

# Visit mysterious and captivating Karaftu Cave in Kurdistan Province



**Iranica Desk**

Karaftu Cave, a natural marvel of Kurdistan Province, is situated 67 kilometers from the city of Divandarreh. This limestone and ancient cave was formed during the Mesozoic era and has been inhabited and utilized by humans at different times. One of the reasons for the significance of Karaftu Cave is the presence of a valuable Greek inscription on the third level, which links this site to Hercules, one of the ancient Greek gods.

Karaftu Cave is registered on Iran's National Heritage List. It is one of the largest, mysteri-

ous, and captivating caves in the country. This cave is nestled in a stunning and profound valley, in a limestone mountain range, surrounded by numerous shelters, crevices, and cavities.

In winter and cold weather, the cave is warm, while in the summer it is cool due to a constant breeze inside the cave. Karaftu Cave was formed during the third geological period, emerging from water; even now, there is water in some parts of it, requiring the use of small boats to explore distinct sections of it.

Karaftu Cave has been used by humans during various periods, from prehistoric times to the Is-

lamic era. The cave's strategic location and favorable climate have made it an attractive settlement for ancient civilizations. Archaeological excavations have revealed evidence of human habitation dating back to prehistoric times. The cave's walls are adorned with intricate carvings and paintings that depict scenes from daily life, religious ceremonies, and mythological stories.

One of the most significant discoveries in Karaftu Cave is a Greek inscription on the third level. The inscription is written in ancient Greek script and describes a heroic deed performed by Hercules. The inscription dates back to

around 200 BCE and provides insights into the cultural exchange that took place between Greece and Persia during antiquity.

Karaftu Cave's natural beauty and historical significance make it a popular destination for tourists and researchers alike. The cave's unique geological features, such as stalactites, stalagmites, and underground rivers, are a testament to its ancient formation process. The cave's cool temperature and constant breeze provide relief from the scorching heat outside during summer months.

Throughout history, Karaftu Cave has been studied by many

archaeologists, and maps have been created from it. Robert Koldewey, a German archaeologist, visited the cave in 1818 CE.

The entrance of the cave is located at an altitude of 20-25 meters above sea level and did not have staircases for access in the past. However, currently, it can be accessed by 180 steps.

The main path of the cave is approximately 750 meters long and its ceiling height varies from one to twelve meters. The cave has multiple vaulted halls with different heights and winding corridors that connect to each other, but it is still impossible for anyone to completely map and

understand all of them. In addition, due to the excavations made in the surrounding rocks in previous eras, it is unclear how many rooms and passages exist in the entire structure.

The cave has four levels of architectural rock formations. In each level, there are rooms and corridors leading to the outside of the cave. The fourth level of the cave is more beautiful. In the third level, there is a high degree of precision in carving rooms and creating ceilings. The stairs and platforms on this level are well-designed, and the windows and corridors are beautifully decorated.

## Social fabric of Central Asian poets and 'literary return' movement

Biographical anthologies from the eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries provide evidence for establishing the connections among individual poets that would later become known as the founders of the 'literary return' movement.

In writing about a Central Asian biographical anthology from the Safavid period, Robert McChesney commented that, while the goal of *tadhkiras* is often 'to explain in a formal and conventional way individual creativity rather than social relations of individuals and groups', they nonetheless offer a great deal of information regarding the social, cultural and economic circumstances of the time. The biographical anthologies of the Zand and Qajar periods do just that, identifying the relationships and connections among poets later known as the founders of the 'literary return' movement. They provide a roster of the poets associated with Seyyed Ali Mushtaq Isfahani's literary society, the affiliations among poets after Mushtaq's death, the diverse class backgrounds of participants

and the lineages of student-instructor relationships that stretch from the movement's early days in the mid-to-late eighteenth century to poets located at the Qajar court of Fat'h-Ali Shah later on.

There are several categories of affiliations that define the social network among the 'literary return' movement from its early gestational form in Mushtaq's literary society to the movement's more formal institutionalization at the Qajar court of Fat'h-Ali Shah: instructional relationships between teachers and students, bonds of friendship, and family and professional relationships.

The existence of these multiple, and often overlapping, lines of association helps to delineate the diverse ways in which the poets of a nascent 'literary return' movement were connected with one another.

Mushtaq's student Azar delineates many of the poets affiliated with Mushtaq's literary society. Azar cites in particular his friendships with Sahba (died in 1777), who, like him,

was one of Mushtaq's early disciples, and with Hatif (died 1784).

The three poets together would later organise Mushtaq's poetry into a collection (*divan*) after his death. Also among this early circle of associates was Aqa Muhammad "Ashiq" Isfahani, a tailor by profession, and Rafiq Isfahani, a vegetable seller. Their participation too points to the humble professions of some of the circle's members and the continued practice from Safavid times of poetic production among Isfahan's urban professionals.

Poets not definitely tied to Mushtaq's literary society, either as participant or student, also form a part of this larger network, such as Sulayman 'Sabahi' Bidguli (d. 1793). Either in Isfahan or in his birthplace of Kashan, Sabahi met Azar and Hatif, leading the three to embark on lifelong friendship.

Indeed, the triumvirate of Azar, Hatif and Sabahi has been heralded by the historian Dunbuli as Mushtaq's heirs in overthrowing the method of poetry whose meanings had become



A poem of Mushtaq



Seyyed Ali Mushtaq Isfahani

'frigid and tasteless'. The strong bonds of friendship and close companionship between Azar, Hatif and Sabahi are well-recorded, both in biographical anthologies and

in their poetry. Their poems, often in conversation with each other, offer some of the best evidence of how these poets viewed themselves and their surroundings.