

A Trace of Mithra in Northwestern Iran; Based on a Qajar-Era Photograph from the Golestan Palace World Heritage Site Archive

Sajjad Alibaigi ^{*1} and Iraj Rezaei²

*Corresponding Author, ¹Department of Archaeology, Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran.
E- mail: sadjadalibaigi@gmail.com

²Independent Researcher, Kermanshah, Iran.

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Abstract

An archival photograph from the Qajar period (1896), preserved at the Golestan Palace in Tehran, depicts a rock-cut tomb known as Hulegu Khan's Cave in northwestern Iran. This tomb features a relief of a lion and a bull carved on its facade. The relief appears to represent a distinctive, possibly ritual scene that has been repeated numerous times within the Iranian cultural sphere. It seems this image carries a symbolic concept and represents a mythological struggle. This study aims to explore the significance of the symbolic relief at the entrance of Hulegu Khan's Cave. The authors propose that this scene depicts a Mithraic theme, with comparable examples attested from China to Europe; its closest parallel in terms of imagery is the rock-cut tomb of Myra in Turkey. The findings indicate that the relief likely conveys a ritualistic meaning associated with Mithraism in its unique eastern and Iranian form. Although the exact location of this rock-cut tomb and its relief is currently unknown, the monument indicates traces of belief in the god Mithra in northwestern Iran. This aligns with interpretations of findings from the Zahhak Castle Complex regarding Mithraic worship in the region.

Keywords: Maragheh, Hulegu Khan's Cave, Golestan Palace Archive, Qajar Period, Rock-Cut tomb, Mithra.

Introduction

At the Golestan Palace World Heritage Site, the Qajar-era royal residence in Tehran, Qajar-era photographs serve as significant pictorial records, offering invaluable insights into Iranian archaeology. With the introduction of photography in Iran, several Qajar kings and princes developed an interest in capturing images, especially of historical and cultural monuments. They documented important subjects, some of which have since been lost due to landscape changes and the development of modern cities and towns. One such document is a photograph from 1896 CE depicting Abdolhossein Mirza Farmanfarma, the ruler of northwestern Iran, visiting the area near Maragheh. This historical photograph shows a man-made, roughly square-shaped rock-cut cave referred to as "Hulegu Khan's Cave" in the image's brief caption (Fig.1).



قبر کاوش مرادکن رودخانه جغتو از زلفای پیردشت، دشت دالان اب از دوحه جغتو در ریشی میان و اب کجا
حضرت ابراهیم صمدی عظیم اران عمر جا پست

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Fig. 1: Hulegu Khan's Cave in Maragheh with a relief of a lion and a bull (after: Golestan Palace World Heritage Site).

According to the caption, the cave was discovered and exposed at that time. A person is depicted standing beside the cave entrance. While the photograph's caption indicates that the monument was located near the Jaghatu River (modern-day Zarrineh Rud) in the Maragheh region, its current location remains unknown. It has not been reported in archaeological surveys of the area. It is possible that this monument, which was buried before its discovery during the Qajar period, was reburied in the soil for some time after being initially unearthed. Given that no trace of the mentioned cave and relief exists today, and the only related evidence- a photo from the Golestan Palace archive- has only recently become available to researchers, this study represents the first publication about Hulegu Khan's Cave following its discovery.

On the upper façade of the cave, a relief is carved, depicting a bull with crescent-shaped horns on the right and a lion on the left, facing each other. To fully comprehend the characteristics of this man-made cave, it is important to consider its features, including its rock-cut nature and a relief on its upper façade.

The monument is reminiscent of pre-Islamic rock-cut tombs, many of which have been identified from the Levant to Iran. In western Iran, rock-cut tombs are mainly attributed to the first millennium BCE and, with a few exceptions, are undecorated and devoid of relief. Although the Donalar rock-cut tomb in Paphlagonia, attributed to the Achaemenid period, features a carved relief of a bull and a lion (von Gall, 1966; Summerer and von Kienlin, 2010), the closest example to the so-called Hulegu Khan's Cave is the rock-cut tomb at Myra in Turkey, which has a similar carved relief of a lion and a bull on its façade (Fig.2, see Texier, 1849: Pl. 225). Other comparable

examples include scenes of lion-bull combat on the Xanthus sarcophagus, the lion tomb at Xanthus, and on a stone base from Loryma, all located in Asia Minor (Nováková, 2014: figs. 8d, 10; Shear, 1914: pl. IV).



Fig.2: View of the Myra rock-cut tomb in Turkey with a scene of a fight between a lion and a bull (after: Texier 1849: pl. 225).

