

New archaeological efforts in Masouleh for UNESCO World Heritage status



Iranica Desk

Iranian archaeologists have begun new excavations in the heights of Masouleh to complete the dossier for its UNESCO World Heritage registration. Chinese researchers have joined them in the search for traces of the residents of Masouleh in metallurgy.

Excavations are ongoing in the heights of Masouleh, with a number of archaeologists led by Solmaz Raouf stationed at Kohneh Masouleh (Old Masouleh), while another group led by Behzad Ali Taleshi is conducting excavations in Siyapsieh. They are studying a culture and lifestyle linked to metallurgy in Masouleh—an area that was once a center for iron smelting and its use in weaponry, according to ISNA.

Siyapsieh is located at an elevation of about 2,500 meters in a region with a 35-degree slope. Due to the presence of organic compounds, winter snow melts earlier, revealing the dark soil beneath. In contemporary terms, *siyapsieh* means “black boy”, but archaeologists believe the name translates to “burnt black” because there is so much ash that the surface has turned completely black.

To reach this height, archaeologists traverse a difficult and lengthy path through snow, rain, and wind, taking about

seven to eight hours, and lasting up to 12 hours if they go on foot. This area had never before been subject to archaeological excavations; it was first identified and surveyed in 2017, which reinforced archaeologists’ suspicions about the presence of a metalworking furnace in this location. Following excavations that began in October 2024, they have finally succeeded in discovering evidence of a metalworking workshop, iron smelting, and related furnaces.

Excavations in Siyapsieh are ongoing, though their pace has slightly slowed. Archaeologists have identified the surface of the furnace, but the excavation site is located at the end of a snow-prone route. Continuing the excavations could endanger the lives of the archaeologists and workers, and there is also a risk of destroying archaeological evidence due to potential avalanches. As a result, the metal smelting furnace identified in Siyapsieh has not yet been fully unearthed.

As the excavation area expands and hypotheses regarding the possible production of various alloys in Masouleh develop, three specialists have been invited for more comprehensive research: Ali Akbar Vahedi, an archaeologist and researcher; Abolfazl Aali, an archaeologist focused on mining studies and excavations; and Fereydoon

Beiglari, who has previously conducted research in the pre-historic section of Masouleh. The Chinese archaeological team is also assisting the Iranian archaeologists with metallurgical testing. They are specialists in metallurgy and will examine the furnace samples. Based on the test results, they will collaborate with the Iranian archaeologists to determine the locations of the Masouleh inhabitants’ mines, assess the level of their technology, and identify which neighboring and non-neighboring regions they interacted with.

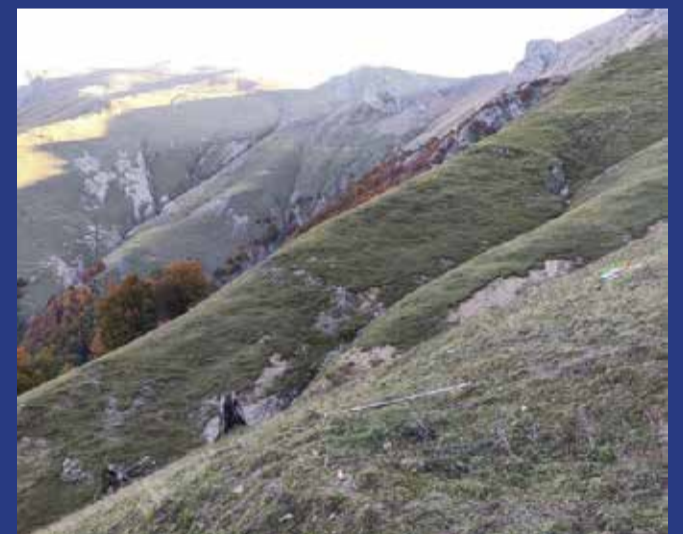
For some time, archaeologists have been systematically excavating the surroundings of Masouleh. They are investigating areas suspected to be related to metallurgy, planning to study and excavate these sites selectively once identified.

The results of the tests remain unclear. It is uncertain when metallurgy began in Masouleh based on the clues gathered so far and how long it continued. Similarly, the timeline for converting iron ore into metal and when metal smelting declined in the region is still unknown. Additionally, it is unclear which neighboring areas (such as Ardebil, Zanjan, Tabriz, etc.) received tools produced in Masouleh and which governing bodies were involved. Answering these questions could help clarify some of the puzzles

surrounding the ambiguous case for UNESCO registration of Masouleh.

Archaeologists who have been intermittently working in Masouleh for several years are seeking scientifically accurate answers to these questions and evidence of the metalworking industry in neighboring regions. They aim to understand the motivations behind the people of Masouleh engaging in metallurgy and operating a metal smelting furnace at an altitude of 2,500 meters.

Masouleh is located 25 kilometers southwest of Fuman in Gilan Province. The terraced village was registered as a National Heritage Site in 1975, and its application for UNESCO World Heritage status has been in progress since 2011. In 2007, Masouleh was included on UNESCO’s Temporary List of World Heritage Sites. The dossier was reviewed on September 17, 2023, during the 45th session of the World Heritage Committee; however, it was deferred based on the recommendation of ICOMOS (the International Council on Monuments and Sites, serving as UNESCO’s advisory body). Following discussions with Iran, the World Heritage Committee has granted the opportunity to resubmit the application for review without the constraints of the annual quota for countries, allowing for the resolution of any outstanding issues.



Shiriki Pich kilims; a fusion of nomadic tradition and innovation



One of the oldest handicrafts in Iran is the kilim, with historical documents indicating that they date back over five thousand years. Kilims are originally flat weaves made without knots, although the Dehkhoda Dictionary also mentions their use as clothing.

Historically, kilim weaving has been a livelihood for nomads, particularly in the southern regions of Iran. Sirjan, a city in Kerman Province, has gained fame for its kilims, which are noted for their high quality and innovative patterns. This reputation led to Sirjan being designated as a global city of handwoven kilims by the World Council of Handicrafts.

Unlike traditional kilims, the *Shiriki Pich*, or *suzani* kilims from Sirjan, are knotted weaves that serve as

an intermediate form between carpets and kilims. These unique pieces are believed to have been developed during the entry of the Afshar clans into Kerman and later during the Afsharid dynasty. The origins of the name *Shiriki Pich* are debated; one theory suggests it refers to a horse cover, while another links *pich-bafi* to a type of kilim. Like many other kilims, they are woven from wool yarns, using looms similar to those for carpets. The weaving technique is akin to carpet weaving, employing two primary knots: *matn* and *abduzi*.

In these kilims, unlike in other woven textiles, the weft does not contribute to the patterns; in-

stead, it is the warp threads that create the designs. Rarely do artisans follow pre-made patterns, which means almost all Sirjan kilims are one-of-a-kind, with no two pieces exactly alike. The backgrounds typically feature cream, milky white, red, blue, and dark blue shades.

These remarkable hand weaves could be described as *hessi baf*, or sensational weaves, as the emotions and moods of the nomadic women weavers significantly influence their color choices during production. The motifs are vibrant, incorporating greens, yellows, pinks, and blues to create geometric designs as well as motifs of fish, giraffes, and various birds, including storks and peacocks. It is rare to find a Sirjan kilim that is plain and devoid of motifs.