

GOBUSTAN ROCK ART CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Located in the eastern part of the Republic of Azerbaijan and on the western shore of the Caspian Sea Gobustan National Reserve was inscribed as Gobustan Rock Art Cultural Landscape into the World Heritage List in 2007.

With hills and highlands covered with big boulders and almost no green, Gobustan is an outstanding rock art landscape, where over 6000 rock engravings were found and registered, since Upper Palaeolithic up to the Middle Ages. In 1966, the rock art area, covering approximately 4000 hectares, was declared a National Reserve.

Fig.1 The map of Karadagh region with the indication of Gobustan reserve.

Background

For the first time data about rock carvings of Azerbaijan were registered by one of the first archaeologists-researchers I.M.Jafarzadeh. He revealed rock images to the south-west of Baku city, at the foot of Jingirdag Mountain near Yazyly hill in spring 1939. He thoroughly described the location of this historical monument and part of the carvings: images of wild animals (goats, gazelles, deer, lions, horses, dogs) and scenes of sacrifice and hunting [Jafarzadeh, 1948]. The 60-70-es of last century were marked with a new discovery of petroglyphs, when Azerbaijani archaeologists (G.M. Aslanov, 1965; V.G.Aliyev, 1970; G.S.Ismailzade, 1977) fixed a great number of unique rock images on Kelbajar highland. In those years the number of revealed petroglyphs of Gobustan was doubled (J.N.Rustamov, 1965; J.N.Rustamov, F.Muradova, 1970). Archaeological excavations were held by the above-mentioned researchers with support of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan. At present, there are more than 1000 rocks with images, the number of which is more than 6000. Besides, the above-mentioned researchers made archaeological excavations on more than 20 ancient settlements and discovered more than 40 burial mounds of the Bronze Age period.

With the aim of the protection of rock images, found on the territory of Gobustan, and having the historical-artistic and cultural importance, the territory of Beyukdash, Kichikdash and Jingirdag mountains was declared as Gobustan State Historical-Artistic Reserve by the decree of the Council of Ministers of Azerbaijan SSR in 1966 and in June 11, 2007 was announced as National Reserve by the decree of the president of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev.

Beginning from 2003 Gobustan reserve has participated in international projects, particularly in CARAD (Central Asia Rock Art Database) project with support of UNESCO. The digital database of Gobustan reserve was created in MapInfo program, in which rock images were registered; description and physical state of petroglyphs were presented.

Fig.2. The map of digital database of Gobustan reserve.

The given map also let us reconstruct archaeological landscape of Gobustan since the end of Upper Paleolith up to Middle Ages. If we look at it we can clearly see that the most ancient petroglyphs are concentrated on the upper terraces of Beyukdash and Kichikdash mountains. Monuments of Neolith and Eneolith are located on the lower terraces. Bronze, Iron and Middle Ages monuments are mainly concentrated at the foot of the mountain.

Gobustan Rock Art Cultural Landscape consists of the following cultural qualities:

- more than 6000 petroglyphs
- shelters, ancient settlements, burial sites
- sacred sites
- evidence of a very long cultural continuity in a number of rock shelters.

Rock Art

Rock art of Azerbaijan is graphically planed. Carvings are given as silhouette, continuous or contour images. The view and capacity are absent. Animals and birds are always depicted on one side (Beyukdash Mountain, "Ana-zaga" cave).

Fig.3. Gobustan, Beyukdash mountain, "Ana-zaga" cave.

Correlation of figures among themselves produces conventional impression - sometimes animals and birds are represented with reverse orientation to each other: with the head up or down, etc. Vividly expressing characteristic features of animals, these plane and realistic images sometimes seem very close to Aurignacian images though some hardness is felt in them (stones № 64, 65 upper terrace of Beyukdash Mountain) [M.Otte, 2004; 2006].

Beyukdash Mountain, "Kaniza" shelter

We meet images of ox heads, early hunters and aurochs. It should be noted that here there were found separate stones with petroglyphs as well as a great number of bone artifacts.

