



The sea on the rocks. Sailing in the rock art of Gobustan

Dario Sigari

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Human and the Sea

A Review of Thousands of Years of Relationship
between the Humans and the Sea in Iran

Edited By:

Fereidoun Biglari, Jebrael Nokandeh

Abdolmajid Naderi Beni, Ali Hozhabri



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2020



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The Sea on the Rocks. Sailing in the Rock Art of Gobustan

Dario Sigari¹

Introduction

With more than 6.000 petroglyphs on more than 1.000 rocks, Gobustan represents one of the richest open air rock art sites in Euroasia. The long chronology, from the upper Palaeolithic to historical times, together with the high quality and the good preservation status of the engravings make this heritage unique.

The main themes of the Gobustan rock art include animals (auroch, horse, goat, camel, deer), humans (feminine silhouette, warrior-hunter, rider), tamgas and boats. Each chronological phase has its own distinct style and subject matter. However the presence of boat and fish gives a deep and unique insight of the relationship between the people who settled this region

and the Caspian Sea.

In this paper the author discusses the boat theme and its implication in the ancient population of Gobustan image, presenting it in the wider archaeological, paleo-geographic and rock art context.

Geography and geology of a unique territory

National Artistic Historical Reserve of Gobustan (Azerbaijan) is 60 km south far from Baku, the Azerbaijan capital city. Covering an area of 4,535ha, it is at the easternmost extremity of the Great Caucasus range, along the west bank of the Caspian Sea, and within it there is the Gobustan Rock Art Landscape, which encloses three main rock art sites, Böyükdaş, Kiçikdaş and Jingirdağ-

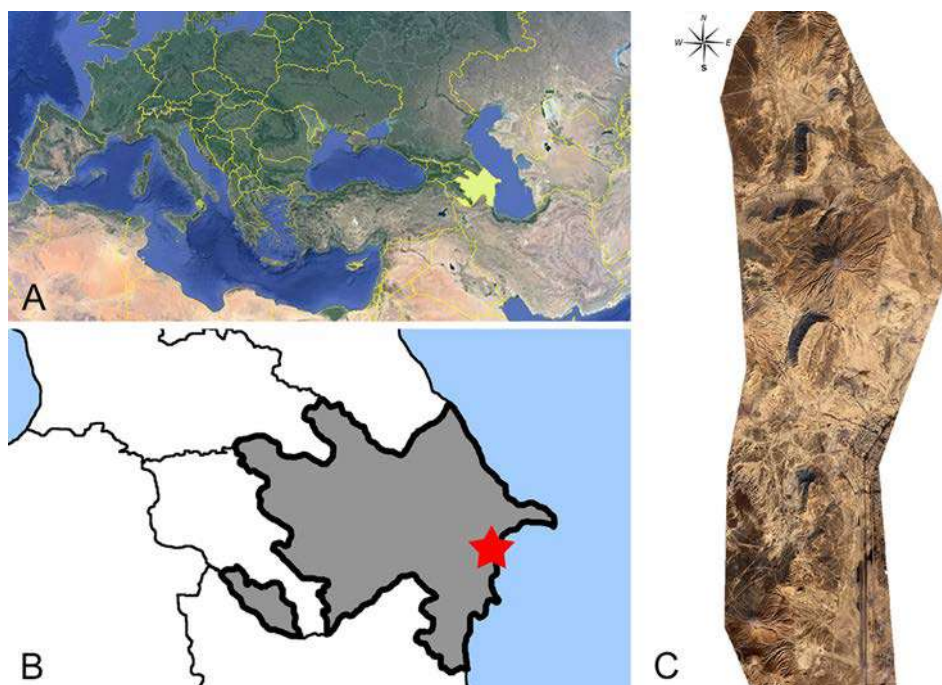


Fig. 1. Where Gobustan is (A, B) and the area of the National Historical-Artistic Preserve, from the top to the bottom Jingirdağ-Yazily Tepe, the Kəvizə mud volcano, Böyükdaş and Kiçikdaş (C)

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YazilyTepe and was included in the World Cultural Heritage list by the UNESCO in 2007 (Sigari, Shirinli, and Abdullayev 2019) (Fig. 1).

Gobustan, which means the “land of dry riverbed” is characterized by a rocky landscape, within a semiarid environment, on the northern edge of the subdesert plane called Shirvan Steppe, and represents a land-bridge between Europe and Asia.

