



Astōdān (Stone-Carving Ledges): Two New Pahlavi Stone Inscriptions in Naqsh-e Rostam Marvdasht Site Nrs1 and Nrs2

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ABSTRACT

Before Zoroastrian religious doctrines, ancient Iranians used to bury their deceased in the soil. However, with the spread of Zoroastrianism, burial methods changed in some areas of the Iranian plateau. Since cremation and burying of the dead were considered an unforgivable sin in the Minuy-e Khrad and Vendidad, the Zoroastrians must keep the bodies of the dead away from these elements to prevent contaminating sacred elements such as water, soil, and plants. Further, according to Zoroastrian religious beliefs, since the world inside the soil was stagnant, dark, and silent related to Ahriman, Zoroastrians tried to separate the soul of the dead from the body as soon as possible and lead him to heaven and the light world. Exposing the bodies on the mountains or in the towers, stripping the flesh off the bones by vultures and birds, and cleaning the bones through sunshine were a precursor to putting the cleaned bones of the dead in tombs. One burial method was putting the deceased in an Astōdān. Those are niches excavated in rocks. Some of them have Pahlavi inscriptions. This research has been done with an analytical-descriptive method to examine Astōdāns and introduce two burial Pahlavi inscriptions. They were inscribed on two Zoroastrian Astōdāns belonging to the late Sassanid period on the rock walls of Naqsh-e Rostam Mountain.

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Introduction

What is Astōdān and what does it mean in the literature of linguistics and archaeology? Are the Avestā and Pahlavi sources in relation to the burial closely consistent with the present-day structures from an archaeological point of view? With this attitude, the studied method should be examined from both the linguistic and archaeological perspectives to achieve a clearer answer to the research questions and purpose with the help of data integration. The word Astōdān in New Avesta is Uzdāna (Bahrami, 1990: 272), Uzdānēm (V.7.5), and its Pahlavi equivalent Uzdahist means «Zarfe Astōdān» or «Ostokhān Dān» (Bartholomae, 2004: 413). In the Pahlavi texts is a combination of two words meaning «bone» and the suffix Dān means «container» or «the place where the bones emptied of meat» (Shahbazi, 1987: 114) and also «disintegrated bones» are placed (Modi, 1877: ff7). Henning believes that this word is originally derived from the Avestān word Atomand meaning «material» or «earthy» (Henning, 1943: 47). In Sogdian texts, the word askasē is used is equivalent to the word Astōdān and its etymology (Gharib, 1995: 61). In the text of Shāpūrgān stwn' manuscript, the word stwn' is also mentioned as the meaning of Astōdān (Durkin-Meisterernst, 2004: 56). Nevertheless, from the linguistic point of view, the difference between Astōdān and other burials of the Sassanid era such as «Dakhmag», «ašwar» and «aspānūr» (Vashaghani Farahani, 2021: 285-306) that each of these words with different etymologies with different meanings, is not specified so many. So far, the word is used only in two late Sassanid burial inscriptions. One in the burial inscription of Meydānak Kāzerun (Tafazoli, 1995: 177-182) and the other in an inscription (Fig. 1) that we discovered in 2016 around the works of Naqsh-e Rajab and in the north of Mehr Mountain (Atabakifar & Ebrahimi, 2021: 186-204). From the archaeological point of view, the traditional method of burial is more obvious. Relatively in the Sassanid era, Astōdān were called «single niche or crescent-shaped spaces» that were created in the vertical wall of rocks (Fig. 2). The formation of this type of burial method spread by extending the Zoroastrian instructions in the plateau of Iran and the homogeneity of religion and government and from the political side with the formation of the government of Frataraka in Pars and the family

of Āturpātakā in Āzerbaijan. The governments that were the first starters of the Zoroastrian religion in the plateau of Iran imitated the tombs of the great Achaemenid kings and spread Gōrs, Dakhmags, and Astōdān compatible with the instructions of the Zoroastrian religion in the mountain and rocks (Von Gall, 1996: 142-148). The purpose of the present research is to confirm the literary sources with Sassanid era burial structures and to introduce two niche-Astōdāns in the rocks of Naqsh-e Rostam Mountain which have discovered Pahlavi Ketabi inscriptions from the late Sassanid era. The text of inscriptions, one in six lines and the other in five lines is written in scratch style and includes the construction of Astōdān (Dakhmags) that two Zoroastrians made for their soul.