Beyukdash Mountain, "Ana-zaga" cave-shelter

Analysis of images shows that images of aurochs, women and early hunters predominate here.

Beyukdash Mountain, "Okuzler" site

Here, mating themes chiefly predominate: 2 aurochs, man and woman holding each other by hands, images of 2 goats.

Kichikdash Mountain, "Gaya arasi" site

Special interest arouses the image of big fish, 423 sm. long, on stone №5 on Kichikdash Mountain. Judging from approximate data, this is an image of dolphin, which is now an extinct animal in this region. Existence of dolphins in the Caspian Sea is dated to the Upper Quaternary period. Dolphin image, in its turn, is crossed with the aurochs images. Besides, in confirmation to the previously mentioned, this image was carved on the wall of early hunters' cave, at the foot of which a cultural layer with the industry reminding of Upper

Paleolithic one was revealed. From this cultural layer, nucleuses, trapezes, denticulate bladelets and bone bores having Upper Paleolithic shape, were found out. In this site approximately 3,5 m. deep a separate stone with klaviform women images in profile were revealed. So, it is possible to date the history of origin of the given image to the end of Upper Pleistocene, when the last big transgression of the Caspian basin- Khvalin Sea, took place. At that period the waters of the Mediterranean Sea reached the Caspian Sea through the Black Sea, i.e. via Manych Strait. In Khvalin layer Manych Strait was open in Vurme. (Vereshagin N.K.,1959; Kovalevsky,1933).

A great number of bones of extinct animals was also revealed in Gaya-arasi site of Gobustan. According to data of osteological analysis, in Gayaarasi site on Kichikdash, 98 % of the bones belong to gazelle, but in Anazaga cave on Beyukdash, 40 % out of 10.000 revealed bones belong to wild horses, 40% to gazelle. The bones of aurochs and goats are isolated. The interesting thing is that the number of gazelle images in this site is quite little. Here there are also images of aurochs head, pregnant women in profile and anthropomorphic images as well as boat images.

Of special interest are images of aurochs in their life-size. Here we should also mention the image of aurochs together with the images of women in profile on the north-western part of stone №5.

Fig.4. Kichikdash mountain. Stone 5.

Women images in this site are the most ancient ones and images of women revealed on separate stones here confirm this fact. Though women images are the most ancient ones, the aurochs image on stone №5 is crossed with women images. In this case it gives us the ground to presume that women images were carved later than the image of aurochs.

Kichikdash Mountain, “Jeyranlar” site

Various themes represented on the walls of this site: images of gazelles, aurochs and women.

Fig.5. Jeyranlar cave.

Kichikdash Mountain, “Firuz- 2” site

Very interesting is stone №19, which is at the same time the eastern wall of the shelter. Images are in the western part of the stone. Klaviform women images and images of boats with the sun on the bow mainly predominate here. Such type of linear boat images was revealed on separate stones from different cultural layers. Also images of aurochs, horses, boar, gazelles and goats were fixed on stone №19.

Fig.6. Firuz-2 shelter.

Dating

One of the most important and difficult questions a rock art researcher has to deal with and on which he does not always find an exact answer, is the problem of dating that has cardinal value for correct definition of place of the given monument in the long circuit of historical development. Stratigraphy of separate stones with rock drawings and cultural layers, typological analysis, and also assistance of other sciences such as geology, paleozoology, paleobotany and others, let us sometimes establish the age of images correctly enough. However, the received data have sometimes, an approximate character, leaving the question of their absolute dating open. Usually images of women and wild aurochs are regarded as relatively earlier groups of images. The revealed Upper Paleolithic flint knives from Gayaarasi site [165, 7-8.; 190, 25] give us the ground to confirm the Upper Paleolithic age of the some petroglyphs on the walls of Kaniza site, the upper terrace of Beyukdash Mountain, Gayaarasi site on Kichikdash Mountain.