The geology of Gobustan comprises a thick limestone sedimentary rock which encloses numerous species of bivalve shells of *Didacna sp.*, a fossil record which testifies the submersion of the region during the Pleistocene era. Indeed following the maximum stage of the Early Khvalynian Sea transgression (up to +50 m asl), two more transgression movements occurred during a pe-

riod of deglaciation, approximately around 16,000 and 14,000 years ago, increasing the sea level up to +35 and +22 meters. At that time Gobustan had to be under the water and the two hills Büyükdaş and Kiçikdaş appeared as two islands. Later on, between 14,000 and 12,000 years ago the Caspian Sea level increased twice again up to 0 and -12 meters (Arslanov et al. 2015; Sigari, Shirinli, and Abdullayev 2019) (Fig. 2).

The characteristic terraced profile of the upland areas, Büyükdaş and Kiçikdaş is a clear evidence of ancient coastal lines (fig.3) onto which the first human groups landed and settled down, so it is possible to use the Caspian eustatic movements as a valid chronological indicator for the rock art chronology (as well as other archaeological factors), according to the en-

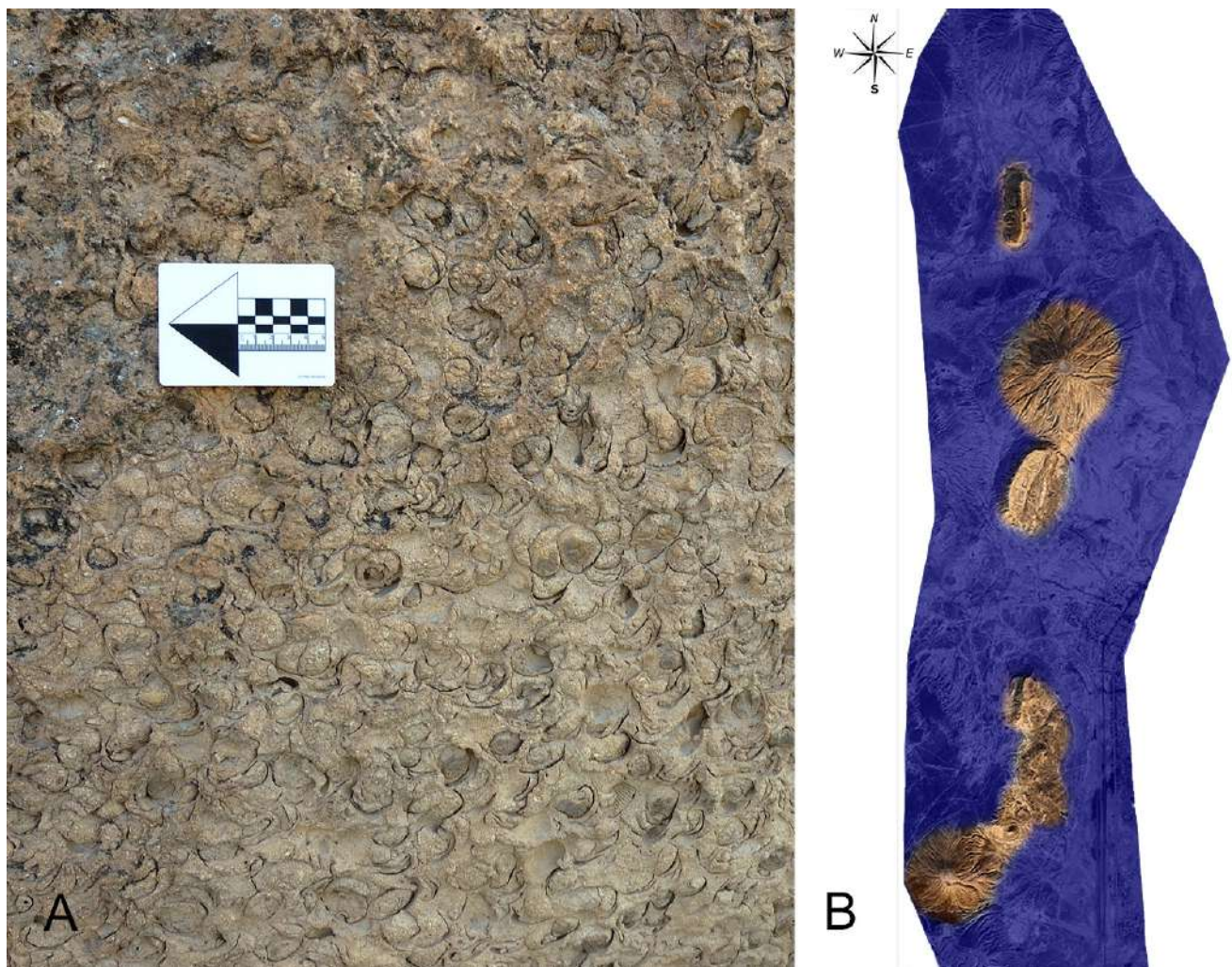


Fig. 2. *Didacna sp.* fossils in the rocks of Büyükdaş (A) and how Gobustan had to look like when submerged by the Sea



