rays of light into the Temple, was done so consciously and artistic that it would affected worshipers in a way that the greatness of divine glory and power of God's would reveal to them. Thus it can be drawn that there is a powerful relation between the creation of temple and praising the light. So they wanted to show the glory of the sun and its bright rays, which are falling like golden lance toward earth, to the worshipers of Gods in the most interesting and the most desirable space. In other words, using sunlight had a big role in formation of this charismatic and romantic temple that affects any religious human (Varjavand, 1976).

### **Rock temples in west of Iran**

**1. Cogan Temple:** The cave is located in the valley of the same name in 6 km south of the village of Cogan village. Cogan cave with two floors is one of the unique attractions of Lorestan. The cave is one of the strangest and most unique caves in Iran, which has different classes of floors, pools of water and garret. The village is located in the Cheshmak region in 44 km south of Khorram Abad (Ali Jabbari, 2016: 142). This cave has available rooms for use and it is an example of Parthian rock architecture. In addition, it is also attributed to the Mithraism. Total area of embedded spaces in this handmade cave is about 281 square meters. And the noteworthy points in this cave are water tanks inside rooms. The height of the rock hill on the entrance of the cave is about 25 meters from the bottom of the valley and the height of embedded entrance that is dug in cave, is about 8 meters.

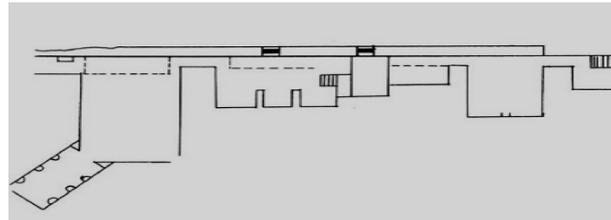


**Figure 7. Interiors of Cogan Temple**

**Reference: Features of Cogan cave, Yafte News station, 2014.**

This entry is open to the north and along the western direction, some window are carved monolithic on the rock, overlooking the adjacent valley, in difference level and different distances. The first part of the cave has several rooms and auxiliary spaces. This part, after going through a corridor and some stairs reaches to the second part of the cave. The second part of the cave is formed by several rooms, interfaced corridors and separated altar-like spaces. General floor of the second part of the

cave is about 3.4 meters above the first floor of the cave. Most of the embedded spaces in cave, from entrance to the end, have difference in level proportion to windows. The total area of embedded spaces in this handmade cave is about 281 square meters. The cave that had a religious use, examples of rock architecture Parthian. Pottery and archeological evidence of piedmont areas adjacent to the river are compatible to the archaeological evidence early second millennium BC and later (Azad, 2005).



**Figure 8. Plan of Cogan temple**

**Reference: Rock temples in Iran. Monthly Art Magazine, Issue 17**

### Result and review

| Temple                                 | Location  | Period                               | Type of Architecture          | Characteristics  | Signs of Mithraism Temple  |
|--|---|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|--|
| 1. Mehr Temple (Masume Shrine)         | Northwest of Iran<br>East Azarbaijan (Maragheh) | Parthian                             | Complex plan<br>one floor     | -Two major part (entrance hall, central hall and area around it)<br>- Organizing element of space: a central rectangular hall<br>- Development and extensions in Islamic periods | -Circular room and light well in it<br>-Existence of altar<br>-Decorative motifs<br>-Signs of waterways    |
| 2. Dashkassan Temple (Shirin & Farhad) | Northwest of Iran (Soltaniyeh)                  | Sassanid or patriarch (Two versions) | Rectangular plan<br>one floor | -Large courtyard, swimming pool.<br>-The main area a fusion of Chinese Islamic Art.  | -Existence of swastika motif<br>-The swastika-shaped plan that is the most important symbols of Mithraism. |
| 3. Qadamgah Temple                     | Northwest of                                    | Before                               | Conical                       | -Existence of little altar in rectangular frame  | -Using the golden rays of light into the temple  |

|                    |   |          |                                      |   |   |
|--------------------|---|----------|--------------------------------------|---|---|
|                    | Iran<br>East<br>Azarbaijan<br>(Azarshahr)     | Islam    | one floor                            | -Similar to Kandovan bounds   |   |
| 4. Cogan<br>Temple | West of Iran<br>Lorestan<br>(Khorram<br>abad) | Parthian | Rectangular<br>plan<br><br>one floor | - Two-floor cave<br><br>- Part one and part two of cave has<br>several rooms<br><br>- Pottery compatible to the early<br>second millennium BC | Water tanks in room<br><br>Nested corridors |

## Conclusion

Rock architecture is one of the most difficult known architecture that at first was used as shelter and housing and then due to inducing a sense of security and peace, has become a good place to worship and doing religious orders. Religious structure of community was one of the reasons that have attracted man to mountain and rock in different schools. The sanctity of mountains and rocks in the ancient religions, especially in Mithraism, have forced followers of Mithraism to make valuable temples and places of worship in the mountains. In North West of Iran, these temples are more diverse than in West of Iran and signs and symbols on them, indicate the performance of Mithraism duties in these temples. Mehr Temple in Maragheh, Dashkasan in Zanjan, and Qadamgah Temple in Azarshahr are the rock temples in northwest of Iran that are totally devoid of any statue, with completely Iranian effects and are different from European Mithraism temples. Their obvious characteristic is circular dome-shaped spaces; simplicity, arrangement of spaces and the way of creating light that correspond with the tradition of Mithraism in Iran.

Cogan temple in West of Iran, which is actually a two floor cave and has arches, corridors and artistic carvings, was used as a Mithraism temple in period and has very different characteristics and plan compared to other Mithraism temples in northwest of Iran. Mithraism characteristic of cemetery reflects the geographic extent of North, North West and West of Iran as the source and gathering place of Mithraism and shows its spread in area. With entrance of Islam, Mithraism temples were used by Sufis and their followers and by doing some changes; these temples have become a worship place for them. Mithraism has spread from the Parthian era to the 4th century AD and Roman domination in European countries. However, about its birthplace, that with the assumption of many researchers is Iran, few signs have remained. Discovering these Temples are an

important document that proves the valuable history and civilization of Iran. Since there are few signs left from this long period of Persian civilization, we should make a worthy protection of them, in order to discover the secrets of Iranian civilization's glory.

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