

MITHRAISM ROCK TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE IN IRAN

İRAN'DA MITRAİZM KAYA TAPINAK MIMARISI

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Abstract

Mithraism is known as one of the ancient world religions. The roots of Mithraism settle in the old world beliefs, culture, and mysteries. Historical documents show the origin of Mithraism belongs to the 1400 years B.C. Mithraism features found in different parts of the ancient world from east to the west: India, Iran, Anatolia, and Europe. The name of Mithra in ancient Indo-Iranian mythology as the god of light is in some historical inscription. Among the ancient world's religions, Mithraism is the ancient Iran pre-Zoroastrian religion. There are some doctrines about the origins of Mithra. The well-defined of them is the dualism doctrine that comes from Zoroastrianism. This doctrine is always a battleground between the Good Principles and the Evil Principles. The force of propitious is light or day and the forces of evil are with darkness or night. These two foes are in a state of perpetual war. According to the archeologists, many rock temples with Mithraism features locate in Iran. Some of these natural rock temples are in the northwest part of Iran.

The gravity center of this study is one of the rock temples of Mithraism in the northwest of Iran. These temples locate at a cross-sectional point between different cultural impressions. For accessing the aims of the research, the study consists of three stages. In the first stage, the focus point is on the roots of Mithraism in Iran and the ancient world and the interaction of Mithraism with other cultures. Then in the second stage, be tried to find Mithraism temples' general architectural characters and elements due to the expansion in Iran and in Europe. Finally, the study is concentrated on the case study rock temple Mehr Temple in the northwest of Iran to investigate the structural characteristics, find similarities with the other temple, and evaluate these characters.

Keywords: Mithraism, Rock Temple, Iran.

Özet

Mitraizm, antik dünyanın dinlerinden biri olarak bilinir. Mitraizm'in kökenleri antik çağların inançları, kültür ve gizemlerinde yer almaktadır. Tarihsel belgeler, Mitraizm'in kökeni M.Ö. 1400 yıllarına ait olduğunu göstermektedir. Mitraizmin genel özellikleri, antik çağlarda doğudan batıya kadar farklı yerlerde Hindistan, İran, Anadolu ve Avrupa'da bulunmaktadır. Mitra'nın ismi antik Hint-İran mitolojisinde ışık tanrısı (Güneş-Tanrı) olarak bazı tarihi yazıtlarda geçmektedir. Ancak Mitraizm antik çağ dinleri arasında, antik İran'ın Zerdüşt öncesi dindir. Mitra'nın kökenleri hakkında bazı doktrinler bulunmaktadır. Bunların iyi tanımlanmış olanı, Zerdüşt'lükten gelen düalizm doktrindir. Bu doktrine göre; dünya, iyi ilkeleri temsil eden Ahura Mazda ile kötü ilkelerin temsilcisi Ahriman arasındaki sürekli yaşanan bir savaş alanıdır. Işık ve gündüz iyilik gücü, karanlık ve gece dünyanın kötülük güçleri tanımlanır. Arkeologlara göre, İran'da Mitraizm özelliklerine sahip birçok kaya tapınağı bulunuyor. Bu doğal kaya tapınaklarından çoğu İran'ın kuzeybatı kesiminde yer almaktadırlar.

Bu çalışmanın ağırlık merkezi, İran'ın kuzeybatısındaki Mitraizm kaya tapınaklarından biridir. Bu tapınak, farklı kültürel izlenimler arasında bir kesit noktasında yer almaktadır. Araştırmancın amaçlarına ulaşmak için çalışma üç aşamadan oluşmaktadır. İlk aşamada, odak noktası Mithra ve Mithraizm'in İran'daki ve antik çağda kökenleri ve diğer kültürlerle etkileşimi üzerindedir. Daha sonra ikinci aşamada, Mitraizm tapınaklarının dünyadaki yayılmasına göre, ortak mimari karakterler ve unsurların bulmasına çalışılacaktır. Son olarak, çalışma, yapısal özellikleri araştırmak, diğer tapınak ile benzerlikler bulmak ve bu karakterleri değerlendirmek için İran'ın kuzeybatısındaki Mehr Kaya Tapınağı'nın incelemesidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mitraizm, Kaya Tapınak, İran.

1- Introduction:

Mithraism is known as one of the religions in the ancient world. The roots of Mithraism are in the old world beliefs, culture, and mysteries. Clearly, historical documents show the origin of Mithraism belongs to the 14th century before Christ. Mithraism features find in different parts of the ancient world from east to the west, India, Persia (ancient Iran), Anatolia, and Europe. But, among the old religions of the ancient world, Mithraism is the ancient Persian pre-Zoroastrian religion. There are many doctrines about the origins of Mithra. But determination about what Mithraism is and where Mithra comes from would be mere conjecture. The dualism doctrines are one of the great backgrounds which come from Zoroastrian. The world was a battleground for eternal wars between the Good Principle (Ahura Mazda or Wise Lord) and the Evil Principle (Ahriman).