Fig 3. The Böyükdaş hill with its terraced profile

gravings style and their relative altitude. Indeed some styles can be detected only on the upper terraces suggesting that the mountain feet were not accessible, being submerged.

The first archaeological researches and the chronological issue

The first Gobustan engravings were discovered in May 1939 by the archaeologist Ishag Jafarzade, but due to the tragic events of the World War II he had to stop his investigation, restarting it only in 1947. By the year 1965, Jafarzade recorded more than 3,500 petroglyphs, including anthropic hollows and holes, on more than 750 rocks (Jafarzade 1973).

Archaeologists C. Rustamov and F. Muradova continued the archaeological research in Gobustan after Jafarzade, unearthing a long chronological multilayered stratigraphy that revealed human occupation of the region from Upper Paleolithic to Middle Age (Rustamov 1994; Rustamov and Muradova 2008). The archaeological excavations were undertaken in a number of rock shelters. Kurgans, a multiple burial (ten adults and one child) in Firuz, a so-interpreted sanctuary in Yazıltepe, Bronze Age settlements, and thousands of archaeological artefacts were uncovered as well. Moreover Muradova and Rustamov recorded nearly

400 new engraved stones, increasing the number of rock art sites to more than 1,000 rocks with more than 6,000 engravings (Rustamov and Muradova 2008), and comparing the stratigraphic sequences of each of the rock shelter sites, it was possible to correlate them with a more precise chronology.

Both the archaeological evidences, that may suggest a relative chronology and cultural association, and the Caspian Sea with its eustatic movements constitute a valid help to better understand the adaptation processes occurred during the millennia and the influence of the sea in the ancient people image (Sigari 2017).

The first occupation phase seems to date back around 16-17,000 years ago, according to the rise of the Caspian Sea and suggesting how a variety of locates were utilized, from hilltops to the lower beaches. The Neolithic is underrepresented, probably due to a natural catastrophe occurred in Gobustan, recognized through a number of different rock displacements that occurred in the early years of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition (Rustamov 2006).

Later during the Bronze Age, it is possible to recognize a strong influence by other Caucasian cultures, e.g., the “Kura-Arax,” “Maykop,” and “Khojaly-Gadabay” (Sigari, Shirinli, and Abdullayev 2019).

The occupation of Gobustan continued till historical times as several inscriptions in Latin, Arabic and Cyrillic witness. At the feet of Böyükdaş hill there is a Roman inscription engraved by a soldier of the 12th Legio Fulminata (Fig. 4). On numerous stones images of caravans attributed to the Middle Age can be found. Finally the Arabic and Cyrillic inscriptions confirm the long history that passed through Gobustan, moving East to West and viceversa along the Eurasian continent.

The Gobustan rock art

With its rich rock art heritage, produced from the upper Palaeolithic to historical times, Gobustan is one of the richest open air rock art sites. Moreover, being a sort of landbridge between Asia and Europe, it offers a unique perspective in the understanding of the migratory routes, and so the cultural dispersal, between the two continents in the past.

In terms rock art techniques, it is scratched and/or abraded into the limestone rocks, with exception of only two red painted figures (Rustamov 2006). The main themes include the auroch, horse, boats, feminine silhouette, warrior-hunter, goat, camel, tamga, deer, and rider. Each chronological phase has its own distinct style and subject matter (Fig. 5).

The chronology of the rock art is mainly based on stylistic comparisons, but in few cases it was possible to give a chronological reference to some engraved slabs found in the excavation.

Jafarzade recognised six styles and grouped them into two phases: the first three belong to the most ancient periods. Years later the rock art specialist Anati reviewed Jafarzade's chronology defining more phases and sub-phases. Always starting from Jafarzade's chronology, Djafargulu Rustamov proposed a stylistic evolution of the Gobustan rock art too, but for each subject and only for three main categories: anthropomorphs, zoomorphs and boats (Anati 2001; Rustamov 2006; Sigari 2013).

