

Insights from Salt Men discoveries in Zanzan



● Zolfaqari Mansion

Iranica Desk

Although in ancient times the Zolfaqari Mansion in Zanzan served as a residence and administrative center for the city's rulers — never open to ordinary people — today it has been transformed into a museum that is accessible to the public. Visitors can explore a significant part of their identity and history by visiting this museum, where they have the opportunity to see the mummies known as the Salt Men, which were discovered from the Chehrabad Mine in Zanzan, and learn about the lifestyle of that era through artifacts uncovered alongside these ancient remains.

The Chehrabad Salt Mine of Zanzan is the only known archaeological site in Iran that provides extensive evidence of salt mining activities dating from both pre-Islamic and post-Islamic periods. Thanks to its unique geological features, this historic mine contains significant quantities of organic materials, ancient mining tools, and natural mummies referred to as the "Salt Men."

According to experts in cultural heritage from Zanzan, a total of six Salt Men have been discovered so far within the Chehrabad Salt Mine near Zanzan. Archaeologists believe that all of these individuals were miners who, due to accidental collapses within the mine, were trapped under a salt avalanche and subsequently buried alive, IRNA wrote.

Currently, the remains of two Salt Men are stored in the Salt Men artifacts repository because of their fragmented condition. Three additional mummies are kept at the Zolfaqari Mansion in Zanzan, and one is housed in the National Museum of Iran.

Until recently, there was no evidence of clothing typical of the Achaemenid era; however, the discovery of a mummy buried in the Chehrabad Salt Mine provided valuable artifacts dating back approximately 2,350 years, shedding light on the attire and material culture of that period.

The Zolfaqari building in Zanzan was designated as a national heritage site in 1996. It underwent several phases of restoration before opening to the public in 1999, eventually becoming the repository for artifacts excavated from the Chehrabad Salt Mine. In

2007, a temporary museum dedicated to the mummies was established within the building, and in 2009, the first official Archaeological Museum of Zanzan was inaugurated inside the Zolfaqari Mansion.

In 2004, during mining operations, miners encountered not only disintegrated human skeletal remains but also discovered several artifacts alongside them. Today, the hidden historical secrets of the Salt Men are showcased at the Archaeology Museum of Zanzan, which is housed within the historic Zolfaqari Mansion.

Despite the significant discovery of the Salt Man 1 in 1993, little effort was initially made to halt mechanized extraction or to cease mining operations altogether. However, in autumn 2004, miners once again found human skeletal remains while operating a bulldozer; yet, these remains had been largely disintegrated due to the machinery used.

While sifting through the disturbed soil, the miners collected parts of the fragmented human remains along with several artifacts. These were later transferred by the operator to the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization of Zanzan Province for further analysis.

Initial examinations of the remains led to the designation "Salt Man 2." These remains belonged to a middle-aged man, approximately 180 centimeters tall, who had died during a collapse of the tunnel walls and ceiling. Among the objects found with Salt Man 2 were fragments of a basket, wooden nails, plant-based ropes, and textiles.

The accidental discovery of Salt Man 2 and its associated artifacts revitalized archaeological research at the Chehrabad Salt Mine after a hiatus of 11 years. Excavations were first carried out in December-January of 2004 to recover remaining artifacts and remains, and a second phase continued in autumn 2005.

Similarly, the remains of Salt Man 3 were also discovered during another accidental excavation in 2004. Due to the discovery of this mummy by a bulldozer, it was also found in a fragmented and dismembered state.

The remains of Mummy No. 3 include bones, clothing, and parts of soft tissue belonging to an indi-

vidual who, like other miners, was killed due to a tunnel collapse and the fall of a several-ton boulder onto him.

Salt Man 4 is the most complete mummy discovered from the Chehrabad Mine. Despite the damage sustained at the time of death, most parts of his body remain intact, including bones and soft tissues that have become entirely dried out due to water loss. At the time of discovery, the body was found in a prone position, with the face and front of the body directed toward the ground. The arms were bent at the elbows — the left hand resting on the ground, and the right hand almost clenched into a fist. The right leg was positioned half-open, while the other leg was folded beneath the abdomen. Despite several fractures to the skull, the cause of death, as determined through CT scan investigations, was attributed to pressure exerted on the chest and a torn heart, likely caused by tunnel collapses and falling debris.

Research indicates that this natural mummy belonged to a young man approximately 16 years old at the time of death, with an estimated height ranging from 170 to 175 centimeters.

Salt Man 5, due to the low salt content present in the environment and water seepage from above the mountain, has undergone more decay than the other mummies. Silver rings are visible on his ears, and his hair is short and reddish-brown in color.

Along with this young man, several interesting artifacts were also uncovered. One notable item is a metal knife with a bone handle, attached to his leather belt with a leather sheath. Other objects include two intact small clay pots, plant-based ropes, a small glazed bead, and eleven pieces of pottery that were found in association with the body.

A particularly significant feature of this natural mummy is the presence of complete clothing, which is still visible on the remains. The attire consists of a long tunic, trousers, and leather shoes.

This mummy was discovered during the second season of excavation, buried beneath large rocks and rubble, with the exception of the head. The shape of the body indicates that, like the previous

specimens, this individual was killed and buried as a result of an incident involving tunnel destruction and collapse. Unlike Salt Mummy No. 4, the soft tissues of Salt Mummy No. 5 have decayed significantly, with only small portions remaining on the hands, feet, parts of the face, chest, and pelvis.

The low salinity of this environment, combined with water infiltration from above the mountain, is among the main reasons for the extensive decay observed in Salt Mummy No. 5.

Before the excavations conducted in 2004 and 2005 at the Chehrabad Salt Mine, it was generally believed, based on findings from 1993, that the mine was the location where a Sassanid prince or a representative of the ruling elite of the Saka tribes in the 8th century BCE had been killed.

However, recent excavations over the past two seasons have revealed that all the mummies discovered in the mine belonged to workers and miners who were killed and buried as a result of collapses, with walls, ceilings, and tunnels caving in.

Furthermore, archaeological evidence suggests that the mine has been active since roughly the first half of the first millennium BCE. Radiocarbon dating tests indicate that Salt Mummies 3, 4, and 5 date to the Achaemenid period, approximately 2,300 years ago. In contrast, Salt Mummies 1 and 2 belong to the Sassanian period, around 1,500 to 1,700 years ago.

Based on existing evidence and documents, the collapses of the tunnels at Chehrabad Mine occurred at least twice: the first around 2,300 years ago during active mining when a significant portion of the tunnels collapsed and Salt Mummies 3, 4, and 5 were killed and, after several centuries, another incident happened in the mine, resulting in the deaths and burials of Salt Mummies 1 and 2.

Currently, aside from Salt Man 1, which is housed at the National Museum, all other bodies and artifacts recovered from the Chehrabad Mine are stored in the Zolfaqari Museum under appropriate conditions. These artifacts are carefully overseen by relevant experts to preserve their integrity and facilitate ongoing research.



● Shoe of Salt Man 1



● Head of Salt Man 1



● Remains of Salt Man 3



● Salt Man 4



● Salt Man 5