

Iranian Rock Art Surprising Khomein



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It is not a surprise to find Paleolithic and Neolithic rock engravings in Iran. We just have to look at the human migration on our planet to be able to confirm pre-historic human presence in Iran. Our ancestors moved from Africa via the Near East into Europe and also to the Far East. So they had to pass through Iran on their way east.

Suitable Living Climate

We have to imagine too that at the time the Iranian landscape was rather fertile with flowing rivers and trees. The living conditions were sufficiently suitable for these early hunter-gatherer clans. Ancient rock engravings have been found all across the Near East, Arabian Peninsula, Europe and as far as Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and China.

Look Back

Please have a look at the other specific articles on this website to compare in more detail these pre-historic rock art images. Their similarity will really surprise you! We have included some for your immediate reference.



Human Time Line

But let's take a step back and look at some interesting facts. The Near East was around 1.8 million years ago the first step out of Africa taken by homo erectus and the link between Africa, Europe and Asia. It was established that over time four homo species left Africa coming from the Turkana Lake and other areas.

Out of Africa Waves

Around 600,000 years ago a second emigration wave took place, which this time was led by homo heidelbergensis, who later in Europe developed further into homo neanderthalensis. But it was only about 150,000 years ago when our ancestor homo sapiens left Africa in a third emigration wave.

High Sophistication

About 60,000 years ago homo sapiens had developed a complex language and could think symbolically. At the same time homo neanderthalensis started first ritual burials and produced jewelry. Skeletons

excavated proved similar speech development as homo sapiens.

Today we have clear proof that both species mixed in antiquity and therefore we have between two to four percent Neanderthal genes still in us today.

New Discoveries

Paleolithic experts recently found human traces in renewed excavations in Iran at the famous Mirak site. A French-Iranian group started in 2015 to re-examine this site known for over 30 years. Mirak is situated at the northern edge of the Dasht-e Kavir Desert in the Semnan Province.

Mirak Site

Previous excavations in 2009 have shown already that Mirak is one of the largest Paleolithic archaeological sites in the Middle East. An area of over four hectares are covered with lithic stone artefacts. These include Levallois stone tools and various other silica flake objects from the Mousterian Period attributed to homo sapiens.

Why is Mirak such an important site? It was established that here the longest human settlement period existed for over 200,000 years starting 250,000 years ago.

Secondly little is known so far about homo neanderthalensis life in Iran. The species lived and roamed here during the Middle Paleolithic period more or less until 50,000





years ago. Shortly before this species became extinct.

And finally Mirak is the only open air site in Iran, as all other sites are either cave or rock shelter sites. Now this proves the pre-historic existence of humans, who were able to create skillful stone tools and with those elaborate ancient rock carvings.

Other Sites

At the Warwasi Rock Shelter north of Kermanshah and the Yafteh Cave northwest of Khoramabad in the Zargos Mountains Paleolithic stone tools could be dated to an age of between 38,000 to 28,000 years.

There are various other sites in Iran which proof multiple pre-historic human presence in this part of the world. Experts have established that ancient hunter-gatherer clans roamed huge areas covering 300 to 500 square kilometers and camped at seasonal changing sites.

Creation of Stone Tools

The first stone tools were created by men as early as 2.5 million years ago and these archaic hand held tools

included already various items such as choppers, hand axes as well as first cleavers.

During the Middle Stone Age from 250.000 to 20.000 years ago flakes were created by striking a core stone with a larger hammer stone, this produced stone pieces or small flakes to split off.

Skillful Artisans

The process involved a great deal of skill to achieve the desired result. Out of these flakes the best usable were selected. These flakes were further refined to create the desired shape and sharpness.