Last Farajova elaborated a new stylistic and more detailed chronology, recognising six phases each subdivided into different styles. The first phase has been subdivided into four styles and would correspond to the whole Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic: most of ship representations belong to the 4th style of the 1st phase (Farajova, 2009).

Finally, giving a rough scheme, Sigari, Shirinli, and Abdullayev (2019) defined five main horizons: Horizon I (Upper Palaeolithic-Mesolithic), Horizon II (Neolithic), Horizon III (Bronze Age), Horizon IV (Iron Age-Antique), and Horizon V (Middle Age and later) (Sigari, Shirinli, and Abdullayev 2019).

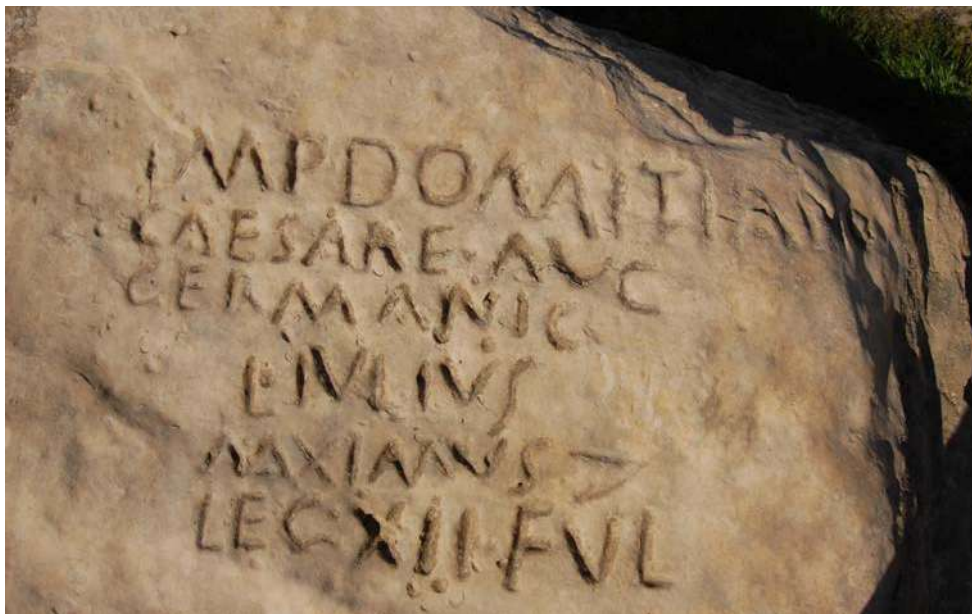


Fig. 4. The Latin inscription dated back to the years of Domitian emperor, done by a soldier of the Legio XII Fulminata