Images of extinct animals testify to ancientness of petroglyphs. In some caves of Gobustan, such as Ana-zaga, Kaniza on Beyukdash Mountain; Gayaarasi-1, Gayaarasi-2, Firuz-1, Firuz-2 on Kichikdash Mountain, petroglyphs are somehow connected with an archaeological layer. In these cases, the establishment of age will be absolutely exact. So, for instance, sometimes in the cultural layers fragments of the separate stones covered with images are buried. Hence, they precede or are simultaneous to the formation of the layer. Separate stones and fragments with images of women, aurochs and boats, found out on the level of Upper Paleolithic flint knives in Ana-zaga, Gayaarasi, Gayaarasi-2, Jeyranlar, Kaniza sites, and other images on 43 rocks that were once walls of these caves, are known today. [Rustamov Dj., 2000, p.21].

Some layers of the above-mentioned sites of Kichikdash and Beyukdash Mountains presumably dated to the period of Upper Paleolithic [Faradjeva M., 2001, 2003; 2004; Farajova M., 2004], contained petroglyphs on separate stones of precisely the same style, as well as petroglyphs on the walls of these caves [Archive of Gobustan Preserve 1973-1992, №1, 2, 3.; Rustamov Dj., 1990, p.99-103.; Rustamov Dj., 1984, p.40-49.]. Thus, we may come to conclusion that these images on Rustamov Dj., separate stones had been executed earlier than the cultural layer, in which they were found out.

Presumably, periodization of petroglyphs of Azerbaijan is the following:

Ancient, Early stage – period of the end of High Pleistocene and Early Holocene

This period, in its turn, is divided into 4 style groups (according to A. Leroi-Gouran, 1965):

I style: the images of aurochs head on Gaya-arasi site of Kichikdash Mountain as well as women images in profile without head, klaviform signs from the upper terrace of Kichikdash, Beyukdash and Shongar mountains.

II style: Images of aurochs in natural size and inverse bas-relief pregnant women images .

III style: images of aurochs with short legs and stretched bodies as on the upper terrace of Boyukdash and Kichikdash mountains.

IV style (approximately XII-VIII mln. B.C.):

1. Inverse bas-relief images of men-hunters, in some of them hunters are with bows and arrows.
2. The images on the same stones revealed from the cultural layer of such settlements as Okuzlar-2 and Kaniza on the upper terrace of Boyukdash Mountain, Gaya-arasi on Kichikdash and Shongar Mountains. Here, mainly, hunters, women, aurochs and boat images are represented.

In Upper Pleistocene the main target of hunting were big animals leading gregarious life. Hunting was collective; one man alone could not kill animals. In Gobustan rock images animals occupy the leading place, as they were the main source of food: aurochs, wild horses etc. But at the end of Pleistocene – beginning of Holocene, climate changes occurred and accordingly, the hunting target changed too. At that period, images of modern, Holocene fauna appeared in rock art (deer, wild boar, bird images, etc). That period could be dated by means of archaeological material, revealed from the Upper Paleolithic cultural layers of Gobustan shelters, such as “Ana-zaga”, “Kaniza” on Boyukdash Mountain, “Gaya-arasi”, “Gaya-arasi-2”, “Firuz-1”, “Firuz-2” on Kichikdash Mountain. Some layers of the above-mentioned settlements of Kichikdash and Boyukdash Mountains possessed petroglyphs on some stones which are of the same style as petroglyphs found on the walls of the caves. Accordingly, these images had been made before the formation of cultural layers, in which they were found. It could happen that the images on the walls were covered by the sea-sand layer, as, for example, in “Jeyranlar” site, 500-600 m. to the north from “Firuz-1” site. Some images were revealed below the sea-sand level, indicating that in one historical period the sea level was below the great ocean’s level and in other period up to 128 m. above the great ocean’s level. Transgressions and regressions of the Caspian Sea also helped to establish the age of some rock images (M.Farajova, 2009).

Late period – Neolithic stage (about VII-VI millennia B.C.)

