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# The Newly Discovered Elamite Rock Relief of Alhak, Izeh, Iran

Ayoub Soltani<sup>1</sup> , Hossein Feyzi<sup>2</sup> , Farzad Najafi<sup>3</sup>, Mehdi Faraji<sup>4</sup>

## Abstract

A newly discovered Elamite rock relief in the Alhak region of central Izeh in southwestern Iran contributes significantly to the corpus of commemorative Elamite art. Unlike other well-known reliefs from the area—such as those at Kül-i Farah, Shahsavar, and Khung-i Azhdar—this composition was carved onto a conglomerate rock surface, a medium both unique and inherently fragile, leading to its accelerated erosion and delayed recognition. The relief depicts a male figure seated in profile on a simple throne, raising his right hand in a gesture of reverence or supplication. A stepped platform lies before him, while a prominent solar disc hovers above his head—features resonant with iconographic motifs found on contemporaneous cylinder seals from Elam and Mesopotamia. Iconographic and stylistic parallels suggest that the Alhak relief belongs to the Shimashki cultural horizon (ca. 2000–1970 BCE). The absence of divine attributes—such as horned crowns or zoomorphic insignia—indicates that the figure is more plausibly interpreted as a royal personage engaged in ritual devotion rather than a deity. The rightward orientation of the seated figure, in contrast to the left-facing postures of most Izeh reliefs, further underscores its distinctiveness. This discovery broadens our understanding of regional variability within Elamite rock art. It highlights the cultural resilience of Elamite traditions in the highlands following the collapse of lowland power centers such as Susa. Future investigations employing advanced imaging technologies (e.g., 3D scanning and photogrammetry) are essential for recovering lost details and refining our interpretation of the relief's symbolic schema.

**Keywords:** Elam; Ayapir; Alhak; Izeh; Rock Relief.

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## Introduction

Despite two centuries of archaeological research, our understanding of Elam's political, cultural, social, religious, and geographical domains—its nature and significance—remains shrouded in ambiguity. This is particularly striking given Elam's antiquity and the many enigmas it holds in relation to neighboring cultures and civilizations. As Steve (1962: 23) aptly observed, “the Elamites reveal their secrets most reluctantly.” Elam's geographical position, stretching from Mesopotamia in the west to the central Zagros highlands in the east (Fig. 1), granted it a strategic yet vulnerable role in the ancient Near East. With the rise of Assyrian military power and its expansionist campaigns toward its eastern front, Elam's political and military decline culminated in 646 BCE with the fall of Susa and Dur-Untash. Nevertheless, the eastern mountainous regions of Elam, protected by their rugged terrain, remained relatively insulated from foreign invasions.

Significant insights from these less-explored highland regions have illuminated Middle and Neo-Elamite history and resolved key ambiguities. Beyond inheriting the legacy of a two-millennium-old civilization, this eastern Elamite zone also served as a cultural conduit, transmitting artistic styles, religious and mythological beliefs, and political concepts from Mesopotamia to the land of Persia and the Achaemenids.

Henry Layard was the first to observe five rock reliefs comprising 341 figures, providing descriptions that, while pioneering, lacked scientific rigor and analytical depth (Layard, 1846: 77). In 1841,

Baron C.A. de Bode, a Russian diplomat, produced highly detailed drawings of the reliefs at Eshkaft-i Salman (de Bodé, 1845). Photographs were later taken by M. Houssay and subsequently published by Perrot and Chipiez in their comprehensive work on ancient art (Perrot & Chipiez, 1890: 773–778). In 1963, Vanden Berghe carried out a more systematic survey, resulting in a comprehensive report on all the rock reliefs of Izeh (Vanden Berghe, 1963).

Subsequently, Walter Hinz and Dominique de Waele interpreted the architectural elements—including sacrificial platforms, incense burners, and musical processions at Kūl-i Farah and Eshkaft-i Salman—as indicative of ritual or ceremonial functions (Hinz, 1946; de Waele, 1976). Their interpretation was later critically reviewed by Calmeyer (1988).

From 1986 to 2017, Jafar Mehr Kian directed numerous archaeological surveys and excavations in Izeh. His excavations near the Eshkaft-i Salman reliefs led to the discovery of a stone structure with gypsum mortar dating to the Ilkhanid–Timurid period. Additionally, during a pre-reservoir archaeological assessment conducted prior to the inundation of the Shahid Abbaspour Dam (formerly Reza Shah Dam) between 1964 and 1966, Henry Wright identified several Elamite sites in the intermontane plain of Izeh (Wright, 1979).

Between 2007 and 2010, the Khung-i Azhdar relief was studied by a joint Iranian-Italian archaeological team led by Jafar Mehr Kian and Vito Messina. A limited excavation was also carried out in the vicinity of the Elymaean rock relief of



Fig. 1. Geographical Location of Ilam.