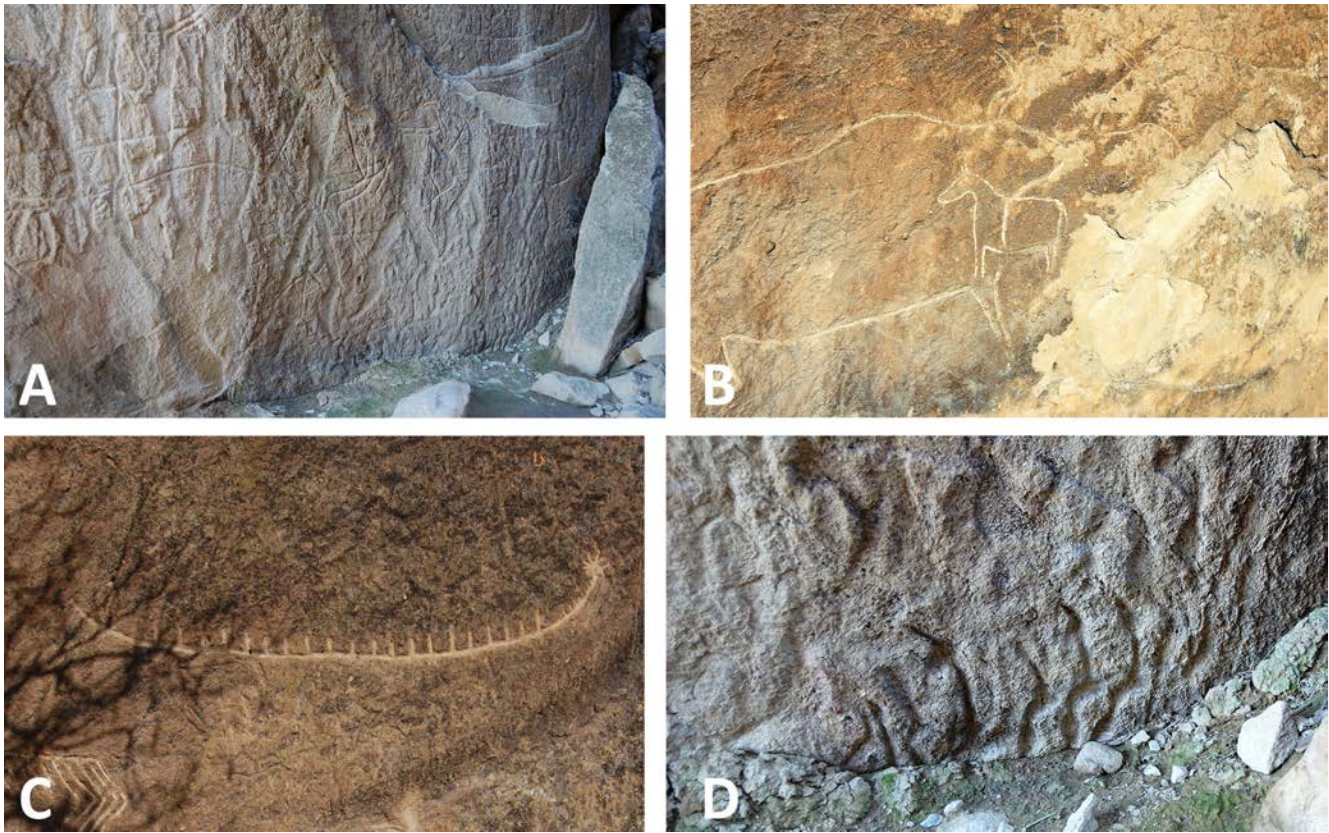


Fig. 5. The main themes of Gobustan rock art

The boat figures

The boat figures are one of the main themes in Gobustan rock art (fig.6). This typology of graphic unit is characterised by a horizontal or slightly curved line onto which a series of short perpendicular segments are. Occasionally it is possible to recognise the use of natural rock shapes to represent the complete boat or part of it.

The different ship representations may change in:

- Length: there are a number of long boats that measure more than 1.50 m in length as well as shorter boats
- Curvature of the keel.
- Prow and stern: prows are characteristically engraved in a hooked shape. Accompanying the ships with this decoration there are sun-like symbols that can be set at the end of the prowline or can be realised by curving the prow and adding the rays. On the other hand, both sterns and prows can be curved towards the deck. All these stylistically different boats can appear on the same rock, possibly revealing a relative chronology among them.
- The deck: it may be differentiated by the way of the

so called crew of the ship, which can be depicted as simple, with short vertical lines, or “X”-shaped.

The boat figures often appear associated with other themes: female silhouettes, hunters-warriors, aurochs; and can be over/underimposed or juxtaposed with the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures (Fig. 7). These kind of relations among the graphic units help to establish their relative chronology and to better understand the kind of relationship that existed between human agency and seascape.

4. The chronological issue

According to Rustamov’s chronological sequence, the small boat figures are the most ancient ones since they were built to carry between 2 to 5-6 people. On the contrary the bigger ships were done later. For this kind of figures, Rustamov recognised two styles: lines and silhouettes. He interpretes the first ones as made of “trees and trunks”, and second ones of “bamboo and cane”. Moreover he suggested how the latest ships were wireframe (Rustamov 2006).