Retouch Technique

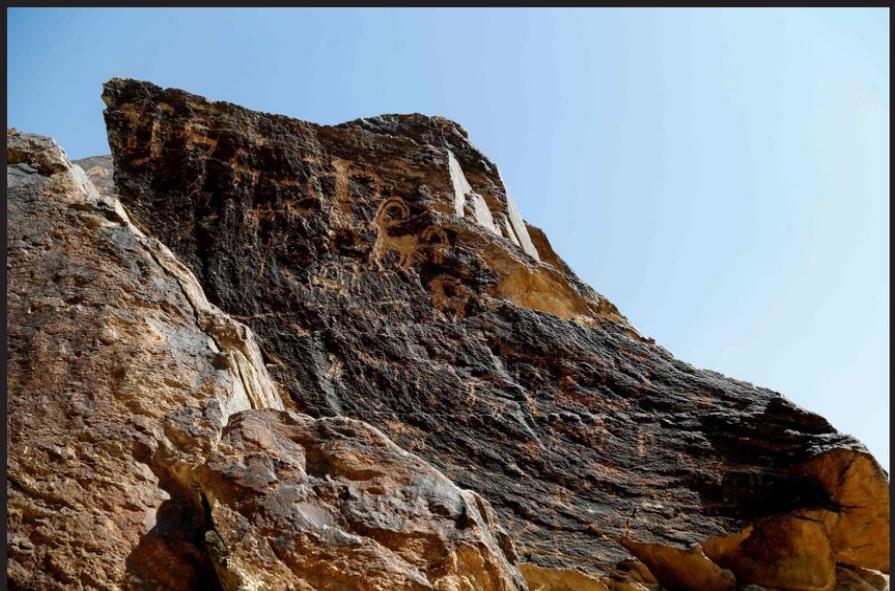
This technique is called retouch. These retouched flakes differed in shape, they were longer and triangular like arrow heads. At the time a significant technological advance was achieved, when flakes were attached with sticky resin to a handle to act as a lever.

Microlithic Tools

Later during the Late Stone Age tools became more specialized depending on their use. So-called microlithic tools were more and more used. They were rather small sharp stone splinter tools, attached with mastic to wooden or horn handles.

Mastic was a glue made from vegetable or gum trees. These tools were used to cut and process food such as meat and plants, or wood and even bones.

Scrapers were best to prepare skins for leather clothes. Backed bladelets were ideal for knives and arrow heads. Adzes were used for wood work. These highly developed tools show how sophisticated





our pre-historic ancestors were already at that time.

Rock Art Images

As in all Islamic countries pre-historic cultures have been neglected, if not bluntly denied. And they were seen by some scholars even as taboo, as they belonged to the so-called “dark ages” before Islam.

So the existence of this pre-historic treasure of over 50,000 rock engravings and paintings in Iran is still not well known in the country and abroad. In the past there wasn't also any money made available for pre-Islamic research.

New Approach

Mohammed Naserifard an Iranian archaeologist has recently reported again about the ancient rock art existing across Iran. There is hope that new co-operation with international rock art experts and institutions could help them to better understand the purpose of the images existing

for example in the Khomein area.

Khomein Area

This area with a town of the same name in central Iran offers a rock covered landscape with many ancient rock engravings. But why do we find pre-historic engravings here?

It is simple. Man lived close water sources and animals congregated here for drinking. At that time the Khomein valley featured a river and was a very fertile area with lush river banks attracting many animals.



Dominant Ibex Images

The uncountable engravings include the typical ibex image with long curled horns and other animals who roamed the area at the time. But the ibex is the most dominant image and represents up to ninety percent of all animal engravings.

Tribal Dances

But there are also depictions of ancient hunters with bow and arrow on foot and even on horseback. The multiple compositions also include interesting tribal dances, which look very similar to those we know from other sites worldwide. Deities and unknown creatures round up the list of rock art engravings. As an estimated age we assume a time span from 8,000 to 2,000 years ago.

Cup Marks

The interesting cup marks found here as well are certainly the oldest rock art creations. From other sites we know they were used for

rituals in cult ceremonies and involved either “holy water” or some sort of trance inducing drink.

Comparing these cup marks with other sites, we have to disapprove with the raw age estimates of 40,000 mentioned about ten years ago. Yes they can be older, but hardly cross the line of 20,000 years of age. Judging the age of ancient rock art is always difficult. New techniques which might be developed in future could prove us wrong.

