



Study and Analysis of Tombstones in Haft Marqadan Cemetery, Baghcheh Behi Village, Bukan County

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 September 2024

Revised 28 November 2024

Accepted 15 December 2024

Published 28 February 2025

Keywords:

Bukan

Baghcheh Behi

Haft Marqadan

Cemetery

Tombstone

ABSTRACT

Historical tombstones are valuable archaeological artifacts that provide insights into various aspects of past societies. However, no targeted archaeological survey has yet been conducted to identify and study the Haft Marqadan cemetery. This study aims to examine the cemetery and demonstrate that the village of Baghcheh Behi in Bukan County gained considerable significance from the mid-Qajar period onward. By analyzing the tombstones of Baghcheh Behi, this research seeks to explore the beliefs, customs, and traditions of the local population, as well as the motivations behind the diverse decorative elements carved by stone artisans. These tombstones, considered a representative sample, are comparable in both chronology and morphology to other tombstones found in Mukriyan Kurdistan. The primary objective of this study is to analyze and assess the subject matter to address key research questions: What significant cultural and social aspects of their era are revealed through the literary inscriptions, elaborate motifs, and structural characteristics of the tombstones at Haft Marqadan? Who were the prominent individuals buried in this cemetery, and what roles did they play in the history of Baghcheh Behi and the broader Mukriyan region? Findings from fieldwork and archival research indicate that the tombstones of Haft Marqadan reflect the cultural identity, beliefs, and artistic expressions of Mukriyan society during the Qajar and Pahlavi periods. Additionally, an examination of the tombstones and historical records from Baghcheh Behi and its surroundings—later known as the Faizullah Beigi region—suggests that, since the reign of Mohammad Shah Qajar, this area held considerable political and religious significance within Mukriyan.

Citation: Salimi, E., Ghezel Sofla, S., & Ramazani Baghche, E. (2025). Study and Analysis of Tombstones in Haft Marqadan Cemetery, Baghcheh Behi Village, Bukan County. *Payām-e Bāstānshenās*, 16(31), 91-113. (In Persian) <https://doi.org/10.71794/peb.2024.1103611>

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Introduction

Archaeological studies across different regions of the world indicate that death, the afterlife, and the associated customs and traditions have been among the most significant concerns of human societies throughout various cultures and historical periods (Salimi & Sulhjoo, 2020: 130). Haft Marqadan Cemetery, located in the village of Baghcheh Behi in West Azerbaijan Province, Bukan County, is one of Iran's historical cemeteries. However, no systematic investigation or scholarly study has yet been conducted to document and introduce this site.

The favorable natural and environmental conditions of Baghcheh Behi—including abundant water resources, fertile soil, a temperate climate, diverse flora and fauna, and a strategic position connecting Mukriyan Kurdistan to the Afshar region—suggest that human habitation in this area dates back to at least the historical period. During the reign of Mohammad Shah Qajar (1251–1263 AH) and concurrently with the rule of Abdullah Khan (1250–1256 AH) over the province of Mukriyan, centered in Savajbolagh (present-day Mahabad), Abdul Rahman Beg, a member of the Mukri tribe and a scribe closely associated with Abdullah Khan, traveled to Tehran during the assassination of Abbas Agha. During his visit, he managed to meet Haj Mirza Aghasi, the then-Prime Minister of Iran. Through this encounter, Abdul Rahman Beg not only received royal garments from the central government but also secured control over the Behi district under a contractual agreement in exchange for an annual payment (Sana'i, 2022: 617–1732).

As a result, under pressure from the Mangur and Dehbokri tribes, Abdul Rahman Beg purchased the village of Baghcheh along with the Behi district and relocated his followers there. With the support of both the central and local governments, the indigenous inhabitants were unable to resist his authority. Subsequently, in addition to Baghcheh, he successfully gained control over two other significant villages, Saroqamish and Tikan Tepe. Historical records and archaeological evidence indicate that Abdul

Rahman Beg's descendants, including Faizullah Beg, Sultan Beg, and Ibrahim Beg, contributed to the development of Baghcheh Behi by establishing mosques, guesthouses, libraries, traditional schools known as *Qutab Khaneh*, public baths, and carpet-weaving workshops (Nahid, 1983: 9–13). The manor houses and historical cemeteries of the region were adorned with elaborate and luxurious tombstones, reflecting the wealth and cultural identity of the community.