Mithra, in Indo-Iranian mythology, is the god of light or Sun-God concerned with the making of alliances. Mithra, based on Zoroastrianism beliefs is the god of contracts, an angel and guardian of truthfulness, honesty, promises. Mithra carries the meaning of friend, ally, qualities of kindness, and friendship. Mithraism religion prevailed for some 2000 years among Aryans.

The access of Mithraism followers to the temple is too restricted and full of secrets. The first reason is religious hierarchic levels between the cult members, and the second worshipping ritual was secretly in the underground temples. According to the archeologists, there are many ruins with Mithraism features in the vast area of ancient Iran. Due to the beliefs of some historians, the northwest of Iran is the birthplace of Zoroaster. This region of Iran was one of the important Mithraism centers, and today there are several places or ruins had belonged to the Mithraism cult. On the other hand, the northwest of Iran is the cross-sectional and strategic point between different cultural impressions from the east, west, and Caucasians region in the north. In the ancient world, this region was the battle place between Persian Empire and the Roman. Thus the socio-cultural interaction in this region carries a high potential.

Due to historical text like Avesta and historical inscriptions, Mithra was born from a rock in the dark cave, near the sacred river and tree. He had a torch in one hand and a knife in the other. He soon rode and then killed a bull. Bull's blood fertilizes all vegetation. Mithra's slaying of the bull was a popular subject of Hellenic art. The birth of Mithra was on the Holy day of 25 December, winter solstice or the longest night of the year, in the darkest cave, symbolizing the birth of the light and hope and renovation of nature.

Persian Empire ruled in vast areas from India in the east to the Mediterranean region, Balkans, and Eastern Europe in the west based on trade and military purposes. Due to this extensive government territory, the influence of Iranian society and culture is seen in Roman culture, especially in the appearance of the cult of Mithra. However, are seen differences in the features and other details of Mithra. One of the main reasons for this extension is Mithraism in the Hellenic world is the defeat of the Achaemenid Empire by Alexander the Great and the high attraction of the Mithraism bonds of brotherhood by Roman soldiers.

The gravity center of this study is the Rock Temple of Verjuy Village in the northwest of Iran as the oldest and biggest Mithraism temple in Iran. This paper consists of three stages. In the first stage, the focus point is on the appearance roots of Mithra and Mithraism in the ancient world in Iran and in Europe. The second stage includes finding Mithraism temple architectural characters according to the transmission of Mithraism from Iran to the Roman territories in the west, based on the ideological roots. So this section aims to find the similarities and differences between

Mithraism temples in Iran and Roman or European. Finally, the paper concentration point is on the oldest Mithraism rock temple in the northwest of Iran in the small Verjuy village. In this stage, the aim is to investigate the structural and architectural characteristics, find similarities with the other temple, and evaluate these characters.

2- The Roots of Mithra and Mithraism in Ancient World

Today the two antiquity terms of the Mysteries of Mithras and Mysteries of the Persians are replaced with the Modern term of Mithraism. “Mithras” is the name of the Indo-Iranian god Mithra or Mehr adopted into Greek. Due to the secret nature of this cult, there are no considerable written narratives or theology from the religion. However, hundreds of artifacts related to Mithraism have been preserved (Assasi, 2014: 78).

The roots of Mithraism come back to the ancient world. The documents reveal the origin of Mithraism belongs to the 14th century before Christ. Mithra is an Iranian god of the sun, justice, contract, and war in pre-Zoroastrian Iran (Eduljee, 2016: 2-4). According to Halliday (1925: 283-285), there are some doctrines about the origins of Mithra. In antiquity Iran, the Zoroastrianism dualism doctrine is one of the well-defined doctrines about the origination of Mithra. This doctrine is always a battleground between the good forces or Ahura Mazda and the forces of Evil or Ahriman. The Forces of Good identified with light or day when the Force of Evil knew with darkness or night. These two forces were in a state of perpetual war. So Mithra was the spirit of light and truth which became a celestial warrior naturally on the side of Ahura Mazda.

The first document about the name of Mithra spelled “Mi-it-ra” dates back to 1380 BC in the inscribed peace treaty between the Hittites and the Hurrian kingdom of Mitanni. These documents are the large number of clay tablets found in the palace archives of Boğazköy, the capital of the ancient Hittites in Anatolia (CAIS, 2022). In this treaty, the name of Mithra with together four other divinities mentioned from Mittani’s side as a witness and keeper of the treaty (Turcan, 1996: 196-198).

