

A Sasanian Relief in the Yasuj Museum¹

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Abstract

Occasionally individual artifacts turn up in our museums that have been extremely well conserved and stored, but have remained completely unknown to even the most dedicated scholars. This problem may arise from the fact that our museums lack a research orientation. Even the most eminent of them tend not to present annual reports or produce research periodicals dealing with artifact descriptions. Moreover, some Iranian researchers working in the field of art history professionally have perhaps not spent as much time in museums as they should.

One of these hitherto unknown museum treasures is held by the Yasuj Museum, in the province of Kohgiluyeh o Buyer Ahmad. The object is a relatively small relief or stone panel. It has not yet been fully or definitively described, despite its eye-catching appearance, and the fact that it was found and placed in the care of the Cultural Heritage Department at least a decade and a half ago. This short paper seeks to remedy this deficiency somewhat, providing a description that, we hope, will open the way for a more precise understanding of the object and other similar artifacts, and stir the interest of scholars and enthusiasts alike.

1. General Overview

The artifact is composed of limestone, part of a once larger work. The surviving portion is 31.5 centimeters high and 31 centimeters wide; with a thickness of five centimeters, rising to about seven centimeters at the center of the object. Extrapolating from the remaining portion of the object, it is estimated that the original complete work would have been around 60 centimeters in height, unless the human figure depicted once had appendages and additions for which we now have no evidence. The artifact has the Yasuj Museum accession number 672.²

¹ Publication of this research note and artifact description is done with the permission of the Director of the Yasuj Museum and the Kohgiluyeh o Buyer Ahmad Department of Cultural Heritage. We must express our sincere gratitude for their cooperation in facilitating this research.

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² We became aware of the existence of this object in the course of a brief visit to the Yasuj Museum, conducted as part of the second season of the Archaeological Survey of Gachsārān County (led by Professor Ehsān Yaghmāi) on 13 Bahman 1387 (February 2009). Measurements and photos were taken during a second visit on 26 Bahman 1387. Mr Ali Nāseri executed the sketch based on these photos. We would like to express to him our sincere gratitude and also to Mr Rezā Nāseri.



2. Detailed Description

The object is a slab of carved cream-colored limestone bearing a finely worked relief decoration depicting the image of a standing man (*Images 1-5, figure 1*). The first impression conveyed by the image is of a vigorous, athletic young man of medium build, though proportionately tall. His body is depicted full-frontally but his head and face are shown slightly turned, in three-quarter profile. The viewer sees the whole of the left side of his face, while the right side remains hidden from view. The figure is oriented so that he faces right. His left hand is placed on his waist and the handle of a weapon (sword?) that was probably once depicted on the now lost portion of stone. His right hand is held out in front of his face holding a vertical standard or spear-like object. This object rises to a point a little above the man himself.

The figure's face has been carefully worked, although not in much detail. The eyes, of which we only see one, are open and large, and although quite abraded, are suggestive of an appealing appearance. Portions of the nose, lips, and chin are lost. The lips are pursed and the mouth is closed. The beard is gathered together and held by a ring below his chin, in a manner that was evidently traditionally associated with kings.



Image 1. Yasuj Museum's Sasanian Stone Relief. (Photo: Zār'a)