Methodology

The data for this study were collected through both fieldwork and library research, employing a descriptive, historical, and analytical research methodology. Due to the presence of moss and mud, deciphering the inscriptions and identifying the motifs on the tombstones proved challenging. To address this issue, the surfaces of the tombstones were carefully cleaned using a plastic brush, minimizing the risk of damage. Additionally, the uniform white color of the tombstones and motifs made it difficult to distinguish and document the designs. To enhance visibility, charcoal was applied to darken the inscriptions and motifs. By selectively erasing and reapplying charcoal, clearer photographic documentation of the tombstones was achieved, ensuring accurate scaling. The dimensions, characteristics, and distinctive features of each tombstone were systematically recorded in a research notebook. In the next phase, the tombstones were categorized based on their typology and decorative elements. Subsequently, their designs were digitally reconstructed using AutoCAD software. Library research was conducted by comparing these tombstones with similar examples and consulting relevant documents, books, articles, and other printed materials. One of the primary challenges encountered in the study was the rereading of tombstone inscriptions, as many had suffered significant damage due to environmental and human factors. Despite these difficulties, the researchers successfully reconstructed and reread the inscriptions (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: Writers cleaning the tombstones of the Haft Marqadan cemetery in Baghcheh Bahi (Authors, 2022).

Discussion

Haft Marqadan Cemetery, Bahcheh Behi

Haft Marqadan Cemetery, which continues to serve as a burial site for the residents of Baghcheh Behi village, is located approximately 320 meters south of the village, atop a high hill that offers a panoramic view of Baghcheh, Saroqamish, Tikan Tepe, and the full-flowing Zarrineh Rud River. The cemetery is situated at coordinates ZONE: 38S - E.629769.49m - N.4039523.01m and spans an area of approximately 1.5 hectares. It rises more than 100 meters above the northern ground level and is surrounded on all four sides by agricultural lands.

Despite its historical significance, no comprehensive study has been conducted on the Baghcheh Behi cemetery. Afkhami briefly referenced the site by including an image of the tombstone of Misbah Aldiwan Adab in *The History of Mukriyan Culture and the Literature of Bukan* (Afkhami, 1985: 431). However, no traces of the original structure of the cemetery remain today. Abbas Ayubi documented the burial of nine religious figures from Behi, Bukan, and Mukriyan in this cemetery, though apart from the tombstone of Ganjali Beg, no other tombstones have survived (Ayubi, 2015: 35-36). Additionally, Salimi and Mollashahi have made brief references to this cemetery in their research (Salimi & Mollashahi, 2022: 54-82).

Like other cemeteries in Kurdistan, Haft Marqadan Cemetery is held in high esteem by the local community. However, due to the absence of livestock grazing, dense vegetation has accumulated over the years, making it difficult to study and examine the tombstones—many of which have been broken and left scattered on the ground for decades. Various plants, including six-leafed species and weather-resistant almond trees, have been planted throughout the area.

At the highest point of the cemetery, a limestone rubble fence encloses an area of 130 m², marking the graves of several prominent individuals, including Misbah Aldiwan Adab, Ganjali Khan, Saeed Khan Adhami, Khalifa Mulla Muhammad Amin Armeni Blaghi, Mulla Abdul Wahab Khalifazada, and Khalifa Sheikh Qayum Savjbolaghi (Afkhami, 1985: 415, 431-652; Ayubi, 2015: 35-36). The presence of these graves highlights the social and religious status of these figures in the society of Baghcheh Behi and Mukriyan Kurdistan at the time.

Additionally, in the designated area, wooden shrines adorned with green cloths can be seen, symbolizing the spiritual and ritualistic significance of those buried in this section of the cemetery. The name *Haft Marqadan* likely refers to seven religious figures, though little is known about them today (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: View of almond trees, wooden shrines, the stone boundary at the top of the cemetery, and other tombstones of the Seven Marqadan (Authors, 2022).

Typology of tombstones

In the burial customs of Mukriyan Kurdistan in the distant past, each grave traditionally featured three tombstones: two vertical stones on either side, known as *Kil*, which marked the boundaries of the grave, and a horizontal tombstone called *Tat* (Samadi, 2017: 159). However, due to environmental factors—such as the annual accumulation of vegetation—and human interventions, including the removal of older tombstones and their replacement with newer ones during recent renovations, many original tombstones have been either destroyed or buried

underground. The tombstones in Haft Marqadan Cemetery in Baghcheh Behi belong to the raised altar type, exhibiting variations in height and thickness.