Traces of Mithra in Hulegu Khan's Cave Relief

The Mithraic cult had numerous adherents in the ancient world, extending from Central Asia to Europe. Although Mithra has been worshipped in Iran for many centuries, only a few remnants of Mithraic temples have been discovered there. The significant lack of evidence regarding Mithraism, or more accurately, the Mihr cult in ancient Iran, may be attributed to the unknown or little-known nature of Mithraic temples in the region, particularly the differences between Roman Mithraeums and those in Iran (Labaf Khaniki 2012). One reason for the limited knowledge of Mithraism in Iran is the relatively distinct imagery associated with the Mithraic cult there, which differs from that of Europe. In Roman Mithraeums, the most prominent depiction of Mithra shows him in human form, killing a bull; however, this imagery has never been attested in the Iranian Mithraic cult (Frey 1978). Apart from the relief of Ardashir II at Taq-e Bustan (Ghirshman 1962: 190, fig. 233, the reverse of coins from the Parthian kings Mithradates II (Sarkhosh Curtis *et al.* 2020: 66-67), Orodes II, Paraates IV, and Artabanus II (Sinisi 2017: 24), the Sasanian king Ohrmazd I (Alram and Gyselen 2012: 143; Grenet 2016), graffiti motifs on plaster at Bandyan-e Dargaz (Rahbar 2017), and the rock paintings of Dāya Cave (Alibaigi *et al.* 2023), Iranian Mithra (Mihr) has not been identified in an anthropomorphic (human) form as seen in Roman Mithraism. However, findings outside present-day Iran, particularly in eastern regions such as northwestern

Pakistan and Central Asia, reveal seals and coins bearing the image of Mithra. These examples are most commonly found in the Bactrian and Kushan cultural spheres (Callieri 1990; Grenet 2016). Scholars believe that Iranian Mithra, unlike his Roman counterpart, who is often depicted as a young man killing a bull, was typically symbolised by animal images such as the eagle and the lion from the Achaemenid to the early Islamic period (Zare 2008; see also Vermaseren 2001; Bivar 1998). A notable example is the fighting scene between a lion and a bull depicted in the Achaemenid reliefs of Persepolis, which may symbolise the conflict between Mithra and a bull. Bivar suggests that this scene could be a manifestation of the god of death (Bivar 1998; Ataii 2010; Bahadori 2015). The stone sarcophagus of Yu Hong in East Asia, which is engraved with the image of Mithra, also portrays a similar battle between a lion and a bull (Grenet 2016) (Fig. 3). On the rock-cut tomb of Myra in Turkey, a scene of a lion-bull fight, similar to that found in Hulegu Khan's Cave, is carved on the upper façade of the tomb (see Fig.2), clearly indicating that they convey a similar concept. David H. Bivar, when comparing scenes of lion-bull fighting and tauroctony, proposes that people in antiquity likely viewed these two compositions as having a similar iconographic theme. In other words, the fight between the lion and the bull essentially carries the same iconographic meaning as tauroctony (Bivar 1998). According to Arthur Lincoln Frothingham, "Whatever may have been the primitive naturalistic meaning of the lion slaying the bull, it was never a mere animal fight but was always symbolic and religious. At a very early date, it took on an astrological meaning. The bull, the "author of creation and resurrection," was killed by the solar lion, representing the sun's intense and ultimately destructive heat. Perseus, the Destroyer, was called the winged lion, and Mithra, as slayer, was the lion, merely taking the place of the lion on the back of the bull as an anthropomorphic substitute" (Frothingham 1918: 64).