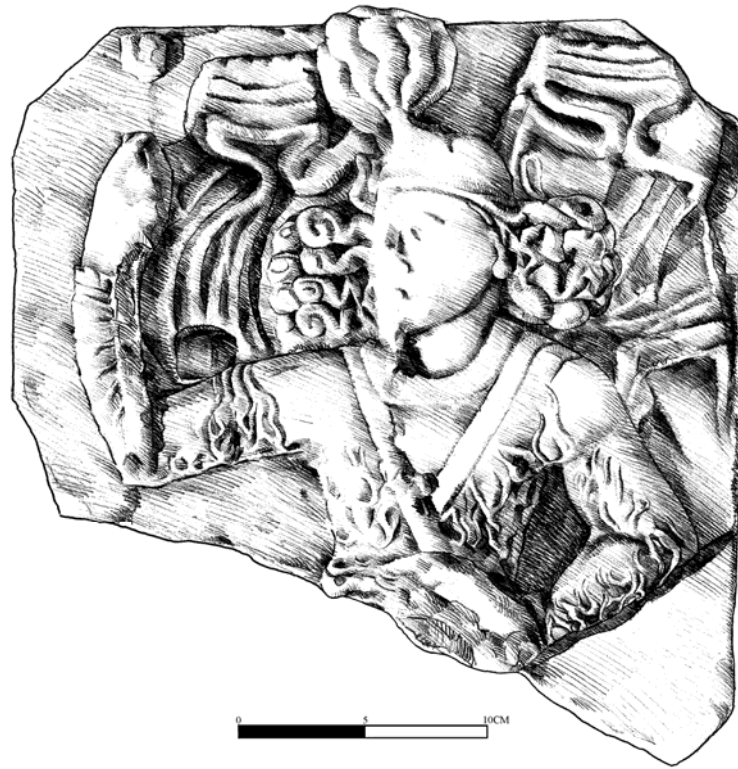


Figure 1. Sketch of the design of the Yasuj Museum's stone relief, based on the photo. (Sketch: Ali Nāseri)



Image 2. Close up oblique angle on the relief.



Image 3. View of the broken portion of the relief.



Image 4. A view of the reverse side of the artifact.



Image 5. Close up view of the work.

A spherical tear-drop earring hangs from the man's left ear, and is reminiscent of the sort of earrings made of large pearls. A part of the forehead is covered by a diadem/headband and not visible. Below the diadem, an area of the head around the nose has been broken and is incomplete. The hair is divided into three parts. Two of these emerge as curly, wavy bunches from under the diadem and out from behind the neck on both sides of the head, above the shoulders. The third area of hair is bunched into a spherical form above the head, held at its base with a ring or tied with a piece of cloth. The hair on both sides of the head is arranged in four wavy ranks, possibly indicating that it was intended to convey to the viewer the impression that it was not tied. Because of the full-frontal depiction of the body, and to render perspective and maintain the symmetry of the hair on both sides of the slightly angled head, the sculptor has made the area of hair on the left side slightly more raised and puffed out. By contrast, the hair on the right side, away from the viewer, is somewhat flatter. Overall the rendering of the face is done in a way suggesting that the subject was quite young [in his early twenties perhaps?].

A train of ribbons from the headband/diadem flutters and dances in the air behind the figure in the empty ground on both sides of the head. The ribbon-train of this headband is employed as the filler for the empty space. It has been so well executed by the sculptor that it may be one of the most exceptional and beautiful renderings of the common motif of fluttering of ribbons in the whole oeuvre of Sasanian art. The artist's attempt to capture the lightness and delicacy of the fabric's movement into pleats and folds as it interacts with the wind is especially admirable.

This wind-blown diadem train is narrow and thick close to the head, becoming broader and more crimped towards its ends.

The figure's garments include a coat/overcoat with a 'left and right collar' [یقه چپ و راست], which was a common feature of Parthian and Sasanian upper body garments. The strip on the left hand side was placed so that it crossed overtop of the strip on the right, which created a full-chested collar shaped like a 'V'. This prominent ribbon-like collar is clearly thicker than other parts of the costume. These ribbon-like edges are strips that come together on the lower chest, creating the 'V' form. The overcoat is sleeved and appears to be sewn together of a relatively thin, delicate fabric – possibly silk – and is so tight that the outline of the musculature of the man can be made out through it. The chest, shoulders and well-muscled arms are cases in point. His abdomen is also flat and the waist is slim relative to the thick shoulders and broad chest.

Such overcoats are usually fastened around the waist with a belt, although here, we cannot tell because this information was contained on the lost portion of the stone. The overcoat's fabric was adorned with fairly regular small pleats and frills that probably covered the whole garment, although these frills are not evident in certain areas of the chest, shoulders and arms. The overcoat's collar goes over the shoulders at a short distance from the neck. At this point, a semi-circular ribbon is shown running around and under the neck. It is not clear whether this relates to the neck line of a garment worn beneath the coat, or if it is a sort of necklace. If it is an indication of an undergarment, it is of a simple, unadorned type, probably of a coarse fabric. If it is a necklace, it is torque-like and solid. The likelihood of it being a necklace is considered less than it being an item of clothing.

The figure's left hand is placed on a sword fastened to the left hand side of his waist. Although the position of the hand suggests the man is grasping the sword handle, his finger indicates his hand is open. The right hand, as mentioned, holds a long perpendicular object that could be a standard or a spear before the man's face.

This summary has been short and somewhat cursory and has not permitted a comprehensive overview of every detail. It is conceivable that the stone relief was once painted, especially considering that traces of red pigments (?) have been found around the left elbow and in the empty space between the figure's flank and the curvature of the left hand. However, further investigation of this issue will require laboratory equipment, the taking of samples and the testing of those samples.

