

# Bardgori and stone lion, symbol of Bakhtiari tribe

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## Iranica Desk

Iran is a rainbow of tribes, each of which has its own customs and traditions. The Bakhtiari tribe is one of the largest in the country, mostly residing in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province.

Their way of life is full of beauty and wonder. They have special customs and traditions for all aspects of their lives, including mourning and celebrating, many of which are very old.

Based on the Bakhtiari culture, the lion is a symbol of courage and bravery; that is why stone lions were placed on the graves of the tribe's heads or those who excelled in hunting, shooting and riding during their lifetime. This tradition is not unique to the past and is still common among the tribe's members. Based on the position of the deceased, stone lions with various dimensions have been placed on their graves.

Moreover, since a long time ago, Bakhtiari people have chosen a place known as *bardgori* for the burial of their dead. *Bard-*

*gories* were the hand-carved structures built as graves for the deceased in the heart of mountains and rocks. A number of ancient graves discovered in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province have turned into the places used by history and culture lovers for research and studies.

A number of *bardgories* are very old and date back to the Achaemenid era. Similar structures have been identified in various parts of Iran, showing that they are not unique to the Bakhtiari tribe. Vahed Joolaei, head of the Preservation and Revival Department of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province's Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization, told ISNA that the *bardgories* were hand-carved structures built in the Middle East and other parts of the world for various purposes.

"A special type of rock structure was used for the burial of the dead in some regions of Turkey and Armenia in the first millennium BCE. This architecture has been seen in

various parts of the world including India," he noted. He added that studies carried out on the *bardgories* built in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province show that the old structures date back to Sassanid and Parthian eras.

"Some of the *bardgories* which are very small in size were probably used as ossuaries" he added.

Referring to the use of stone lions, he said that the lion was of great significance in ancient Persia, adding that the lion motifs can be seen on pottery items dating back to the fourth millennium CE. He said the oldest stone lion discovered in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province dates back to the Safavid era.

Farideh Ahmadi, an expert from the province's Cultural Heritage Organization, said that there are more stone lions found in the city of Koohrang than in other parts of the province.

The sides of the lions are adorned with a sword, horse, gun, and rosary. The personal information of the deceased is carved on the back of the stone lions.

The notion of "Persia" is a key to understanding of what we now widely conceive as the Islamic Iranian art style but equally as the Central Asian art style of the Islamic period, evoking, for instance, the famous *maydan* (square), Naqsh-e Jahan Square, in Isfahan or quadrangular formal gardens in Shiraz, as well as the blue tiles on a four-ivan building in Samarqand or knotted pile medallion carpets from Herat.

"Persian art," in the first place, had developed in a succession of Persian empires, first under the Achaemenid kings, later under their Arsacid, Sassanid and Muslim descendants. The core lands of these empires changed from time to time, but as the Persian administration expanded, this generated a broad Persianisation that affected vast swathes of Central Asia as well as the art history of even farther regions.

A lasting visual bond between Persia and the region of Transoxiana became self-evident after the

integration of this region into the greater Islamic world under the Abbasids, Samanids, Ilkhanids, Timurids and their successors. In the words of Robert Byron (1905-1941 CE): "Timur, in founding an empire [...], had delivered Oxiana from the nomads and brought the Turks of Central Asia within the orbit of Persian civilisation."

Such sweeping statements are, however, bound to be challenged.

While the impact of the Persian style is undeniably reflected in most aspects of the art and architecture of Islamic Central Asia, this Perso Central Asian connection was chiefly formed and articulated by the Euro American movement of collecting and interpreting the art and material culture of the Persian Islamic world during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This exerted an enormous impact on the formation of scholarship and connoisseurship in Persian art, for instance with an attempt to define the characteristics

of how the Islamic art of modern-day Iran and Central Asia should be viewed and displayed at museums and how these subjects should be researched in academia. This important historical fact, which has attracted scholarly interest only in recent years, should be treated as a serious subject of research, accepting that the abstract image of Persian art was not a pure creation of Persian civilisation but can be the manifestation of particular historical times and charismatic individuals. Attention should therefore be given to various factors that resulted in the shaping of "Persian" imagery across the globe, not only in terms of national ideologies, but also within the context of several protagonists, such as scholars, collectors and dealers, as well as of objects themselves. Besides the on-going debate as to whether or not the cultural term "Persia" should be replaced by the more politically-oriented term "Iran," the fundamental question

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arises: can "Persian" art be defined after all? Is it related to a particular style or a peculiar visual language, or, rather, does it refer to the unity of artistic traditions within a given geographic, ethnic or linguistic area at a limited time?

Why shall we still opt for the enduring term "Persia" when it comes to the art, architecture and material culture of modern-day Iran and Central Asia after the Arab conquest in the 7th century? If "Persian art" should and must only be interpreted as an abstract idea rather than a well-defined unity, was the term solid enough through its constant use in past scholarship? And, above all, can we still employ it safely?

There is no shortage of self-assured statements and attempts to classify artistic and architectural forms to different social or ethnic groups, such as the Persians, the Turks or the

Naqsh-e Jahan Square, Isfahan  
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Arabs, as well as to propose certain hierarchical orders between them.

Yet "Persian art" — like most collective terms in the history of art — has always been fluid, greatly depending on who, where, when and on what purpose brought it into play. Judging by the number of books and

articles about "Persian art," it is intriguing to see that, while consensus did never exist about the items that could be packed together in this baggage, the existence of the baggage has been accepted by nearly every scholar. For some, a Coptic textile may have been Sassanid, hence Persian; others

grouped Mughal paintings into several "Indo-Persian" schools with the emphasis on the Persian pedigree. For yet others, the palace of Mshatta in modern-day Jordan was Persian, but some could regard the Mausoleum of Ismaeil Samani in modern-day Uzbekistan only as Tajik.