The Mithra is in ancient Indo-Iranian mythology (Foltz, 2013:19) the god of light (Sun-God) concerned with the making of alliances. In old hymns of the Avesta¹ the sacred texts of Zoroastrianism and Rigveda² celebrated the name of Mithra, despite the differences obtained between the two theological systems of books and the expression. The first written mention of Mithra is in the Rigveda dates to 1400 BC. Both religions named Mithra differently: Ahura Mazda (Iran) and Varuna (Indian), but both of them were a god of light, invoked to Heaven (Comunt, 1903, 1-3).

Throughout history, some parts of Avesta have vanished. Today Avesta consisted of five parts; Yasna, Vendidad, Visperad, Yashts, Khordeh Avesta (Little Avesta). The Yashts is a collection of 21 hymns and 146 verses that have been named Mithra or in Persian Mehr. In the Mehr Yasht, one of the longest and most important hymns of the Avesta begins with the statement that Ahura Mazda created Mithra (Mehr) and made him “as worthy of sacrifice, as worthy of prayer as myself” and Mithra is “master of the world.” In the Avesta, sun and Mithra (Mehr) have

¹ Avesta is called Zend-Avesta, the sacred book of Zoroastrianism containing its cosmogony, law, and liturgy, the teachings of the prophet Zoroaster (Zarathushtra) in ancient Iran (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2022).

² Rigveda is the oldest sacred book of Hinduism collection of Vedic Sanskrit hymns along with associated commentaries on liturgy, ritual, and mystical exegesis (Encyclopedia Britanica, 2022a).

separated in dedicated chapters, and the role of Mithra (Mehr) is as the bond of friendship and companionship between the Sun and the Moon (Eduljee, 2016: 23).

In the Avesta, Mithra appears as a Victory Divinity associated with Varahran (Bahram in modern Persian). Here, Varahran has described as a boar with iron teeth running in front of Mithra's four-horse chariot, fighting for him. He has thousand eyes and ears and always stands in the high end of the north sky. In the Gathas, another part of the Avesta, this is associated with the words of Zoroaster himself, Mithra means "oath" (Assasi, 2014: 78-79).

Mithra was the god of contracts by the meaning "that which causes to bind" (Foltz, 2013: 20). Based on the Zoroastrianism beliefs, Mithra is an angel and guardian of truthfulness, honesty, promises, and bonds. On the other hand, the name of the Mithra carries the meaning of friend, ally, qualities of kindness, and friendship (Eduljee, 2016: 2).

The Persian Empire during the Achaemenid Period (550-330 BC) was the greatest extent from the Mediterranean region, Balkans and Eastern Europe in the west to the Indus Valley in the east with spanning 5.5 million km². It incorporated various peoples from different origins and faiths. Persian Empire was a successful model of a centralized administration, building infrastructures such as road systems and a postal system, the use of an official language across its territories, and the development of civil services and a large professional army. Figure 1 illustrates the vast area of the Persian Empire during the Achaemenid Period.



Figure 1. Expansion of the Persian Empire during the Achaemenid Period (Cream color)

After the defeat of the Achaemenid Empire by Alexander the Great, Mithra worshipers spread throughout the Hellenic world and transformed into Mithras God of Mysteries by Roman in the 1st century CE. Mithras' mysteries particularly attracted Roman soldiers and emphasized bonds of brotherhood (Johnston, 2007: 103-104).

The Kingdom of Commagene in Anatolia characterize as a buffer state between Armenia, Iran, Syria, and Rome. Anatolia in general and Armenia, in particular, have owned the most intense geopolitical and intercultural contact regions between Persians and Greeks and later between Persians and Romans. Mithra appears in the large statues of Mount Nemrut (69-34 BC). Mithra appears, alongside other deities seated on a throne, wearing a Phrygian cap. The Greek inscription on the back of the thrones shows that the name of Mithra is with together the four other gods: Apollo (Mithras), Zeus (Oromasdes), Herakles (Ares-Artagnes) and Fortuna (Kommagene tanrıçası) (Vermaseren, 2001, 6, Şahin, 2013: 132, Assasi, 2014: 82).

In the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, the cult of Mithra carried and supported by the soldiers of the Roman Empire was the chief rival to the newly developing religion of Christianity. The Roman

emperors Commodus and Julian were initiates of Mithraism, and in 307 AD, Diocletian consecrated a temple on the Danube River to Mithra, “Protector of the Empire” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2022b). According to historians, during the Parthian Empire or Arsacid Empire in Iran (247 BC-224 AD) the most known temples were built for Anahita³ and Mithra (Schippmann, 1972, Eduljee, 2016: 9-11). Repeatedly Eduljee (2016: 11) emphasized: “Both Mithraism and Christianity appear to have their footholds in the Rome Empire around the same time in the first century CE.” In ancient Iran, the slaying of the bull ceremony was the symbol of resurrection and revival of nature in the spring when the sun prevails over the moon. Figure 2 show a relief from Persepolis lion and bull battle.