Images of wild aurochs and wild horses (onager)- (“Ovchular” shelter on the upper terrace of Beyukdash Mountain, stone N 45, realistic images of domesticated aurochs in the same place (stone N 45), petroglyphs with ritual-magic sense (round-dances, sacrifice scenes, etc., upper terrace of Beyukdash Mountain, stone N 67).

Later period – Chalcolithic period (VI-IV mln. B.C.)

1. Numerous deer and goat images, which are given in real size. There are also a wild boar and images of domesticated animals (Jingirdag Mountain, Yazyly hill, stones N 4, 9, 92, 33, 54; Beyukdash Mountain, upper terrace - stone N 46, low terrace – stone N 10)
2. Conventionalized images of people in hunting and ritual-magic scenes, the upper terrace of Beyukdash Mountain, stone N 59.

The Bronze Age (IV-III mln. B.C.)

Images of deer on Kichikdash Mountain and images of goats on Jingirdag Mountain (Jingirdag Mountain – stones N 13, 33, 36, 63, 54; upper terrace of Beyukdash Mountain, stone N 42 (southern side).

At that period rock images were created beginning from the second part of the II mln. B.C. and ending by late Middle Ages (I.Jafarzadeh, 1973). The concerned period is characterized by significant changes in rock art of Gobustan. The images are becoming even sketchier. A new stylistic manner of image drawing is appearing. Among petroglyphs new motives, cart and rider images start to appear. For graphic manner the body dismemberment of animals by numerous geometric figures is characterized. Scenes of driving deer in the enclosures are shown. (Yazyly hill, stones N 9, 38, 40, 92, 136, upper terrace of Beyukdash Mountain stone N103). Some geometrized images, individual cross-shaped inscriptions or petroglyphs inscribed in a circle also refer to that period. Archaeological material revealed in Gobustan and separate stones with similar images from these cultural layers let us date the analyzed images by the Bronze Age.

Iron Age (II-I mln. B.C.)

Scenes of driving deer in enclosures (Yazyly hill, stones N 9, 38, 40, 92, 136; upper terrace of Beyukdash Mountain, stone N 103). A very important detail of that period is the presence of armless anthropomorphic figures, a characteristic feature of sacrifice scenes (Yazyly hill, stones N 24, 25).

Middle Ages and later period (I-XVIII c.c.)

Images of hunters (lower terrace of Beyukdash Mountain, stone N 155), armed with spears, riders, tribe signs, inscriptions and images with religious Islamic themes (arch-mehrab on the lower terrace of Beyukdash Mountain), Arabian and Persian inscriptions. This period is characterized by the appearance of horse hunting scenes in a new manner of performance (M.Farajova, 2009). It is important to note that the most ancient rock images were registered only from the sea side and on the upper terraces of Beyukdash and Kichikdash Mounts. As a result of recent archaeological exploration on the territory of Karadag, Absheron and Gobustan regions, the revealed petroglyphs were dated by the Middle Age.

Shelters, ancient settlements, burial sites

The most ancient settlements and shelters, dated by the Upper Paleolithic and Mesolithic period, are located on the upper terraces of Gobustan Mountains. These are “Gaya-arasi”, “Jeyranlar”, “Firuz” shelters on Kichikdash Mountain, “Kaniza”, “Ana-zaga”, “Ovchular-2” shelters on Beyukdash and Kichikdash Mountains.

Fig.7. Kichikdash mountain. View from the “Gaya-arasi” shelter.

In these sites cultural layers of not only Upper Paleolithic, but also of Mesolithic, Neolithic and Eneolithic period were also revealed. The fact is that at the end of Upper Pleistocene the level of historical Caspian Sea (geological name is Khvalyn) was considerably higher. Gobustan Mountains Beyukdash, Kichikdash, Jingirdag were washed by the sea. The above-mentioned sites were discovered approximately on the height of 127 m. above the great ocean’s level. The implements made of stone, bone and obsidian were revealed from these sites as well as remains of extinct flora and fauna that became a very valuable material for reconstruction of geographical environment of the ancient epoch.