Fig. 6 The big frieze of Rock No.8 with its boat figures

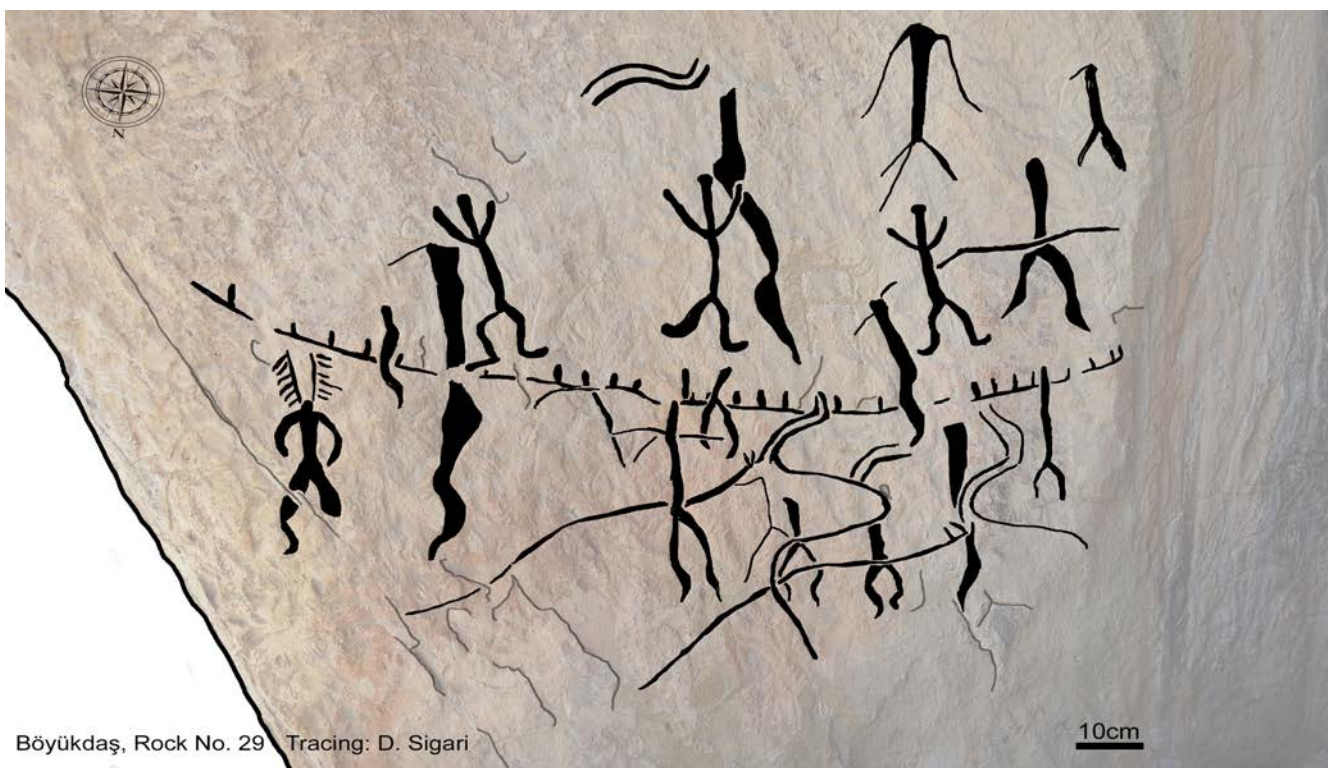


Fig. 7. A big boat overlapped by anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures. More human figures are engraved around

The azeri archaeologist purposed a functional analysis of the boats as well, stating that: “Ancient ships have undoubtedly been constructed first to sail across the river, and then for fishery development purposes. They brought to invention of fishing nets, transportation of industrial goods by lakes and rivers, improvement of trade, relations between the tribes, they were used for fish hunting as the main transportation mean, and even for military purposes.”(Rustamov 2006).

A recent study changed the perspective in under-

standing the chronology, looking at the relationships between rock art and landscape, or we should say “seascape” the boat figures of Gobustan rock art reveal a strong influence of the seascape, in the general figurative production. They had been engraved for a long time, changing style, possibly according to new ideologies. The changes in styles, altitudes and positioning of boat figures can suggest a relative chronology and reveal the different use of spaces, from the top of the hills, down to the lower terraces, on what

had to be paleo-beaches. According to (Arslanov et al., 2015), we can suggest that the first boat images, which are set on the upper terraces of both Böyükdaş and Kiçikdaş, date back to a period of deglaciation, occurred between 16 and 14,000 years ago or even before, when the Caspian Sea level was higher than today. Then, between 14 and 12,000 years ago, the Later Khvalynian stages occurred, rising sea level between 0 and -12masl. To this period, or to a later one, can be dated the boat figures engraved at the Böyükdaş and Kiçikdaş hill feet. From here the boat style with the sun-symbol on the prow and the “X”-shaped crew could spread up to the higher, to the upper terrace (Fig. 8).

The fishform figures can be linked to the sailing theme as well. And since the big figures engraved seem to

belong to the most ancient horizons, they confirm the influence that the water resource had on the ancient populations image.

