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About specifics of rock art of Gobustan and some innovative approaches to its interpretation (“Firuz 2” shelter)

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ABSTRACT

The petroglyphs of Gobustan are an important historical source that allows us to get an idea about the material and spiritual culture of the population inhabiting the region in various historical periods. The analysis of the specific features of the creative process let us imagine how the ancient artists of Gobustan conveyed some aspects of their creative perception and specifics of their world view.

In this respect, the “Firuz 2” shelter on Kichikdash Mountain in Gobustan is of special interest. “Firuz 2” lies at the foot of a vertically standing boulder oriented N-S. (stone №19). The archaeological site is located at the western side of this stone covered with petroglyphs. On this surface numerous female figures, images of hunters, animals and boats are fixed. Visual domination of images of female figures and boats make a uniform semantic plot. It should be noted that from Mesolithic and Neolithic occupation layers of Gobustan separate stones on which female figures near boats are also represented are found. It is quite possible that this composition is characteristic to this period.

Images of female figures on stone №19 stylistically differ from each other and some of them are executed in profile with prominent bellies. Besides these, images of animals (aurochs, wild boars, onagers, gazelles, bezoar goats) were depicted on stone №19.

Under the stone and on the north side, there is a strip of rocky blocks lying deep in the soil. On one of these rocks (stone 19-a), split in two parts, images of boats were recorded. The stone was found in the Neolithic layer. Images of boats of this kind are also registered on stone №19. On three of them the symbol of the sun is represented on the bow. In the Caucasian region, images of boats are only met in Gobustan rock art. Considering attentively these images of boats, can be supposed that they belong to the Neolithic period of Gobustan culture and existed throughout millennia.

In order to get some chronological control, various methods were combined: analogies with stones found in cultural layers and bearing similar images, study of the stylistic features and the stratigraphic method. AMS dating of the cultural layers of the “Firuz 2” site allowed to understand the variability in the form and meaning of the petroglyphs of various periods. Previously, artifacts from the cultural layer of “Firuz 2” site had been dated to the end of Mesolithic and beginning of Neolithic period. The last AMS dating provided the result: 7850 ± 30 BP, which led to suppose that Gobustan was the earliest center in which navigation emerged in the Caucasian region.

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1. Introduction

With hills and highlands covered with big boulders and almost no greenery, Gobustan is an outstanding rock art landscape, where over 6000 rock engravings were found and registered, since the end of Upper Paleolithic up to the Middle Ages. In the reserve territory,

20 shelters (caves) and 40 burial mounds were also found (Farajova, 2011, 41).

In 1966, the rock art area, covering approximately 4000 ha, was declared a National reserve. Located in the eastern part of the Republic of Azerbaijan and on the western shore of the Caspian Sea Gobustan, the National Reserve was inscribed as Gobustan Rock Art Cultural Landscape into the World Heritage List in 2007 (Fig. 1).