On the low terraces of Beyukdash, Kichikdash, Jindirdag Mountains of Gobustan such settlements as “Daire-1”, “Daire-2”, and a great number of burial mounds, dated by the Bronze Age were fixed and registered. From these settlements and burial mounds skeletons and bones of extinct animals, some stones with petroglyphs, archaeological material of the Bronze Age and some gravestones in anthropomorphic shape were found. The objects of special interest are 11 skeletons that were found in “Firuz” site; 2 of them belonged to women, 1 to a child and the rest to men. More than 15 other burial mounds were thoroughly studied and explored.

The holy places

Gobustan rocky boulders, situated closely to one another, form the caves, which over thousand years were used by ancient dwellers as a living place and religious sanctuaries, where ritual and magic ceremonies, ancestor and mountain worships were made. Up today the tradition of worship has been still preserved in the vicinities of Gobustan. Local residents consider wedding procession on Beyukdash Mountain as an obligatory ritual. People dance “Yally” dance in front of Beyukdash rocks with petroglyphs, where images of human figures dancing in line are represented. Evidently, it is the preserved vestiges of ancient forms of mountain worship.

Fig.8. Beyukdash Mountain, upper terrace. Stone 67.

Materials in the sphere of studying rock art of Azerbaijan let us make assumption of the connection of rock art with the cult of mountains and stones. In Gobustan, Kelbajar region, Nakhchevan (on Gemigaya), ancient artists were carving images on high rocks that could be seen from far away and attracted people’s attention by their size and beauty. Mountains, that were, probably, worshipped as ancestral patrons in the past, turned into holy mountains. It is not without reason that local dwellers call Jingirdag Mountain as Jingir-Baba (“Jingir Baba” means “grandfather”). Interesting also is more ancient pronunciation of Jingir Mountain – “Dengir”, “Dengri”. “Tengri” in the Uyghur version of «Oguzname» means the Supreme deity. And from the Albanian historians we learn that Tangrikhan was the main god of Huns. Tangrikhan had a stone sculpture, and people sacrificed horses and other animals in his honor [Seidov M.,1983]. Ancient myths and legends that exist in the vicinities of Gobustan Mountains (*note: oral evidence of local residents in the vicinities of Big Gobustan, particularly, residents of Gobustan village*) have preserved the echoes of conceptions about relation of rock art with the cult of mountains.

Among the rocks of Gobustan remains of sanctuaries were also revealed. Near them rock images were registered on the walls of boulders.

The ensemble of sanctuaries in the vicinities of Gobustan organically fits in the panorama of mountains with their flat tops. There is Gara-atly sanctuary on Kichikdash Mountain. The sanctuary is placed on the rock. On the lower terrace of Beyukdash Mountain, there is a stone with the deepening that was regarded as an imprint of Imam Ali's foot. Not far from this stone, on rock №117 the arch - altar reminding of mekhrab was carved. The practice of engraving rock carvings on the rocks of Gobustan mountains was connected with the conception of not only mountain cult, but also stone cult. Here people, who wish something for their future ("niyat"), come to get confidence in the forthcoming important events. For their wishes to come true, worshipping people usually hammer nails in the rock and tie up the rags "dag-dagan" on them or on the branches, which are near the cult hackberry trees (*Celtis caucasica* Wiii) or build miniature stone houses . Many of the sanctuaries (Sofu Novruz baba, Sofi Hamid, Hury Gizlar) are visited even today.

Fig.9. Pir Sofi Hamid.

Evidence of a very long cultural continuity in the rock shelters

Gobustan is the place with the longest continued rock art tradition - since Upper Palaeolith until Middle Ages. Evidence of monuments such as caravanserai of XVI c. and Gara atly sanctuary with petroglyphs on the walls the same as on Gobustan rocks is a testimony of a long cultural continuity.