The exterior of the artifact is worn and smooth. In areas around the edge of the object, there are traces of the action of a toothed or rasping chisel, which appear to be similar to the effects of tools used by Sasanian craftsmen to carve other stone reliefs, documented elsewhere. The surface of the reverse side of the relief is uneven (*figure 4*). The two sides of the upper portion of the artifact are not squared off; and the horizontal axis of the work, defined by the upper edge, is not completely square with the vertical axis, defined by the longer right hand edge. This makes the object somewhat asymmetrical.

3. Style, Structure and Historical Context

So, to which period should we attribute the work? Who does the image depict? To what style and artistic school does it belong? And, what function did it have? Naturally, obtaining accurate and verifiable answers to some of these questions is impossible. However, answering others

may be possible, based on the small amount of evidence we have, alongside a comparative study.



Image 6. Ardashir I in the Tang-e Āb relief, Firuzābād (Herrmann 1387/2008: 98)



Image 7. Stone relief of the Victory of Shāhpur I, Darāb (Garosi 1388/2009: 57)



Image 8. Stone relief of the Victory of Shāpur I, Bishāpur (Ghirshman 1390/2011: 153)



Image 9. Face of a coin of the first Sasanian King, Ardashir I (Ghirshman 1956: Pl. XXVI)



Image 10. Reverse of a coin the second Sasanian King, Shāhpur I



Image 11. Reverse of a coin of Bahram II



Image 12. Seal impression bearing the image of Bahram IV (Ghirshman 1390/2011: Image 4, p. 294)

A. At first glance, the artifact informs us that we are dealing with an object from within the Parthian-Sasanian artistic tradition. The figure's hair and personal adornment style, and the garment with the 'left and right' collar are all diagnostic indicators. Further reflection reveals that we are actually looking at one of the preeminent examples of Sasanian stone relief work. It appears to have a greater affinity with works from the early period of Sasanian rule (third-fourth centuries CE), rather than the later.

The Sasanian practice of commissioning commemorative stone reliefs begins with the founder of the dynasty, Ardashir I (c. 224-240 CE), and evolved out of a longstanding Near Eastern artistic tradition of creating pictorial reliefs. Although the tradition did not spring *sui generis* from the workshops of the court of the early Sasanians, and was directly stylistically indebted to Parthian-Elymaean sculpture and relief; Sasanian reliefs were made distinctive from the outset, by features that were noteworthy developments on what had preceded them. The Yasuj relief is a product of this tradition, which had emerged during the reign of Ardashir I, maturing gradually towards the end of his reign and the early part of the reign of his son Shāhpur I, and eventually emerging as a distinctive artistic school in its own right.

B. A general rule of Sasanian sculpture is that important personalities were not portrayed in life-like or realistic ways, characterized by the representation of personal physical characteristics. Rather, the identity and personality of the subject was conveyed via particular motifs and symbols attributed to that person (Sarre1386/2007: 749). For example, each king had his own distinctive personal crown. His style of coiffure and the adornment of his

possessions and body were equally distinguishing. The Yasuj Museum's stone relief is thus amenable to an iconographic analysis to determine who the subject might be.

We see a person wearing a coronet or headband, with a thick bunch of hair tied above his head. This iconography became the established convention for representing Sasanian sovereigns from the time of Ardashir I, excluding several early designs attributed to Shāhpur, Papak and Ardashir I. In fact, ignoring the first coins of Ardashir, which were struck in the Parthian style, the coins of the first Sasanian king were the also the first to employ this style of depicting a monarch, which was to endure with minor changes, for nearly 400 years. It can be found both on Ardashir's coins (*Image 9*) and in his reliefs at Firuzābād, Naghsh-e Rostam 1 (Ghirshman 1390/2011: 125-132), Naghsh-e Rostam 3 and Khān-Takhti Salmās. He is depicted with a relatively simple crown, his beard gathered within a ring below his chin, wearing a necklace and earrings. Also, a spherical mass of hair covered by a delicate fabric (*korymbos*) is apparent above the king's crown, and was evidently one of the emblems of kingship (Herrmann 1387/2008: 159). This mass of hair above the head, while also common before the Sasanian period, was given a distinctive Sasanian twist by Ardashir. Despite this, the Bāshkuhi relief, commemorating Ardashir's victory over the last Parthian king Ardavān V, hewn into the mountain rock face at Firuzābād, shows the king wearing a headband/diadem rather than a crown, with a part of his hair unbound behind his head. Another part is bunched into a topknot-like crest above his head (*Image 6*). This manner of depicting a mass of loose hair above the head may owe something to its thematic context – representations of war and battle. In the conventional iconography of Sasanian monarchs, the *korymbos* is usually depicted covered, where the strands and texture of the hair are not able to be distinguished. By contrast, the hair in the Yasuj Museum's relief, although tied back, is relatively free and the individual strands of hair are visible. This relief however, does not depict the progenitor of the Sasanian Dynasty, Ardashir I.