The boat figures in other rock art sites

Boat figures can be found in other rock art sites. The strongest comparisons can be established with the ship images found on the Scandinavian Peninsula. Several rock art sites are known, e.g. Kanozero, Alta, Saraakallio, Bohusland, Myllylampi... (Lahelma 2008). The boat motifs are very closed to what can be found on the Gobustan rocks, and the differences in chronologies can be justified by cultural movement towards the northern regions of Europe. The strong climatic and environmental changes might have produced migratory phenomenon pushing west/northwards the ancient



Fig. 8. Boat figures from the big boulder of Firuz site in Kiçikdaş

resident populations, spreading symbols on wider territories (Fig. 9).

An interesting reference more comes from the Romanelli cave, in southern Italy, where a big painted slab was found within archaeological layers attributed to a Late Upper Palaeolithic culture. The painted motif, if correctly displayed, reminds the boat figures that can be found both in Gobustan and in Scandinavia (Fig. 10).

Differently from the ship representations, the fish figures have a wider dispersal. Examples can be found in several sites of the Western Europe and Scandinavia as well. Sometimes the boat symbol seems to be associated with funerary ritual, or possibly with the aim of connecting this world with a one beyond, signifying

the boat as vehicle to cross from a concrete reality to a spiritual one.

Rock art and archaeological record

The importance of the sea can be detected not only in the rock art evidence, but in the uncovered archaeological findings as well. A big rock in K ı ıkda  offers an interesting example. Indeed this boulder together with other stones, form a sort of sheltered area. On its western surface, so opposite to the Caspian Sea, it has around 34 engravings representing ships. The uncertainty on the number is due to the difficulty of reading part of the palimpsest. Boat figures are from the bottom to the upper part of the surface and are