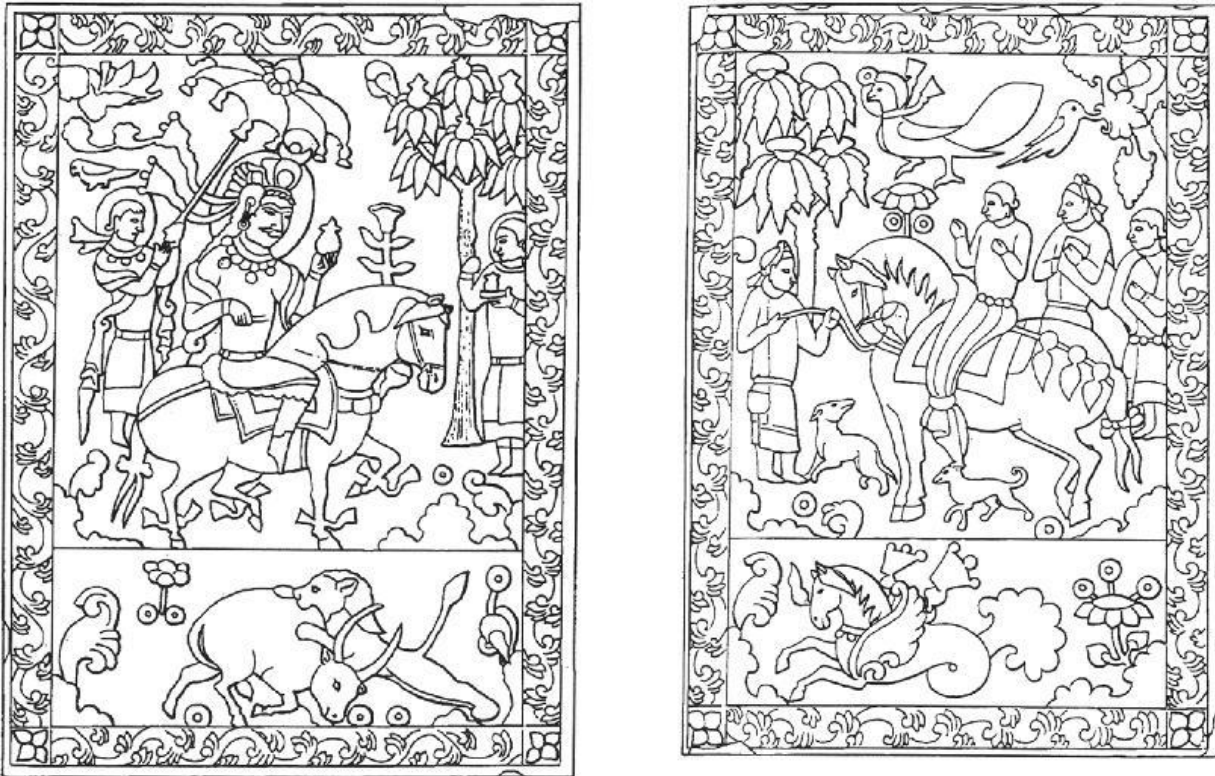


Fig. 3: Relief of a lion and a bull on the stone sarcophagus of Yu Hong, China (after: Grenet 2016: fig. 10).

Among the so-called “Greek Imperial coinage”, bronze coins minted in Tarsus during the reign of Gordian III (238–244 AD) prominently feature the Tauroctony scene, which depicts Mithra in human form (Bivar, 1998). Notably, another bronze issue under the same ruler replaces the human representation of Mithra with the motif of a lion attacking a bull (Bivar, 1998; fig. 16; cf. Fig. 4). The coexistence of these two motifs within the same mint and chronological context suggests that the lion-and-bull combat may serve as a symbolic substitute for the Tauroctony, conveying a closely related, if not identical, ideological theme.

Interestingly, in the Močići Mithraeum in Croatia, a scene carved on the façade of the cave depicts Mithra in human form killing a bull (Sanader 2008: fig.14) (Fig.5). Therefore, this suggests that, in Hulegu Khan’s Cave, the scene of the fight between the lion and the bull also conveys the same thematic message, with Mithra appearing in his animal form, that is, as a lion. Consequently, this relief should also be considered a symbol of Mithra. In a different interpretation, Bivar argues that Mithra should be viewed as a god of death. This might explain his presence in bull-killing scenes, as those found in the Maragheh rock-cut tomb and the Myra cemetery in Turkey.



Fig. 4: The reverse of two coins of Gordian III from Tarsus, a) Mithra killing a bull, b) Lion killing a bull (after: Bivar 1998: figs. 15 and 16).



Fig. 5: Močići Mithraeum in Croatia with a relief of Mithra killing a bull (after: Sanader 2008: fig. 14).



Fig. 6: Map showing the location of rock-cut tombs and stone bases with a symbolic image of Mithra killing the bull (after: Google Earth 10/10/2025, modified by authors).

Conclusion

The Qajar-period photograph from the Golestan Palace archive reveals the entrance to Hulegu Khan's Cave in Maragheh, a pre-Islamic rock-cut tomb in western Iran, where a significant number

of such tombs can be observed. Above the entrance, there is a relief depicting Mithra in his animal form, specifically a lion fighting a bull. In Iranian art, Mithra is consistently represented through animal imagery, particularly that of the lion. Thus, the authors suggest that this tomb is related to the Mithraic cult, with the closest parallel in imagery found in the rock-cut tomb of Myra in Turkey. Evidently, this burial tradition, characterised by both large and small rock-cut tombs adorned with reliefs depicting a lion attacking a bull, was prevalent in Asia Minor. However, there is no evidence to indicate that this tradition was common in present-day Iran. Therefore, it appears that the Maragheh tomb is currently the easternmost known example of this type of tomb that features a symbolic image of Mithra killing the bull (Fig. 6). If this connection is correct, this tomb, like the others, should probably be attributed to the Greek-Roman period.

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