C. The features of the work described above – the head covering, headband/coronet, and the style of depicting the hair behind the head – make it likely to date to the very early Sasanian period, probably close to the reign of Ardashir I. However, the wavy hairstyle, the garments, and the manner in which the relief itself is rendered mean that it cannot be attributed to his reign. Ardashir's hair was always depicted as falling in long, hanging braid-like strands or ringlets (*Image 9*). The style of hair represented as radiating wavy strands on both side of the head begins to be seen in the reign of Shāhpur I (241-272 CE), the second Sasanian king. The Yasuj Museum's relief depicts two elements of coiffeur – the first, the crested topknot above the head; and second, the somewhat wavy strands on both sides of the head. This style of representing hair on both sides of the head has many similarities with the details of portraits in the reliefs of Shāhpur I, especially those dating to the final decade of his reign, such as the statue of Shāhpur in the Shāhpur Cave (Garosi 1388/2009), Bishāpur 2 and Naghsh-e Rostam 6 (Ghirshman 1390/2011: 153 and 161). Moreover, the form of the head-covering and headband/diadem in this work has parallels with those in two reliefs at Salmās and Dārābgerd, attributed to the period when Shāhpur was crown prince. The hairstyle, with bunches of hair arrayed on both sides of the head, is also similar to the hairstyles sported by some of his successors in other reliefs, such as the one depicting Bahrām II hunting at Sar Mashhad, or the scene showing the coronation of Narsé in the Naghsh-e Rajab relief (Ibid: 174 and 176).



The workmanship of the hairstyle in the Yasuj Museum relief is not of such fine quality as those in the other reliefs mentioned. In the reliefs at Bishāpur and Naghsh-e Rostam, every wavy strand of hair on both sides of Shāhpur I's head is evocatively layered gently atop the next. The strands are depicted composed of longitudinal and horizontal lines. In the Yasuj relief, at least two strands of hair can just about be made out in each wave of hair on either side of the head, more so in the bunch on the figure's left. Of course, this lack of detail may simply be related to the much smaller scale of this relief relative to the others. The Yasuj Museum's relief has reached us in broken and abraded condition and as a result, we may never have a complete understanding of the subject's garments. However, based on the upper-body garment, or coat, we are able to venture that he would probably not have been wearing anything similar to the long gown worn by Ardashir I at the beginning of the period, nor indeed the long garments we see on kings from the end of the Sasanian period, depicted in the reliefs at the Tāgh-e Bisotun complex in Kermanshāh Province (Ibid: 190 and 192). To reconstruct this figure's clothing, a more appropriate comparison may be with the garment on the statue of Shāhpur I in the Cave of Shāhpur (at Bishāpur, Fars Province). It must be mentioned that this apparently new type of coat is not in fact an innovation of this period, and we are aware of earlier examples such as that on the Shami bronze statue (discovered in Izeh and now held in Museum of Ancient Iran, Tehran), and other examples from Parthian-Elymaean art (Ibid: 109, image 125; also, Curtis 1993: Pl. XIX b-d, XXI-II). Further, the Yasuj example's first layer of clothing even reveals differences when compared to other well attested images of the clothed Shāhpur I (in the Cave of Shāhpur or Naghsh-e Rajab 1). Here, by contrast with the Shami statues and the statue of Shāhpur I, the left collar strip of the coat crosses over top of the strip on the right, below which is depicted the handle of a sword. Also, differences exist in the decorative details and folds and creases. The over-coat on the statue of Shāhpur I has decoration that brings to mind the flames of a fire, but here, we see a different decorative effect. Unfortunately the significant abrasion makes it difficult to determine exactly what this intended effect might once have been. Perhaps greater insight might be gained into what the figure's full suite of clothing was, by considering the possible function this relief might once have served.

Another somewhat diagnostic element is the quality of the limpid wind-blown and fluttering effect of the diadem's train, which is more reminiscent of those in pictorial stone reliefs from the early part of the Sasanian period. This is because the crown and diadem ribbons depicted in reliefs from the late Sasanian period at Bisotun, have a much stiffer, unbending quality that the supple evocations of movement found in earlier examples of the motif elsewhere.