Figure 2. The battle between lion and bull

According to Cumont as the first scholar about Mithraism in his book “The Mysteries of Mithra” (1903: 130-138), the inscriptions about Mithra’s birth show Mithra was born from a rock. He had been caved issue forth from the rocky mass. He armed a torch in one hand and a knife in the other hand. Mithra’s birthplace is on the bank of a river under the shade of a sacred tree, and his head has worn with a Phrygian cap. He soon rode and then killed a bull; bull’s blood fertilizes all vegetation. Later, Mithra’s slaying of the bull was a popular subject of Hellenic art and became the prototype for a bull-slaying ritual of fertility in the Mithraic cult. As the god of light, often he is paired with Anahita, goddess of the fertilizing waters in Iran. Mithra is associated with the Greek Sun God Helios⁴ and the Roman Sol Invictus⁵. Figure 3 shows the Roman Mithra killing the bull relief. Similar to this, many reliefs and sculptures of Mithra find inside the Roman Mithraism temple around Europe.



Figure 3. Roman Mithras killing the bull (Roman Cult of Mithras, 2022)

³ Anahita is the name of a popular Zoroastrian and an ancient Iranian cosmological figure venerated as the female guardian angel of waters (Ābān), associated with fertility, healing, and wisdom (CAIS, 2022a).

⁴ Helios (also Helius) was the god of the Sun in Greek mythology (Ancient History Encyclopedia, 2022).

⁵ The god of the Unconquered Sun, Sol Invictus, was the official sun god of the later Empire of Rome (Imperium Romanum, 2022)

The significant icon of Mithraism is the “bull-slaying scene” in which the god of the cult, Mithras, accompanied by a dog, a snake, a raven, a cup, a lion, and a scorpion, is shown in the act of killing a bull; the scene depicted as taking place inside a cave of Mithra’s Temple. The blood of the bull fertilized all vegetation (Ulansey, 1994: 41).

According to the ancient Iranian beliefs, Mithra was born in a dark cave, and shepherds were the first people who found him. The birth of Mithra was on the Holy day of 25 December, winter solstice or the longest night of the year, in the darkest cave, symbolizing the birth of the light and hope and renovation of nature. From ancient times until now, Iranian people have celebrated Yalda Night or winter solstice and waited for sunrise. Christ’s holy birth is on the same night in the solar calendar. Mithra is held to be the god of salvation, associated with the sun (Vermaseren, 2001: 91-97).

Furthermore, Cumont declared (1903: p.2-3): “In the Avesta, Mithra is the genius of the celestial light. He appears before sunrise on the rocky summits of the mountains; during the day he traverses the wide sky in his chariot drawn by four white horses, and when night falls he still illumines with the flickering glow the surface of the earth. He became for ethics the god of truth and integrity. Mithra is ‘the lord of wide pastures’; the one that renders them fertile....He scatters the waters of the heavens and causes the plants to spring forth from the ground; on them that honor him, he bestows health of body, the abundance of riches, and talented posterity...”.

According to the many historical sources, many ancient Persian Kings were fond of Mithra and supported his worship of him. Thus, the cult of Mithra developed into an independent religion. Mithraism spread through the Persian Empire. In the inscriptions of Artaxerxes I “Great King” of Persian was carved the reliefs of Mithra with Anahita, alongside Ahura-Mazda in. In this relief, the great looked upon him as their special protector (Comunt, 1903: 8).

Figure 4, illustrates a relief at Taq-e Bostan in Iran, and is about the Sassanid Emperor Ardashir II (379-383 AD) inauguration. On the left stands the Mithra with raised Barsom⁶ in his hand for sanctifying of the king. Figure 5 illustrates a high-relief from Taq-e Bostan about the investigation of Khosrow II (590-628 AD). Figure 5 illustrates another high-relief from Taq-e Bostan about the investigation of Khosrow II (590-628). The king in the center receives the ring of kingship from Mithra in the right. On the left, sanctifying the investigation stands a female figure generally assumed to be Anahita. Both reliefs’ of Taq-e Bostan belong to the Sassanid Empire (224-651 AD).



Figure 4 and 5. Fig.4: Investiture of Sassanid emperor Ardashir II, (Taq-e Bostan, Iran), Fig. 5: A high relief from Taq-e Bostan the investiture of Khosrow II (590-628 AD)

⁶ A bundle of sacred twigs or metal rods used by priests in Zoroastrian ceremonies (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2022).

The access of Mithraism followers' to the temple is too restricted and full of secrets. Maybe one of the reasons is the existence of several grades and hierarchic among the members of the cult and only for men. The grades of the cults' members based on the hierarchic from low to high level believed to be Corax, Corux or Corvex (raven or crow), Nymphus or Nymphobus (bridegroom), Miles (soldier), Leo (lion), Perses (Persian), Heliodromus (sun-runner), and Pater (father) (Assasi, 2014: 89-90).