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

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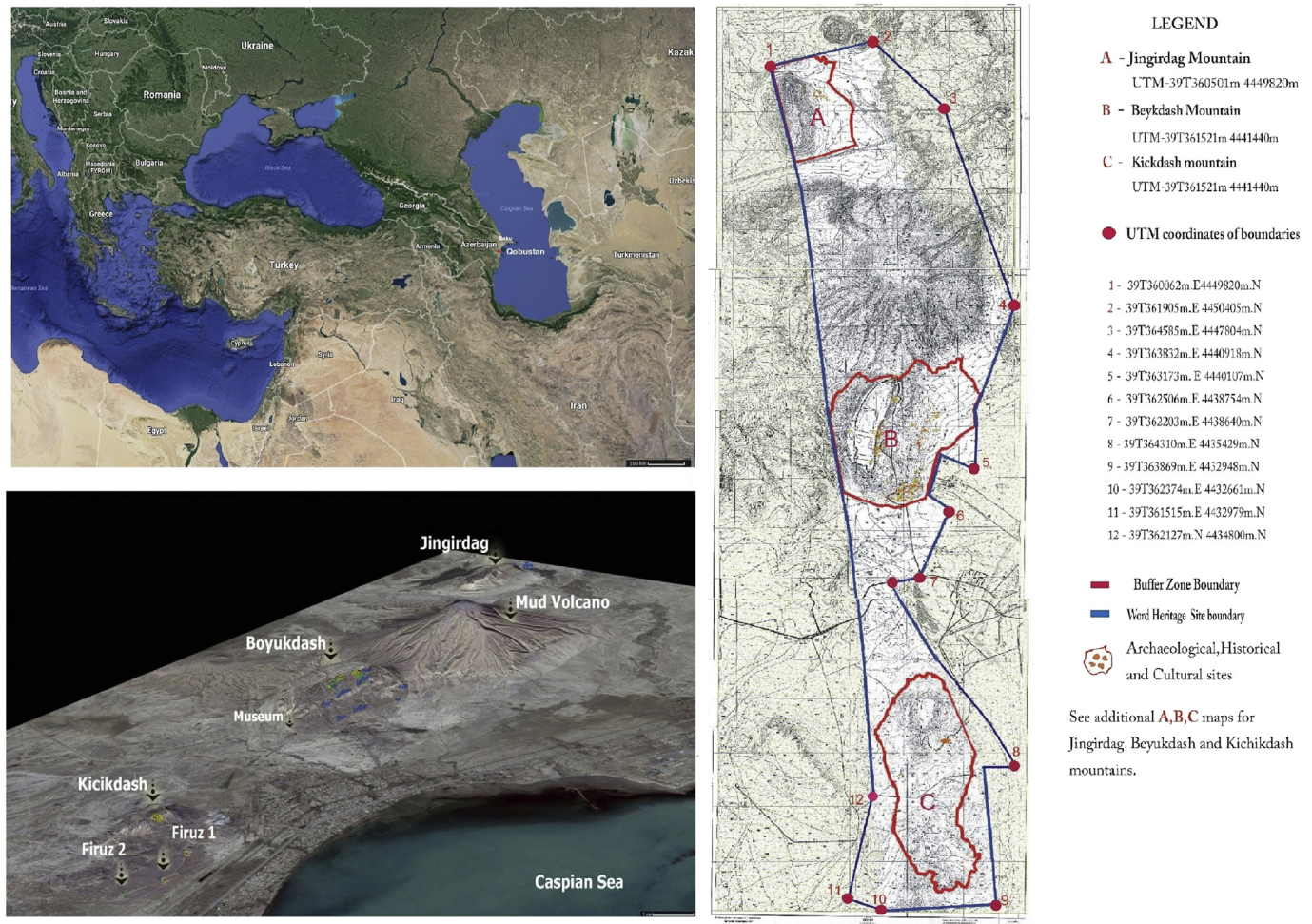


Fig. 1. The map with the indication of borders of Gobustan preserve.

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

It should be noted that in the territory of the Caucasus large centers of ancient rock carvings were first revealed in Azerbaijan. Despite the fact that Gobustan territory has been frequented by different people during the past (see the case of the Roman Inscription), the rock art and the archaeology of Gobustan were known by the general public and scientists only from 1939, thanks to the work of I. Jafarsade. After initial discoveries in 1939–40, systematic explorations were conducted by I. M. Jafarsade from 1947 onwards; he registered and analyzed more than 3,500 images and signs on about 750 rocks (Jafarzade, 1999). This inventory was taken over and expanded by J. Rustamov and F. Muradova, who made new discoveries of engraved rocks with more than 1500 images and carried out archaeological excavations (Rustamov and Muradova, 2008). Unfortunately, such important historical sources have not for a long time been the object of special generalized scientific research. In a number of publications, great attention was chiefly paid to the description of separate rock carvings of this or

that site, but questions of their profound complex study remained out of sight. Detailed studying of petroglyphic art of the Neolithic and Bronze Age wasn't a subject of a special research. Information on chronology was given in the generalized publications, covering all historical periods of Gobustan. (Jafarzade, 1973, 1999; Rustamov Dj., 2003; Rustamov and Muradova, 2003, 2008). In turn this led to additional difficulties in the course of studying of petroglyphs of Gobustan.

Judging by brightly expressed stylistic features and rich subjects, groups of people differing in their economic way of life, participated in the creation of petroglyphs. In Gobustan, in Upper Pleistocene and early Holocene, in the development of rock art of Azerbaijan, various stylistic-thematic tendencies are observed. On Paleolithic and Mesolithic images, humans and Pleistocene fauna (aurochs, wild horses) are depicted one by one and in groups and are executed in a realistic manner.

In early Holocene, in connection with changes of hunted fauna, fluctuations of climate, with the last transgression of the Caspian Sea, changes in the subject matter of rock drawings also take place. On rocks, domesticated oxen, wild horses, deer and goats appear which are the major object of totem and hunting of that period. Images of men are less frequent. At that period there appear images of birds, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic creatures. On manner

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