Another point concerning the subject's clothing is that we find the garments in other reliefs from the early Sasanian period to be largely without design or epigraphic elements. In other words, this work has less in common with the more intricate ornamenting details, faunal motifs and busy geometric elements found in representations of clothing from the later centuries of the dynasty.

D. Many decorative statues were produced alongside pictorial reliefs in the Parthian and Sasanian periods, for use both inside and outside buildings. These types of statue and relief were made of either stone or rendered in plaster. Although most of those surviving, created as decorative features for buildings, are plaster; a number of stone examples are also known. Some of the most well-known statues and reliefs in this category include the assemblages

found at the Fortress of Yazdegerd in Kermanshah province (Keall 1997: Fig. 3), the Hajiābād Mansion in Fars (Azarnoush 1994), the Kish archaeological site in Miyānrudān (Moorey 1978), the stone busts found at Pāykuli (in present day Iraqi Kurdestān; Herzfeld 1914), and a number of others.

It appears likely that the Yasuj Museum's relief is in this category and may have served a decorative purpose. Its small size suggests it could have been inset into the wall or an internal or external vestibule in a building. The uneven surface of the reverse of the work, and that fact that the two upper corners are not square may support this contention.

In the description of this artifact, we referred to an object that the man grasps in his right hand. The motif of a king holding a banner, flag, standard or spear in his right hand is a familiar element in the standard design of the reverse of the coins of many Sasanian monarchs (*Images 10 and 11*). There are usually two armed men in these images, striking a heroic pose, standing guard on either side of the sacred fire. We know that this theme – guarding or paying homage to the sacred fire – was not a Sasanian innovation and in fact had appeared on the reverse of the coins of local rulers of Pars before this time. In these, the individual is depicted standing with a bow in hand before the sacred fire, royal standard and the *farr*. This motif has its roots in the Archaemenid period or even further back, but this paper will not concern itself with the device's antecedents.

We also know of examples of similar scenes in other reliefs, paintings and seal impressions that echo the theme of a figure holding up a standard/pennant or spear. The reverse of some Macedonian and Seleucid coins can be mentioned, bearing the images of Zeus, Poseidon or Jupiter, standing or seated, holding a tall stave. The Sarvak Gorge 2 Elymaean relief (Ghirshman 1390/2011: 54) should also be mentioned, in which two deities are shown seated on a platform. Both gods hold a standard or spear aloft in their right hand. There is a similar scene depicted in the Aleg Elymaean relief at Bāzoft (Mehrkiyān 1381/2002). Another example that can be cited is a sealing of Bahrām IV (388-399 CE) (*Image 12*), in which the king is depicted planting a spear atop a vanquished enemy (Ghirshman 1390: 241). However, the body of evidentiary elements in Yasuj Museum's relief suggests the image has more in common with images of guards standing on both sides of the fireplace, as struck on the reverse of Sasanian coins. This particular iconography evidently appeared for the first time on the reverse of the coins of Shāhpur I. Only a pedestalled fireplace was depicted on the coins of Shāhpur's father, Ardashir I. Following Shāhpur, the practice of portraying guardians of the sacred fire in this manner continued, sometimes with minor changes, as on the coins of Hormozd I, Bahrām I and Bahrām II. Gradually, the style of depiction of the fire guardians on the reverse of coins changed, especially after the reign of Bahrām II (276-293 CE). Although the guardians were still present, their standing profile and representational form was much altered.

If we accept that the Yasuj relief can be appropriately compared to images of guardians of the sacred fire on coins, the question arises as to what function this relief served? Was it installed in a vestibule in the wall beside a fireplace, with another similar relief panel installed on the opposite side? If this is the case, did the building in which it was set have a ritual function, or did the relief simply serve a decorative and symbolic purpose in the house of a prominent

person who wished to display images of the gods and the king? As far as we know, no such image in a stone or plaster relief has yet been reported from a secure archaeological context.³ Based on what we have, all it is possible to say is that the mason-craftsman executed the work with skill and precision, creating an arresting tableau that possibly has both a ritual and decorative aspect. Although this pictorial relief was rendered in stone, it compares favorably with the very best Sasanian plasterwork examples.

To conclude, it appears that the figure depicted in the Yasuj Museum's relief was either the crown prince or another high-ranking royal of the Sasanian court. Features such as the hairstyle, beard, coat and headband/diadem, in addition to the way they are represented, have many similarities with well attested images of the second Sasanian king, Shāhpur I.