Methodology

The writing of classical Greek and Roman authors, Avesta texts of Vendidad, and Zoroastrian Pahlavi literature along with the writings of Iranian and Arab historians in the first Islamic centuries are among the important sources in the research of burial traditions in the Sassanid era. In addition, the Persian poems and the travelogues of the Western travelers who entered Iran widely during the Safavi era provide a great contribution to the method of burial in the historical and Islamic periods. In this research, documentary and field methods were used in data collection. It was attempted by benefiting from archaeology and linguistics studies (Pahlavi words dictionary), comparing it with the Sassanid sources (Pahlavi texts), and continuous field investigations (objective observation) to describe these two newly discovered burial inscriptions and their related Astōdān around the mountain of Naqsh-e Rostam.

Discussion

Burial methods

The transformation of burial rites and methods with the spread of the Zoroastrian religion in the plateau of Iran followed with different procedures, which archaeological sources provide us with a wide range of these transformations today. A significant number of Astōdān and other burial structures related to the Sassanid era were created around the city of Istakhr, Persepolis (Herzfeld, 1935: 39) and Naqsh-e Rostam (Gropp & Nadjmabadi, 1970:

205) and in the birthplace of «Farte Dār» and «Sassanid» kings that some of them have inscription related to late Sassanid era. This type of burial in eastern Iran, the Arabian Peninsula (Kennet, 2007: 86-122), Mesopotamia, Susa (Boucharlat, 1991: 72), Tell Malian (Balcer, 1978: 86-92), and Qomes (Bivar, 1970: 157), due to various religious beliefs and less cultural dominance of the Sassanid government, it was not popular. In Vendidad, in Ahūra Mazdā reply to Zoroaster «about the first purity of the earth», three types of burial are mentioned. (1) Leaving the dead bodies on the ground in front of the sun. (2) The burial method. (3) Collecting and putting the bones of the deceased in «Dakhmag» which here refers to the various methods of burial including Astōdān (Atabakifar & Ebrahimi, 2021: 186-204). The results show that in the beginning, the Zoroastrian religion did not apply much strictness to burying the dead in the soil. However, the construction of «public Dakhmag» or «tower of silence» only spread in central Fars around the cities of Istakhr and Bishapur, where the cleaned bones of the deceased were transferred from these Dakhmags to the nearby Astōdān or other types of burials (Ebrahimi, 2021: 186). Several centuries later, at the end of the Sasanian period, Zoroastrians, especially in the eastern regions of Iran, were forced to build "public Dakhmags" according to religious teachings, the surrounding geography, and the difficulty of building separate Dakhmags and Astōdāns. In these Dakhmags, both "Hvare Daresa-kar" and "burial" ceremonies were performed (Jackson, 2008: 446). This process, which intensified during the Islamic era with the religious strictness of the Islamic sects toward Zoroastrians, although it did not create much difference in the structural and traditional nature of burial, the methods of burial were limited. Its diversity was reduced, so that public Dakhmags and kates (Nesā Khāne) in the desert areas and (Khereft Khaneh) in the mountainous areas of the southwest were increasingly popular in the Zoroastrian society. Putting corpses in public Astōdāns or towers of silence and special place called «Bhandār» or «Chahe Ostōkhān» which took place in the open air, made the commentators of Zand and the western travelers equate it with the Sassanid era «Astōdān» (which is a separate place for putting cleaned bones inside the rocks after the ceremony of Hvare Daresa-kar). This caused many interpretations of

the etymology of the word Astōdān which means «tank», «stove», «structure», «substructure», «tripod» and «bone store» from the texts of Vendidad. In Vendidad, it is pointed out that «Mazdā worshiper should build an Astōdān that the rainwater does not stop, somewhere far from the crossing of dogs, foxes, and wolves. They should build a temple of stone, mortar and soil» (Vendidad, 6, 50-51).