Mithraism religion prevailed for some 2000 years among Aryans. Ancient Iranian communities extended all over the eastern Mediterranean for trade and military purposes. The influence of Iranian society is seen in Roman culture, especially in the appearance of the cult of Mithra. By notion to the culturally mixed environment background of northwestern Mesopotamia and Anatolia, the presence of Mithraism has taken shape during the first century B.C and had expanded throughout the Roman Empire. Iranian Mithraism survivals have been seen in Roman Mithraism, not in the ritual reliefs of Tauroctony or "bull-slaying scene" but also the association of Mithra with the sun and "his role as savior or conductor of the soul" (Foltz, 2013: 24).

3- Mithraism Temple

Like every religion, Mithraism cult members have also created appropriate places for his prayers. Mithraism followers' access to the temple for ritual ceremonies is too restricted and secret. So the information about the Mithraism temple structure is limited. The researchers believe that the Roman Mithraism cult gathered in the underground temples Mithraea or Mithraeum windowless cave or temples, which survive in large numbers. Out of Iran, considerable numbers of Mithraic temples find in Rome, Ostia, Numidia, Dalmatia, Britain, and along the Rhine, Danube frontier, and also in smaller numbers in Greece, Egypt, and Syria.

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According to Gordon (1976: 220), Mithraism had an elaborate cosmology in the central of its doctrines. This cosmology can prove why the natural or artificial caves and underground places were temples or Mithraea. Porphyry⁷ stated caves are an image of the cosmos. For this reason, the temples of the Mithraism cult were equipped with symbols of the cosmic elements, astronomy, and circulation of celestial bodies set at appropriate intervals.

There are some similarities and differences in their construction between Iranian and European Mithraism temples. In Iran, the place of worship of Mithra or Mehr is named Mehrkadeh (Mithraeum), Mehrabeh, or Mehraveh (Mehr Dome). Maybe this name depends on the roof system of Mithraism temples as a dome, or it may be an ideological interaction. According to Shekari Niri (2019: 49), there are dozens of rural places' names in the book of the geographical culture of Iran are Mehrabad. In the Persian language, the name of the Zoroastrian fire temples was Darb-e Mehr or Gate of Mithra. Because the fire temples were places with ambiguous meaning, or maybe the origin was in a very ancient period (Foltz, 2013: 28). Mithraism temples were influenced by the God of the Moon, the God of the Sun Mithra (Mehr), and Anahita Goddess of water, fertility, and guardians of pure water. Under these ideological influences of divinity relationships, in the construction of most Mithraism temples, there are many significant elements to present this relationship. For example, create a relationship with natural environments such as spring or trees, using the movement of celestial bodies in designing buildings, day and night, summer and winter, etc. (Alipour, et.al, 2019: 33-34). One of the well-known features of Mithraism monuments that can see in all areas and stages of their distribution

⁷ Neoplatonic philosopher born in Tyre, Roman

is attention to natural elements such as nearly to water, vegetation, holy fire, celestial bodies, and daytime.

According to Eduljee (2016: 4) from Porphyry (234-305 AD); The Mithraeum Temple of the Persians is a cave where they introduce the initiative to the mysteries, revealing to him the path by which souls descend (to the earthly body) and go back again (to the spiritual realms of the cosmos). Eubulus⁸ tells; Zoroaster was the first to dedicate a natural cave in honor of Mithras, the creator, and father of all.

Since Mithra was born from a rock or mountainous and died in the mountains, every cave inside it flowed with spring water as the shrine of Mithra and Anahita, and worshipers went to the temples to worship them (Vaage, 2006: 179). According to Shekari Niri (2019: 37), a common feature of Mithraism temples in Iran and Rome civilizations is cave or underground places. However, due to the inscriptions related to Mithra, these shrines have been divided into two categories; in the specific category of the word cave or underground cave in Iran and the second group has a more general meaning. The second group is generally Roman temples around Europe with small-scale temples with a simple rectangular plan (Comunt, 1903: 200, Alipour, et.al, 2019: 33).

In Iran, most Mithraism temples settled near springs. Maybe the particular form of baptism is the reason for this selection (Halliday, 1925: 298). The roof of Mithraism temple or Mihrabeh was built-in concave form, as a sample considered a sign of the revolving arch and the azure dome of the sky, and the roof was decorated with stars, and sometimes a relief. In the Mithraism temple, sometimes there are several rooms and corridors parallel to the altar for prayers and religious rites, and in which of these places there are platforms for sitting. Due to the Shekari Niri research on Mithraic temples (2019: 37-38), European Mithraeums on both sides have a platform to sit; such platforms are in some Iranian Mithraic temples. After Christ, in the construction of churches, the plan and appearance of the altars have been imitated. The focal point of the Mithraism temple is an altar, not a rostrum (Moghaddam, 1964: 57-58, Alipour, et.al, 2019: 34). Figure 6 shows a sample plan of the Roman Mithraism temple plan in Germany with a simple rectangular plan and basilica form.