4. Circumstances of Discovery

The artifact was apparently found accidentally sometime during the first half of the decade of the 1990s in the village of Eshghābād/Sa'adatābād⁴ in Bāsht, one of the districts of Gachsārān County in the province of Kohgiluyeh o Boyer Ahmad (*Figure 2*). The then county administrator, a Mr Ahmadzādeh, transfer it into the care of one of the officers of the provincial Cultural Heritage Department in Yasuj in 1376/1997, Mr Ali Sharifi. Regrettably, appropriate follow-up and documentation of the find was not carried out by Department of Cultural Heritage, and we do not have a precise account of the details and circumstances of the object's discovery. In the winter of 1387/2008-09, as part of the second season of the archaeological survey of Gachsārān County,⁵ the present writers endeavored to conduct local enquiries in Eshghābād village to try to ascertain the circumstances and exact location of the object's discovery. However, these efforts were not successful. If we accept that this object did in fact originate in this area, then we have no choice but to assess it within this geographical context. This raises the question of what significance this county had in Sasanian administrative geography. Although the region is now part of the present-day province of Kohgiluyeh o Buyer Ahmad, during the Sasanian period it was part of Shāpur Khoreh and the Governate of Pars.

The district of Bāsht is an archaeologically important area, as testified by some of the artifacts that have been recovered from here. Cuneiform clay tablets have been found, and artifacts and the foundations of at least one Archaemenid residence have been identified in the region. As far as objects related to the Sasanian period are concerned, although to date no really memorable artifacts or diagnostic architectural features have been identified, we are aware of several sites probably associated with the period. The most important of these were identified and subject to a preliminary study in the course of the archaeological survey of Bāsht district. These include the fort of Bānu Gasheh (Lady Goshasp),⁶ two buried stone columns, known as

³ A heavily damaged and abraded example should be mentioned that is held in the Bishāpur Museum. This object has been described by Shahrām Zār'a and Sirus Barfi, an article that will appear in the summer 1392/2013 number of the journal *Bāstānpazhuhi*.

⁴ The present name of this village is Sa'adatābād, though it was called 'Eshghābād in the years prior to the 1979 revolution. Even earlier it was called 'Shakark'.

⁵ The final report of the survey of this county is currently being prepared for publication.

⁶ The fort of Banu Gasheh is located in the mountains, two kilometers south-west of the village of Mansurābād, Bāsht district. The fort is well sited to watch the roads on the Bāsht Plain. It was constructed 400 meters above the level of the plain. Its builders' focus was on the communications route connecting Nurābād and Doganbadān and

“two graves, two legs” [دو گور دو پا]⁷, a fort, and a bridge called Barim or Parim [بریم/پریم]. Of these, the former two are closest to the village that is the supposed site of the relief’s discovery. Nonetheless, it is hard to imagine that any one of these sites possessed the type of characteristics that would make it a likely location with which the Yasuj relief could once have been associated. Consequently we are left to place out faith in providence that in future, the location of the discovery will be revealed, and we may then be able to gain an insight into its original archaeological context, and perhaps shed some more light on the subject’s identity and the object’s original purpose.

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the northern Basht Plain. The fort is 20x20 meters in size. It was constructed of stone rubble, slate, with chalk mortar. Large flagstones were laid around the building and lower parts of the fort’s towers, some of which are more than a meter square. The walls are up to 1.3 meters thick. The round towers were built to strengthen the defensive attributes of the fort. Banu Gasheh Fort, also known as ‘Ghaleh Dokhtar’ (the girl’s fort), is registered as number 19950 on the list of National Monuments. It is at map coordinates 30°19’864”E, 51°09’125”N, at an elevation of 1239 meters above sea level.

⁷ South of the village of Shush Sofāli in the Bāsht District of Gashsārān County are two stone columns on top of a natural hill, known locally as “two graves, two legs”. The eastern column rises 203 centimeters above ground level, while the western rises to 190 centimeters. These columns are composed of white limestone and were each worked from a single block of stone. It is likely they were the obelisks for an ossuary and therefore, are interment markers. The two pillars are set 50 centimeters apart from one another. The upper part of each has been worked into a stone capital form. On the very top of these, are notches, onto which it is thought a casket containing the bones of the dead was lowered and made secure. The diameter of the best preserved column (the eastern one) is 40 centimeters, while the other (the western) is 37 centimeters. This site is number 2985 on the Register of National Monuments. Its map coordinates are 31°18’805”E, 51°129’713”N, and its elevation above sea level is 780 meters.

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