Chronologically and morphologically, these tombstones are comparable to other stone graves found in Mukriyan Kurdistan, including those in Turjan (Saqqez) and Pirbadin (Bukan). In the Sorani dialect of Kurdish spoken in the region, these tombstones are referred to as *Kil*. Based on their stylistic features and inscriptions, they are associated with the Qajar and early Pahlavi periods (Fig. 3).



Figure 3: View of the raised altar tombstones in the Baghche Behi Cemetery in Bukan County (Authors, 2022).

The arrangement of tombstones

On the tombstones of Haft Marqadan Cemetery in Baghcheh Behi, only two types of elements are discernible: geometric patterns and inscriptions identifying the deceased. These features are likely reflective of the religious beliefs and worldview of the people of Baghcheh Behi.

Geometric patterns

Geometric patterns are the most common decorative motifs found on the historical tombstones of Haft Marqadan Cemetery in Baghcheh Behi. These patterns, along with their variations, are classified as the second major category of Islamic art motifs. The geometric designs, characterized by their harmony and sense of unity, complement the spiritual themes of the inscriptions, collectively conveying

profound moral and spiritual messages. These motifs not only resonate with the viewer's soul and intellect but also form aesthetically significant compositions (Frost, 2006: 25).

The geometric patterns adorning the tombstones primarily take the forms of circles, squares, triangles, and rectangles. Orientalists have interpreted the intricately interwoven polygons as a mystical representation of Supreme Beauty, inspiring contemplation on existence and divine attraction (Mehrdad, 2014: 173).

In the tombstones of Baghcheh Cemetery, various geometric motifs can be observed, including circles, squares, rectangles, cross-shaped lines, interwoven designs, raised circular elements, decorative frames, and altar-shaped *bergamots* (Fig. 4).



Figure 4: Geometric arrays of tombstones in the Haft Marqadan cemetery in Baghche Behi, Bukan County (Authors, 2022).

Inscriptions

Inscriptions are among the most prominent decorative elements found on the tombstones of Haft Marqadan Cemetery in Baghcheh Behi. These inscriptions are enclosed within squares, rectangles, triangles, and altar-shaped frames. The content of the inscriptions typically includes

the name and introduction of the deceased, the year of death, advisory and reflective verses, Quranic excerpts in Nastaliq script, and poetry from renowned Iranian and Mukriyan poets. Collectively, these inscriptions serve as both commemorative and didactic elements, offering spiritual and moral reflections (Fig. 5).



Figure 5: Inscriptional arrays of tombstones in the Haft Marqadan cemetery in Baghche Behi (Authors, 2022).

Conclusion

Haft Marqadan Cemetery in Baghcheh is one of the historical cemeteries of Bukan, distinguished by its unique tombstones. Despite its historical significance, no dedicated study has been conducted on this site, and it has largely been overlooked in the archaeological research of the region. Covering an area of approximately 1.5 hectares, the cemetery remains in use by the residents of Baghcheh Behi.

In this study, the authors examined 22 tombstones belonging to 15 deceased individuals, of whom the identities of six are known—five male and one female. In the highest section of Haft Marqadan Cemetery, a limestone rubble enclosure has been constructed around the graves of notable figures such as Misbah Aldiwan Adab and Ganjali Beg. These individuals were influential regional officials, while *Khalifa* Mulla Muhammad Amin Ayubi was a prominent religious leader in the Mukriyan community. All three held significant social standing within the governmental and regional structures of the Qajar and Pahlavi periods. Geometric motifs are the predominant decorative elements on the tombstones of Haft Marqadan Cemetery. Due to its strong Iranian cultural identity, the *Nastaliq* script was exclusively used by the stone carvers of Baghcheh Behi to inscribe the names and details of the deceased. The tombstones feature intricate designs across three distinct sections: the head, the central text, and the margins. Stone carvers adorned these areas with elaborate decorative

frames and calligraphic embellishments, incorporating verses from great Iranian poets such as Saadi and Nezami Ganjavi, as well as Quranic excerpts from *Surahs Al-Infitar*, *Al-Takwir*, and *Al-Ankabut*. These elements, enriched by the influence of local libraries, contributed to the artistic and literary sophistication of the inscriptions.

Overall, based on the study of historical tombstones and written records, it can be concluded that the presence of graves belonging to both ordinary individuals and people of varying social statuses reflects the class distinctions in Baghcheh Behi society during the Qajar and Pahlavi periods. Additionally, the presence of the tombs of the Faizullah Beigi family, regional officials, and religious figures further underscores the historical and social significance of the cemetery during these eras.

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