Animal Domestication

The larger compositions with close to 50 images on one rock surface tell us an interesting story. On one side the panels with man and ibex give us the impression of herding activities and others show real hunting scenes with bow and arrow depicted.

Now let’s look at animal domestication, which started in the so-called Fertile Crescent in southeast Turkey, northern Syria and Irak and north western Iran some 15,000 years ago and took less than 3,000 years across various species.

Man first started to train hunting dogs, which was first proven



in the Natuf Culture in the Jordan Valley. Goats followed shortly after in Iran and sheep at the same time in the Taurus Mountains in Turkey. Cattle domestication from aurochs was started in northern Iraq.

Horse Domestication

An interesting story is the domestication of horses, as we have horse riders depicted at Khomein as well. So far it was thought that horses were domesticated in Kazakhstan around 5,000 years ago.

But new archaeological discoveries in 2011 at al-Magar in Saudi Arabia move that time line by 4,000 years further back. So this helps us to date the horse riding hunters at Khomein. Please see the respective article on al-Magar on this website.

Dating Rock Art

An important fact gets often forgotten in dating rock art. Petroglyphs on sandstone have a taphonomic threshold average of 8,000 years, but on granite this increases to 50,000 years.

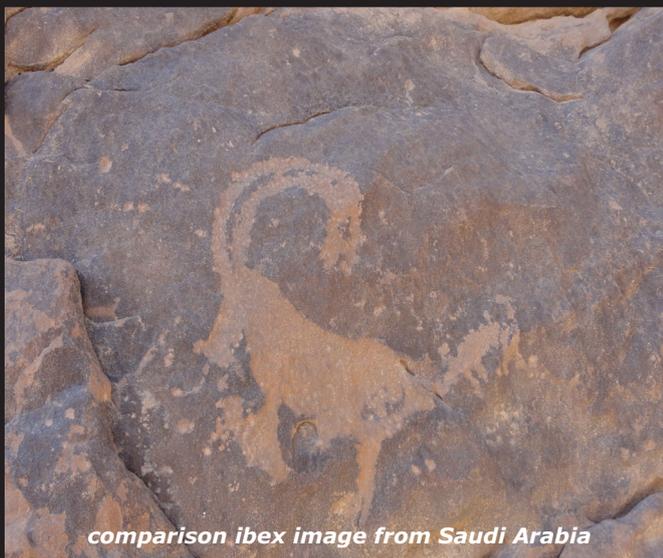
But this is not the end of it, as new dating techniques developed in future might prove us wrong. In this whole discussion we have to remember also that Paleolithic and Neolithic rock engravings can only be dated securely by corresponding excavation finds. Such as stone tools and fire places, which are technically datable and can be linked in a secure context and time horizon.

Example Brazil

This was the fact recently in Brazil at the Serra Capivara site, where an age of about 30,000 years could be established. This was a new record for South America and proves that history of the population of this continent has to be re-written.

European Situation

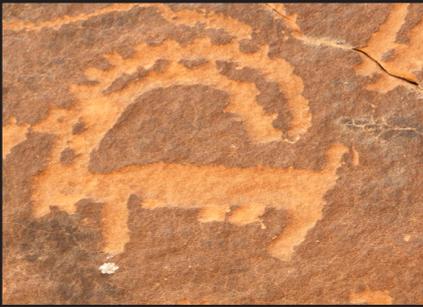
Interestingly in Europe developments of cultural sophistication were at the



comparison ibex image from Saudi Arabia



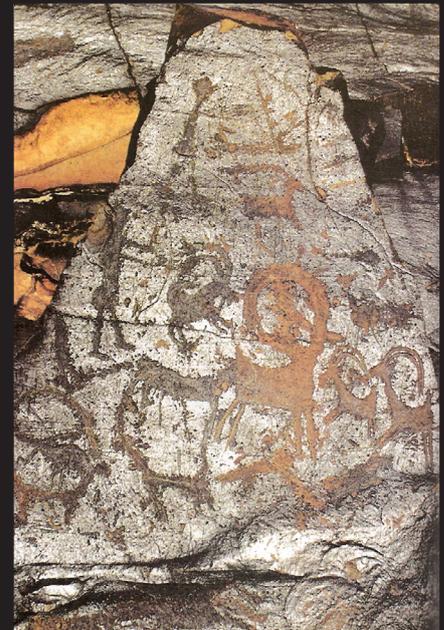
comparison ibex image from Kyrgystan



composition of various animals, show them in various perspectives and dimension in space, scale and form. For this man produced defined working tools for very specific purpose made from stone, bone, antler and ivory.