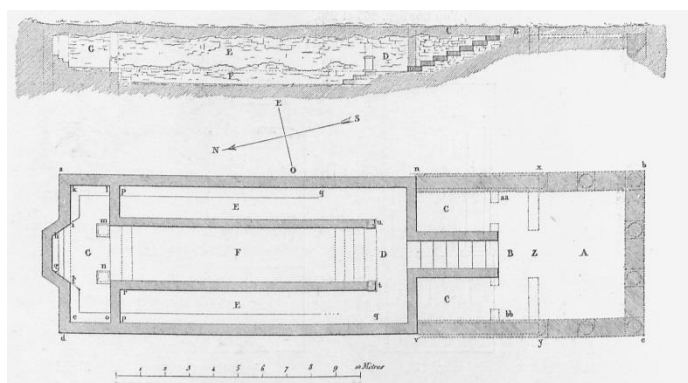


Figure 6. Plan and section of a Mithraeum at Hedderheim, Germany (Cumont 1899: 430).

Generally, in Iran, the building of the Mithraism temples consists of an entrance and an inner vestibule to access three parallel halls or corridors. The main hall is larger than the other and settles in the forefront part of the temple. These two halls are narrower with a shorter roof than

⁸ An Athenian "Middle Comic" poet, (370s or 360s B.C.).

the main hall. The altar locates in the main hall with small depressions on the wall covered by reliefs of killing the cow. Stone platforms as a place for worshippers seating were on both sides of the main hall. The small opening on the dome has provided light for inside spaces. Low access to light creates special sanctuary spaces that are dark as natural caves (Comunt, 1903: 166, Halliday, 1925: 298-299). There are differences between the two groups of Mithraism temples. Persian temples have covered with dome-shaped roofs with circular and square plans. However, Roman Mithraism temples have rectangular or basilica plans without dome roofs. On the contrary Roman Mithraeums, in Iranian Mithraism temples, there are no sculptures and paintings (Sommer, 2017: 346, Shekari Niri, 2019: 37-38). The inside places of the Mithraism temples are nearly 10-12 meters long and 4-6 meters wide. Most of them are located in isolated areas, underground and dark. The openings and windows to get light inside the temple areas are restricted and narrow (Eduljee, 2016: 11-14).

According to Ulansey (1994: 41-42), the walls of these subterranean temples had filled with extremely elaborate iconography: carved reliefs, statues, and paintings variety of enigmatic figures and scenes. This iconography is our primary source of knowledge about Mithraic beliefs, but because there are no written accounts about the meaning of these ideas, it expresses difficulty to decipher. Due to Comunt's belief (1903: 30), the practice of consecrating caves is about the time when temples didn't yet construct. According to Vermaseren (2001: 48), the Mithraism temples are directed to the east to access the first rays of the rising sun when the bull-slaying ceremony.

Mithraeum's spatial configuration illustrates two elements. The first characteristic is the small size of Mithraism temples. Maybe it depended on the number of worshippers, or as a results brotherhood creation with well-defined grades of Mithraism membership system. Secondly, around the temple rooms, there were benches for sitting worshippers and eating ritual meals (Comunt, 1903: 30-40). Table 1 has gathered the similarities and differences between Iran and Roman Mithraism temples' architectural characters.

Table 1. Similarities and differences between Iran and Roman Mithraism temples

Region	Mithraeum Characters						
	Plan	Roof	Level	Window	Painting	Sculpture	Iconography
Iran Temple	Circle/ Rectangle plan	Dome or Dome shaped	Under ground	Windowless or Skylight	Sometime With Painting	Without sculpture	With Iconography
Roman Temple	Rectangle/ Basilica plan	Without Dome	Under ground / Ground	Windowless Skylight	With Painting	With sculpture	With Iconography

4- Mithraism Rock Temple in Northwest of Iran

In pre-Islam Iran, different religions from Mazdak, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Judaism, and Mithraism were common with their traditions and worship places. However, due to the Mithraism Cult's special ideas about the cosmos, their worship places turned to mountains and caves. From a long time ago, the northwest of Iran was one of the significant regions of the human social presence of ancient societies. Despite the unknown birthplace of Zoroaster, some historians and references believe the northwest of Iran or a place near the Urmia Lake was the birthplace of Zoroaster. Azerbaijan province in the northwest of Iran is known as the birthplace

of Zoroaster. According to some historians' belief, this is a solid reason for the existence of many temples belonging to the Mithraism cult in this region.