A combination of these clauses with «Astōdān - like structures» can be described in three groups. (1) All stone structure Astōdāns, such as around the city of Istakhr, Takhte Jamshid, Naqsh-e Rostam, Bishapūr of Fars (Ghirshman, 1971, Taf5/2). Mountain Zane of Marvdasht and Sar Mashhad of Kazeroun (Trümpelman, 1994: 29-37). Rock ledges of Khārk Island (Farjamirad, 2015: 270). Rock ledges in Kouh-Rang Bakhtiāri (Roustaei, 2016: 41-42). Niche Astōdāns of the region of Boyer Ahmad (Zehbari, 2014: 56) and Niche Astōdāns of Khūzestān plain (Kleiss, 1978: 89). (2) Made of plaster and mortar Astōdāns similar to the plaster enclosures of Bandiān Dare Gaz (Rahbar, 2010: 168). Plaster enclosure of Palangerd Eslamābād-e Gharb (Khosravi et al., 2018: 51-73). (3) Soil Astōdāns meaning all kinds of clay pots and baked clay molds. Clay pots discovered in Tūrkeštān in the late Sassanid era (Ghirshman, 1993: 39). Common Astōdāns of baked clay in the region of Soqd, Khārazm, Marv, and Khāš (Pugachenkova, 1994: 227). Some of these clay pots were placed on Gōr hāvani and stone shaft (Mil Gōr) like the clay pots above the east of Tal-e Takht Pasargād, Naqsh-e Rostam and a wide area of Marvdasht plain (Ebrahimi, 2014: 32-34). Clay pots above separate Astōdān with a stone base from Tāgh-e Bostān and Bishapār with images of gods (Ghirshman, 1993: 396-398). Clay pots above the Tang-e Karam Fasā (Stronach, 1966: 224). Above the single column above Naqsh-e Rostam, above Tang-e Jelō Semirom and Bāgh-e Bodreh Marvdasht (Vandenberghe, 1969: 46). Above the so-called «Do Gōr Do Pā» in the village of Shush-e Soflā in Bāst district (Farjamirad, 2015a: 357). Above the Mil Gōrs which writers have discovered around the lake of Dorūdzan dam in Marvdasht (Ebrahimi, 2014: 146).

In all of these cases, only the bones of the dead were buried after being transferred from the Dakhme Āftāb to the burial place. Among these, the most common reference to the construction

of Astōdān in Vendidad includes the first group, which is closely related to the creation of niche-like in the mountain's rock (Schmidt, 1953: 57). Our investigation in the Marvdasht plain showed that in the lower part of these, which are often related to the late Sassanid era, small grooves have been provided to exit rainwater, according to the story of Vendidad. In one case around Naqsh-e Rajab where an Astōdān was created in the form of a small hole, this was well observed, so that a small storage pit was built next to this structure for the outflow of rainwater (Atabakifar & Ebrahimi, 2021: 201). Our investigations also revealed several «small and separate stone coffins» from the late Sassanid era around the Marvdasht plain and Tang-e Khošk Sivand area, which are believed to be the same

Astōdān which are called «Zarfe Astōdān» or «Ostokhān Dān» (Fig. 3). These separate stone Astōdāns are mostly reported in Tāg-e Bostān and Bishapūr areas (Ghirshman, 1993: 396-398). However, today Astōdāns are often called that were created inside the mountain rocks and had a stone door on the outside. The recesses and grooves that have been created at the entrance of the Astōdān are proof of this claim (Edmonds, 1934: 189). We were lucky that we could discover the only example of these carved stone doors next to one of these «Niche Astōdān» located in the upper rocks of Naqsh-e Rostam (Fig. 4), which is a great help to solve the mystery and how blocking the exterior of these Niche Astōdān.



Figure 1: The Pahlavi inscription around Naqsh-e Rajab in Mehr Mountain, discovered by the authors in 2016, and the word Astodan is written in it (Authors).



