

Dolmens in northwestern Iran in need of more attention



Iranica Desk

Dolmens, properly called portal tombs, mark burial places in a very distinctive way, with large capstones elevated at an angle and held up by huge standing stones.

As the ancient objects date back to the Iron Age, they have not been immune to natural disasters and the effects of climate change.

In addition to Iran, dolmens, which seem to be the remains of collective or individual graves, are found in many European countries, including France and England, IRNA wrote.

The stone structures have been discovered in the north and northwestern Iran, in the vicinity of Meshginshahr, Namin, Astara and Talesh.

Yahya Asgari, a history researcher, said that the dolmens of Namin, a city in Ardebil Province, are mostly located at the confluence of two rivers known as "Chay Qushan".

Regarding the way in which the large stones were transported in ancient times despite the absence of elevators and machinery, he said, people probably first placed the stones standing in some pit, surrounding it with soil, and then put a piece of stone over them as a roof.

Referring to the artifacts discovered in the tombs, Asgari noted that in ancient times, it was believed that the dead would come back to life after some time and need some pottery items and tools, thus they buried such things next to the corpses.

Head of the Archeology Department of Ardebil Province's Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization Ruhollah Mohammadi said that more excavation projects should be carried out on portal tombs.

He said a major part of the budget of

the Cultural Heritage Organization is allocated to the renovation and preservation of the historical monuments; this is while significant attention should be paid to the implementation of research projects on the sites hosting the dolmens.

He said the upright stones presently put on people's graves are reminiscent of dolmens.

Archeologists believe that the upright stones of Shahr-e Yeri, located 65 kilometers from Ardebil, and 31 kilometers from Meshginshahr, belong to rulers and warriors who won victories in several battles. The number of standing stones placed on their graves is equal to that of the number of people they killed in these wars.

The official said that dolmens and other ancient structures are not considered treasures and sources of income in Europe, while a number of people have carried out illegal drilling on some ancient sites in Iran to acquire wealth.

He noted that the people of Meshginshahr and Namin, with a rich cultural and historical background, expect related officials to carry out further research to discover the secrets of the dolmens.

The dolmens of northwestern Europe were built in the early Neolithic period (New Stone Age), which began in Brittany at about 5,000 BCE, and in Britain, Ireland and southern Scandinavia at about 4,000 BCE.

Sites in central and southern Europe were constructed at a similar date, but that corresponds to the middle or late Neolithic period in those areas. Outside Europe, dolmens were built over a long time, and they continue to be constructed in some parts of the world — such as the island of Sumba, Indonesia — up to the present day.

Timur's devastation of Persia

Amir Timur's devastation of Persia and other lands was on a par with that of Changiz, the founder and first khan of the Mongol Empire; some say it was even greater, except that perhaps the number of people killed was smaller. Yet the degree of cruelty which Timur displayed surpassed that of Changiz.

Timur was born near Samarkand (in Transoxiana, now in Uzbekistan) in 1336 and began his career of continuous conquest when he was thirty-five. He had become lame in childhood and so was known as Timur the Lame (Persian: Teymur-e lang; classical English: Tamerlane). He claimed descent from Changiz through his son Chaghatai, but there are strong doubts about the veracity of this claim. He was later known as 'guregan' or 'son-in-law' when he married two women who descended from Changiz Khan.

Having secured Transoxiana in 1370 he crossed the border to Khorasan in 1380, attacked Herat whose Kart ruler submitted and became a tributary of Timur for a decade before Timur overthrew him and ended the Kart dynasty.

Having razed a few other towns and castles to their foundations in Khorasan and Mazandaran, he returned to Samarkand, but resumed his conquest of Iran in 1383, attacking Mazandaran again, conquering and massacring Sabzevar, followed by Sistan and Qandehar. But he was back in Mazandaran again in the following year, then moving to Azerbaijan



in 1385, later to Lorestan and still later again to Azerbaijan to suppress the J-layerid ruler, who nevertheless escaped. The pattern that emerges from the career of Timur is that he did not have — or perhaps did not want to have — a plan of conquest, but attacked, conquered and reconquered towns and regions several times, and that everywhere he went he caused wholesale death and destruction.

In Isfahan alone, which had risen against his unbearable taxes, some 70,000 people were slaughtered. Until his death in 1405, he attacked, subdued or reduced vast territories as far apart as the Mongol Golden Horde in Russia, the Ottoman Turks in Anatolia and the Sultanate of Delhi. In 1405 he set out for the biggest prize, the conquest of China, then under the Ming dynasty, but died when he had

reached the border town of Otrar and was buried in his beloved Samarkand. He was undoubtedly a military genius and a man of great courage and determination.

He was also an agent of death and destruction, often in the cruellest possible manner, apparently having no other aim than his own greater glory and the suppression of all comers with any claim to

power.

Timur's main constructive work was his adornment of Samarkand with beautiful suburbs and fine buildings where he stored some of the art and other treasures which he had plundered from the vanquished civilizations. His administration was in the hands of Persians but he did not have a great vizier, perhaps because of his tendency not to share significant amounts of power in his empire.

Typically, the death of Timur led to civil war, fratricide and killings of members of Timur's house and others. His youngest and only surviving son, Shahrokh, eventually emerged as his successor, although neither he nor any of the following Timurid rulers managed to hold on to the conqueror's empire intact. Timur himself had designated his grandson Pir Mohammad, Shahrokh's nephew, to replace him. But, as throughout much of Iranian history, the wish of the deceased ruler carried little influence in the struggle for power which followed his death. Pir Mohammad's claim was rejected by his cousin Khalil Soltan, who took Samarkand, though his behaviour led to a rebellion forcing him to flee to the east, to be eventually shaken off by Shahrokh a few years later. In the meantime Pir Mohammad was also killed, and Shahrokh began to consolidate his rule from his base in Herat, from where he had governed Khorasan under his father.