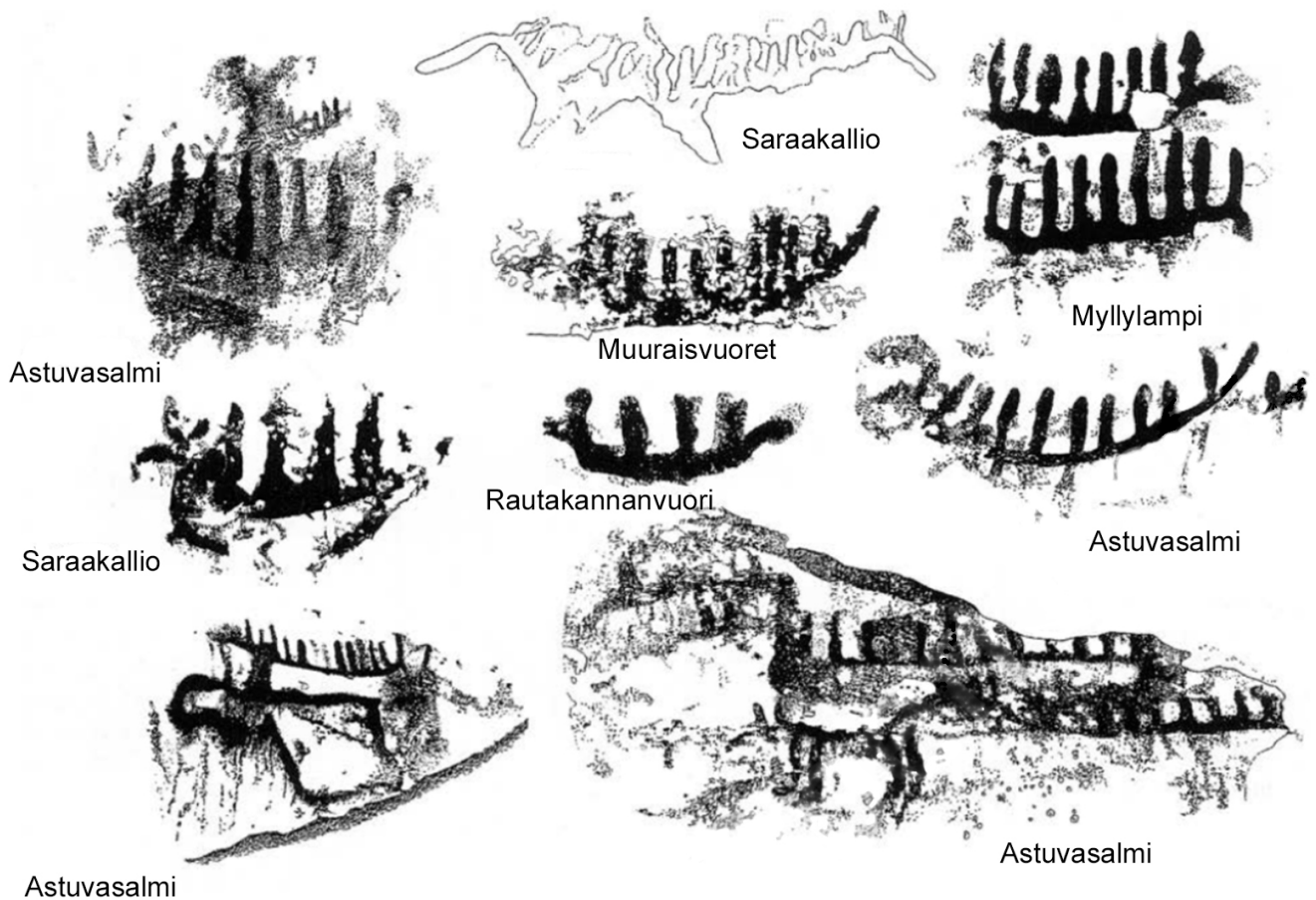


Fig. 9. Tracing of ship figures from the Scandinavia region

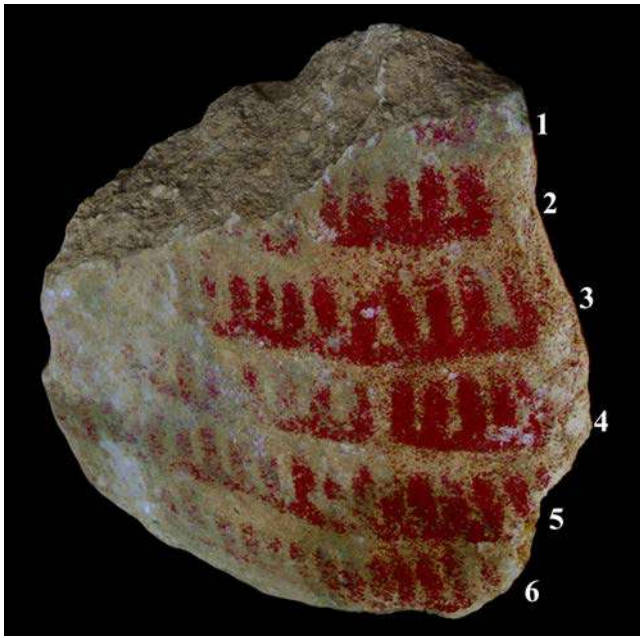


Fig. 10. The painted boulder of Romanelli cave

depicted in different styles. Three of the boats have the sunshaped prow and one of them the “X”-shaped crew. Concerning keels and general size of the boats they vary a lot. The lower part of the rock was originally under the soil and then excavated by Rustamov and Muradova, who named the site “Firuz”. The findings here discovered were attributed to different period from Upper Palaeolithic to Copper Age, and here was found a burial with a child and ten adults, attributed to 10.000 years ago (Rustamov, 2006). Skeletons were accompanied with pendants and other objects, some of them have been recognised as tools for knitting fishnets, witnessing the importance of the water resources in the economy and culture of those people who live in Gobustan at that time.

Conclusion

To conclude, the boat engravings not only tell that sailing was already practiced during the Late Pleistocene in Gobustan and probably in other Mediterranean areas, but that the Sea and its resources played



Fig. 11. A map showing the distribution of boat figures

an important role in the ancient cultures. Furthermore the importance of the seascapes is confirmed by the archaeological evidence as well (e. g. tools for knitting fishnets found associated with buried bodies, or the holes in the rocks to dock the ships). So boat and fish became important elements in the collective image.

The engraved ship and fish figures define a new space, a new scape into which the stories of a human group or more are told. Although these stories can never be deciphered, the rock art narrative involves the importance of sailing and fishing in general, during prehistoric times. We may propose that since the boat separates the underwater from the land and the sky, this symbol might have been signified a vehicle putting in connection the real world with the beyond one: a world of spirits that can be reached by interacting with and engraving the rock surface, which represents the veil separating the two worlds.

Finally the territorial dispersal of the boat figures witnesses the maintenance of an importance given to sailing and fishing activities for the ancient population on a wider scale. The chronological comparisons suggest the rhythm of the cultural and human dispersal on long distances along the millennia (Fig. 11), according to the climatic and so environmental changes occurred at the beginning of Holocene, that pushed the human groups north-westward.

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