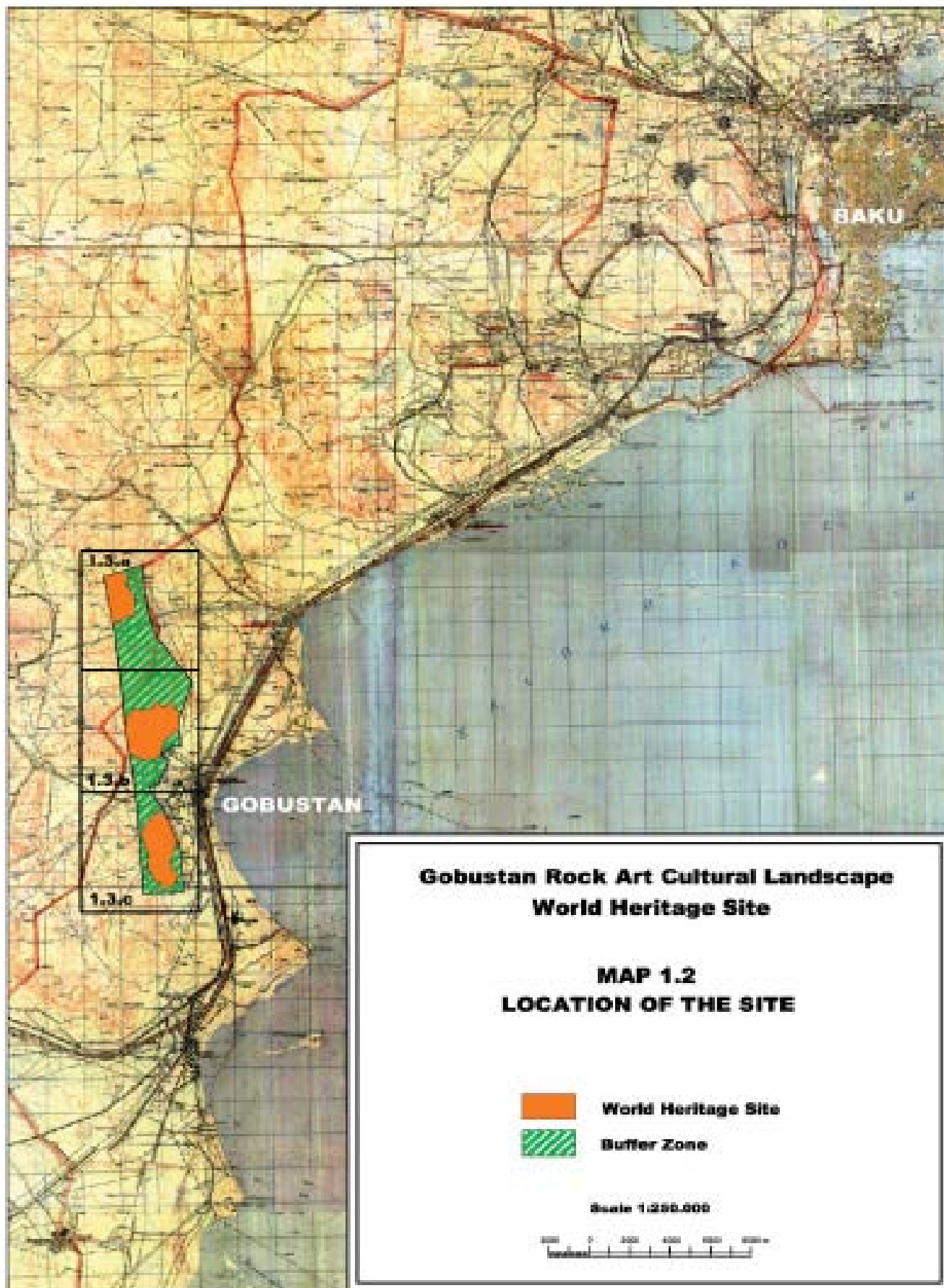
All these facts give us evidence that Gobustan, where rock images are concentrated in a great number, has preserved its religious importance up today.

Fig.10. Gobustan. Caravanserai of XVI c.