Creative Preconditions

Paleolithic rock art is only possible to be created when the following cultural conditions exist: strong beliefs, important rituals, deep seated shamanic cults and passing knowledge down to younger generations.



same stage at the time. For example cave paintings in the famous Chauvet Cave in southern France have a similar age and show a high level of artistic finesse already.

What does all this tell us? Certainly we can't ignore any longer, that our ancestors at the time when they populated Europe and Asia were definitely much more developed and intelligent than we thought so far.

Human Development

Man at the time had much higher capabilities, than we previously thought. Today we know that he had a well-developed pre-frontal cortex, was capable of structured thinking and planning, logical reasoning and finally clear decision taking.

Well Developed Communication

Our ancestors could also communicate well in words and with pictures, further they could sing and play music. They also had a high level of creativity to paint animals with imagination and abstraction, tell a story by creating a

In this case images show spiritual closeness between animals and their creators. Scientists believe that our hunter-gatherer ancestors in their spiritual world did not differentiate between man and animal nor the living and non-living. Therefore animal depictions express this spiritual closeness between man and beast.

Hand Prints

But why do we find hand prints as rock art images, but not faces? Where hands compared to faces not personal? This remains a big question, because our ancestors certainly had the needed artistic skills and talent. Hand prints might have



served as proven contact with the mythical world by touching these walls with important paintings in a cave in the mythical "underworld".

Missing Faces

Another interpretation of missing faces is, that human figures did not represent a person, but expresses a situation or story. Thus no faces were shown. It is also interesting to note that most caves with important paintings were only used as ritual site and not as living quarters.

Purpose of Rock Art

Rock art had a multitude of purposes, such as: cult rituals, meditation, myth, clan identity, wealth demonstration, prestige, memory recordings, funerary purposes, initiation and teaching the young.

But the main purpose is that of creating and passing on an important message. Rock engravings are a universal communication instrument understood by everyone across any language borders. They were created during celebratory, commemorative, initiation or propitiatory rituals.



Common Concept

But how was it possible that our ancestors in various parts of the world developed a common art tradition with similar images and themes? We first have to remember that homo neanderthalensis was not that creative, at least we can say that based on today's archaeological findings.

Creative Homo Sapiens

It was homo sapiens who left behind the majority of rock engravings and art objects. His human creativity exploded at some point in time about 40,000 years ago.

Fast Moving Human Explorers

We do not believe that a common concept was developed already in Africa. But we can assume that human immigration and expansion across the world happened much faster than we imagine.

There are indications that

the first colonisers of the Americas moved down the over 10,000 kilometer long coastline rapidly in only few hundred years and not slowly taking many thousand years.

Conclusion

We need to study a wider sample of Iranian rock art images and compositions. It would be strange if ibex really represent ninety percent of all images across Iran, when certainly more other animal species lived in the area at the time.

Why should Iran have such a limited choice compared to all other rock art sites in the world? If we only look at the various sites in the Near East for example in Saudi Arabia, we can list over a dozen different animal species.

These being depicted in all forms and sizes, from very realistic and also abstract engravings.

Some sites here offer rather huge panels with over 500 animals as well as life size human figures and again huge dancing groups.

For your comparison we have added various pictures of ibex. It is surprising how similar they are from sites in the Near East to Asia.

Thanks:

We thank the Bradshaw Foundation and Dr. Mohammad Naserifard for making available some of their pictures.

Weblinks:

www.bradshawfoundation.com