Figure 3: A separate Zarfe Astōdān or Ostokhān Dān, Tang-e Koshk area, Sivand, Marvdasht (Authors).



Figure 2: A view of two Niche Astōdāns with the pattern of fire flares above it; Eastern valley of Persepolis (Authors).



Figure 4: Fragments of the carved door of a Niche Astōdān, discovered in the upper rocks of Naqsh-e Rostam (Authors).

Newly – discovered inscription

Today, different types of Sassanid burial methods have been revealed to us with the help of burial inscriptions and religious writings (Frey, 1972: 152-156). Archaeological surveys and excavations have also changed our attitude toward Sassanid burial methods. The formation of these burials has been created along with religious teachings, the geography of the environment, government laws, and the financial ability of individuals and has gradually covered a wide range of public culture. In our opinion, such as Dōkhtar Gabr Eqlid (Hintz, 2006: 313), šōqāb Būshehr (Mirfatāh, 1988: 52-53), Sirāf stone coffins (Whitehouse, 1968: 22), Hasir Abād cemetery in Ahvāz (Rajabi, 2013: 82-88), Tang-e Khōšk Sivand (Gropp, 1969: 243), Gōr hōfre sangi on the coast of the Persian Gulf (Towfiqyān & Bāstāni, 2016: 23), magnificent Astōdān, Dakhmags around Istakhr (Gropp, 1969: 258), and the graves that discussed before, all belong to the upper ranks of the Sassanid society and Gōr Khōmrehei. Stone mounds (Khareft Khāneh) and Havani (Jōqani), which are widely scattered in the plateau of Iran and their construction did not cost much, belonged to the ordinary people and the lower classes of the society. Not only the sayings of Nizām al- Mōlk about the Shahr-e Rey's Astōdān (Nizām al-Mōlk, 1955: 187) but also the inscription of Dōkhtar Gabr Eqlid proves that the amount of 12000[dirhams] was spent for the construction (Gropp, 1969: 241) which included a very high figure in its time. Undoubtedly, constructing an Astōdān also involved a huge cost that could only be offered by rich people and high rank. Our investigations in Marvdasht plain showed static of the Astōdān created in the Sassanid era and the early Islamic era including a minimal share compared to the Gōr Havani (Jōqani) and Gōr stone mounds (depending on the ordinary people). This shows that rare people have built Astōdān and other noble graves (Ebrahimi, 2014: 36). However, a small share of Astōdān is concentrated in the city of Istakhr and the works of Naqsh-e Rostam, which is a sign of a kind of social welfare of the people of this city and its surrounding villages (Fig. 5). In addition, the city of Istakhr, which was considered one of the centers of science and writing in the Sassanid era and several centuries after Islam (Masoudi, 1977: 106) had

skilled scribes that today we have many Pahlavi inscription written by them. More clearly, the ritual city of Istakhr, which is considered the birthplace of Sassanid dynasty, was a suitable environment for the creation of Astōdān and other magnificent tombs. The first Astōdān with the inscription that we investigated is located 205 m northeast of the tomb of Darius the Great (Fig. 6).

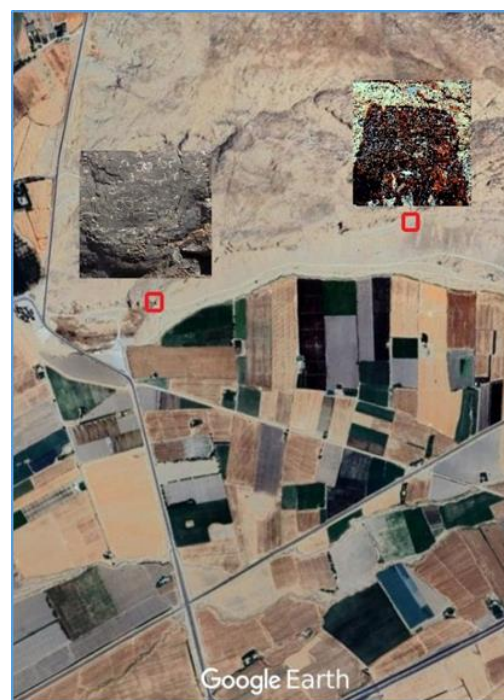


Figure 5: The position of the inscription Nrs1 on the left side of the image and the inscription Nrs2 on the right side of the northeastern slope of Naqsh-e Rostam rocks (Google Earth, 2024).