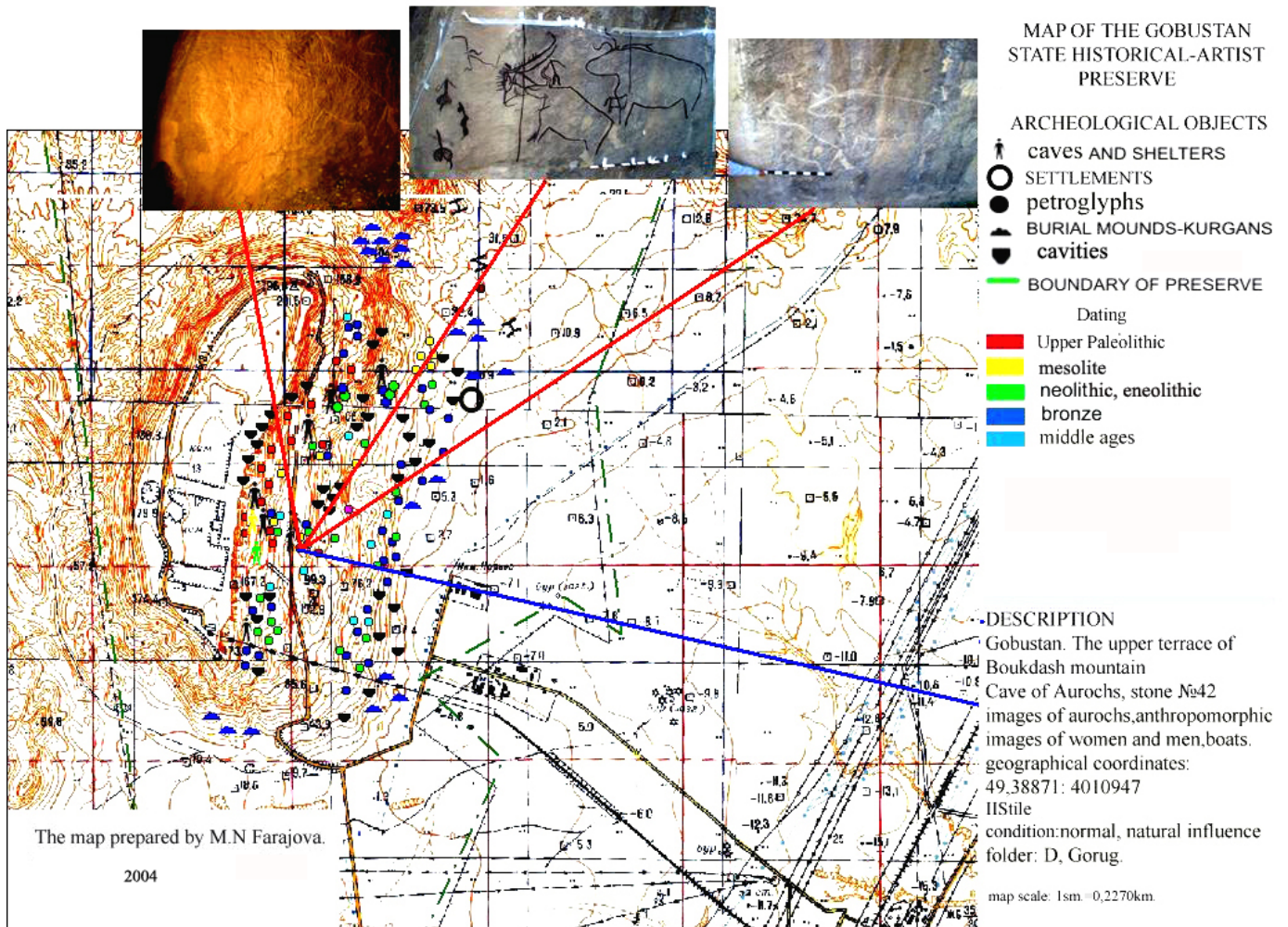
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Gobustan Database System



Example of Rock Art from Gobustan