The material of this study is the oldest Mithraism rock temples of Iran Verjuy Mehr Temple. Verjuy is the name of a small village in the northwest of Iran near Maragheh city. The village's name has been given to the temple. Maragheh city locates in East Azerbaijan Province. This temple is the oldest and the biggest rock Mithraism temple in Iran, with rich tourism attractions in the northwest region. The Maragheh city's geographical location is in the 37°N and 46°E. The Verjuy village is in the south of the city, and the temple is settled in the 7.5 km southeast part of the village under the ancient Iron Age cemetery. The city is considered one of the first prehistoric human settlements, and it's one of the ten ancient cities of Iran. The city is known as a garden city, rich cultivation center and the astronomical capital of Iran. Especially, the city is known as a production center of the apple and grape Iran. Inside the city there are a lot of historical architectural element and building. In the northwest of Iran in Azerbaijan provinces, several Mithraism rock temples settle near the location of this temple. Table 2 presents the name, distances, and estimate of the construction time of these temples from Verjuy Mehr Temple.

Table 2. Name and location of the known Mithraism temples in Northwest of Iran

Name of Temple	Location City	Date	Status	Distance from Case Study
Mehr Temple or Varjuy Temple	Maragheh City	3000 years	Registered in national historical heritage	-----
Qadamgah Temple	Azarshahr City	1200 years	Registered in national historical heritage	80 km
Azar-Goshap Temple	Tekab City	3-7th centuries	Registered in World's Cultural Heritage	220 km
Zahhak Castle and Zahhak Temple	Hashtrud City	2000 year	Registered in national historical heritage	120
Dashkasan Temple	Zanjan	Arsacid Empire (248 BC-224 AD)	Registered in national historical heritage	260
Abāzar Temple	Nir City	Arsacid Empire (248 BC-224 AD)	Registered in national historical heritage	320 km
Qarashirān Temple	Nir City	Arsacid Empire (248 BC-224 AD)	Registered in national historical heritage	320 km

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Figure 7 illustrates the location of the Urmia Lake in the northwest of Iran, as the estimated birthplace of Zoroaster and Verjuy Mehr Mithraism rock temple. On the other hand, the map clarifies the settlement of the other known Mithraism temples in this region and their distances from the Verjuy Mehr Temple.

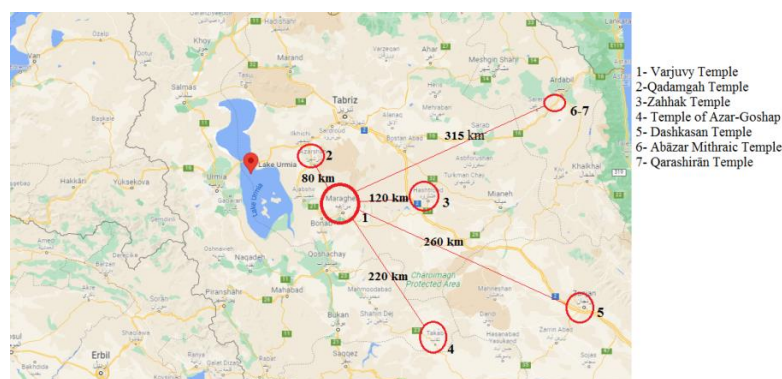


Figure 7. The location of the known Mithraism temples in northwest of Iran

The Verjuy Mehr Temple is an underground sanctuary for Mithraism worshipping. This historical site locates inside the village's agricultural lands. Based on the unplanned development, the new development areas have expanded to the historical site of the temple. The first excavation research on the temple is about 1973-1974 by one of the Iranian archeologists Parviz Varjavand. He prepared the first plan of the temple after the first excavation in 1974. According to him, this temple is the oldest Mithraism temple and the widest Iran. This ancient historical site and temple were added to the National Historical Heritage list in 1977. This rock temple is one of the four remaining Mithraism temples from the Parthian Empire or Arsacid Empire (248 BCE-224 CE) (Tavakoli, 2004, Omrani and Moradi, 2014: 116,). In ancient times, maybe the temple had a larger area than today is clear. According to the Starnejad et al. (2019, 216), in the local language (Azerbaijan Turkish), the name of this village is called "Var-Övi" which means "House of the Sun". The meaning is a keyword role in understanding the concept of the Mithraism temple.

The construction material is the cut schist stones. The entrance of the temple is slop 5.4 m wide which has led the members of the cult from ground level to the underground level as a cave (Varjavand, 1974: 16-17). Figure 8 shows the entrance place of the temple. The temple settles in a historical site under an Iron Age Cemetery. After Islam and until recent years, this historic cemetery and Mithraism temple have applied as a cemetery and mosque. The function of the cemetery and mosque has continued before adding the temple to the national heritage list.