Of the four Astōdān carved in this place, it is tough to access this Astōdān with a dimension of 45×45 cm and with an internal depth of 40 cm is located at a height of 6 m from the ground and in the hearth of rock. The area around the Astōdān is polished to the size of 10 cm, which has a «dome-like view» in the upper part (Fig. 6). Of course, this dome-like view has been warmly observed in most of Astōdān of Marvdasht' plain, which is a sign of allegory of the sky and also the ascension from the earthy world to the world of eternity (just as in the construction of Islamic domes, the transformation of square shape into circle have had the same deep meaning). In the lower part of this Astōdān, a Pahlavi Ketābi inscription was written at a distance of 1.30 m from the ground and by order of one of the Zoroastrians at the end of Sassanid era (Fig. 7). The scribe

who wrote this inscription in 6 lines choose a smooth natural space with the dimension of 20×30 cm due to the irregularity of the rock and then started writing the letters of the inscription. This newly-discovered inscription which we have named Nrs1, is not very deep and seems to have been struck with a sharp object, as far as its traces are still visible.

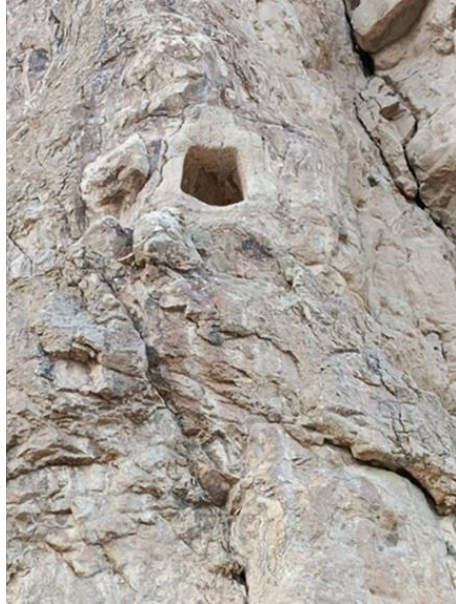


Figure 6: Astōdān associated with the inscription Nrs1 at a distance of 205 m from the tomb of Darius the Great (Authors).



Figure 7: Inscription Nrs1 at a distance of 205 m from the tomb of Darius the Great (Authors).

Conclusion

Death in Zoroastrian religion has always been associated with different customs and burial methods. Belief in the purity and sanctity of some elements, including soil, caused the earthen burials with the bodies of the dead (which was Nasū and had a demonic position) to transform fundamentally and only the bones of the deceased should be transferred to the stone or mortar. This attitude was not in conflict with Zoroastrianism's «bodily resurrection». for this reason, with the spread of Zoroastrian religion from the pre-Achaemenid period onward, different types of burial methods were formed in the plateau of Iran, especially in the southern and western regions, which today are known as Astōdān, Mil Gōr, Gōr hofre sangi, Gōr Havani (Jōqani), and Gōr stone mounds. from the point of view of archaeology the followers of the Zoroastrian religion, who had high financial ability and privileged social status, started to build magnificent tombs such as Astōdān, Mil Gōr, Gōr Hofre Sangi and ordinary people were content with Gōr Havani, and Gōr Sang. Some of these magnificent graves have inscriptions in the Pahlavi Ketābi script, which were often written in the late Sassanid era and the early Islamic period and contain the building of Astōdān or Dakhmag and prayer for the soul of the deceased. According to today's discoveries, most of these inscriptions were written primarily in the Marvdasht plain around the city of Istakhr and Naqsh-e Rostam and then in Kāzerūn area. Archaeological evidence shows that the other religions' followers followed the usual burying method and there was no religious strictness.

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