Figure 8. Entrance space of the temple (Irantour, 2022)

Based on Figure 9 temple's plan, there is an embankment steep in the entrance of the underground corridor. In the temple plan, the gate of the underground temple has a crescent-shaped ceiling with a height of 2.5 m. from the ground level and 17.6 m. long (no.1). The central corridor or main hall (no. 4) has a lot of pits that connect to underground rooms (no.2, 5, and 6) with a dome roof. In ceilings of the temple have holes to reach light inside the temple (Varjavand 1974: 16, Tavakoli, 2004).

Today, the holes in the roof are damaged by climatic changes. On the walls around the main hall (no.4) and entrances (no.1), there are inscriptions with Quranic written in Naskhi script that circles the main hall as a belt. The date of these inscriptions was related to the Islamic period when the temple was a Sufis monastery or mosque (Varjavand, 1974: 16, Maragheh Cultural Heritage Organization, 2007). At the end of the main hall, there is a platform with two steps that reaches a small wooden door (no.7). The height of this place is 6 m. Here is the main room of the temple with the altar. In the Islamic period in this space has been built the shrine of Molla Masoum. The shrine, made of stone, has beautifully vaulted rows around the walls (Varjavand, 1974: 16, Tavakoli, 2004). The most important part of the temple is the altar is located at the end of the main room and includes a small porch. This porch was built a little higher than the ground

level and resembled the entrance of the temple. Figures 10, 11, and 12 illustrate some views of temple interior places.

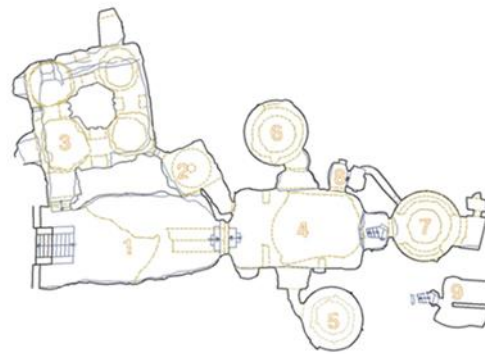


Figure 9. The plan of the Verjuy Mehr Temple (Maragheh Cultural Heritage Organization, 2007)



Figures 10, 11, and 12. Some views of the inside places of temple, a) entrance gate of the temple, b) the main hall dome and its ceiling, c) view of altering, d) main corridor (Author, 2015)

5- Conclusion

This study has reviewed the Verjuy Mithraism Rock Temple. This temple is the oldest and biggest Mithraism temple in Iran. The temple settles in one of the first human settlements in the northwest of Iran in Maragheh city and near Urmia Lake. The Urmia Lake region was known as the presumed birthplace of Zoroaster. Six other rock temples belonging to Mithraism have been recognized in the northwest of Iran, and all of them settled near a distance from the city. On the other hand, by considering the Iron-Age cemetery in the Mehr Temples site, the origins of the temple and this historical site come back to the prehistory period. Furthermore, Maragheh city is one of the ten historical cities in Iran.

Due to the temple plan, there are common similarities in architectural characters between this temple and the other Mithraism temples in Iran and the world. So these similarities can be

recognized as reasons that this underground temple belongs to Mithraism cults. The common similarities characteristics elements of the temple are; near to spring in the site, a manufactured underground place like a natural cave by using cut stone, windowless spaces, dome roof, circular plan of the temple, alter, and Mithraism iconographical reliefs on the walls. Especially the circular plan and dome shape roof are the main principles of the Mithraism temples in the northwest of Iran. Similar to the other Mithraism temples of Iran, there are no paintings or sculptures of Mithra inside the temple. Quranic written inscriptions on the temple walls are a reason for transferring the function of the Mehr Temple to the mosque after Islam. In Iran, most of the mosques have been built on the Zoroastrian Fire Temples.

One of this study outputs, this Mehr Temple has been reviewed to reveal evaluation to adding the UNESCO World Heritage as the oldest biggest Mithraism temple. This Mehr Temple has a high potential attraction for cultural-historical heritage tourism due to the historical and cultural value, nearly to Maragheh city as a cultural tourism center, and a good source of cultural and natural tourism potential of the village. On the other hand, based on the city's historical background, the historical-cultural architectural elements seem to be capable of making an essential contribution to historical-cultural tourism or Mithraism Temples tourism routes.

Furthermore, Maragheh city, Verjuy village, and the surrounding areas are the crucial center of agriculture. Based on these authentic roots, this area has a functional capacity for creating different kinds of tourism like natural, agricultural, cultural and historical. Attention to the restoration and conservation of the Mehr Temple and surrounding historical site based on scientific methods help to survive the area and increase the chances for adding the UNESCO World Heritage list. Moreover, the creation of the Mithraism Temple tourism route due to the near other temples in the region can be one of the ways to increase the tourism attractions.

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