Khung-i Azhdar (Mehr Kian & Messina, 2015). In 2007, Mehdi Faraji dedicated part of his MA thesis to studying Elamite Relief No. 6 at Kūl-i Farah, attributing it to the Middle Elamite period (Faraji, 2010: 11).

The Alhak rock relief was identified and recorded for the first time as part of a broader archaeological survey in the central district of Izeh, conducted under the supervision of Ayoub Soltani on behalf of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Research Institute. The authors discovered and published this relief (Soltani, 2018: 729) (Fig. 2-8, Table 1).

### Research Methodology

This study employs a descriptive-comparative approach, integrating field in-

vestigations with library-based research. The comparative analysis describes and explains the similarities and differences between the newly discovered Elamite rock relief at Alhak and other related reliefs. The methodology is grounded in identifying chain-like relationships among various Elamite rock carvings and conducting iconographic and chronological analyses through comparison with other early Ayapir figures (notably Kūl-i Farah IV, Khung-i Azhdar I, and Shahsavvar), as well as with Kurangun, Elamite commemorative stelae, and seals from Elam and Mesopotamia.

### Geographical and Spatial Context

The archaeological survey project of the central district of Izeh, directed by Ayoub



Fig. 2. The Ancient Gorge of Kül-i Farah and the Location of the Rock Reliefs (Photo by Faraji, 2017).



Fig. 3. Image and Sketch of the Kül-i Farah Rock Relief (Alvarez-Mon, 2015).

Soltani under the auspices of the Research Institute of Cultural Heritage and Tourism (RICHT), led to the first identification of the Alhak rock relief (Soltani, 2018: 729).

The Alhak relief is located at geographic coordinates X: 389779, Y: 3520578, at 1050 meters above sea level.

It lies in the southwest of the city of Izeh, on the southeastern front of the village of Alhak, within the central district of Izeh County, specifically in the western rural district (Fig. 9).

The Alhak area holds strategic significance due to its vantage position along the ancient Atabaki Road and its location

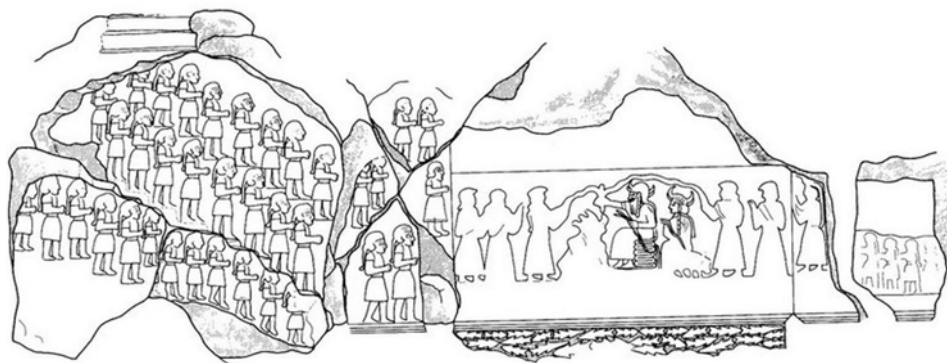


Fig. 4. Kurangun Rock Relief (Faraji, 2024).

within the intermontane plain of Izeh. The Alhak relief is situated within the cultural sphere of Izeh and the broader Elamite cultural landscape, in close proximity to other notable rock carvings such as Eshkaft-i Salman, Shahsavar, Kūl-i Farah, Khung-i Azhdar, and Qaleh Tall (Fig. 10).

Beyond its strategic location, the region's moderate climate, mountainous topography, abundant springs, and rich vegetation have made it a favorable area for human habitation since antiquity (Fig. 11). A permanent and abundant spring flows just 90 meters north of the Alhak relief (Fig. 12).

### The Newly Discovered Alhak Rock Relief

Unlike all previously known rock reliefs in the Izeh plain—which were carved into solid, compact, and homogenous rocky surfaces either attached to mountains or isolated rock outcrops—the Alhak relief is carved onto a conglomerate stone formation composed of compressed and interwoven sandy and pebbly materials. This rocky surface features a shallow, nat-

urally formed recess, which the sculptors utilized by carving its base to accommodate the relief scene. The conglomerate nature of the rock contributed to the late discovery of this relief, as it is virtually invisible from a distance and only faintly discernible at close range (Fig. 13).

Examinations indicate that, contrary to the evident expertise of ancient sculptors in selecting appropriate stone surfaces for artistic intervention—as seen in other Izeh reliefs—such consideration appears to have been lacking in the case of the Alhak relief. This poor choice of material has made the relief considerably more vulnerable to damage than its region counterparts. The conglomerate composition, characterized by loosely bonded pebbles and sandy matrix, offers weaker structural integrity than the denser rocks typically used for Elamite reliefs. As a result, the Alhak relief has suffered greater erosion and fragmentation due to weathering processes, daily temperature fluctuations, wind, and rainfall (Soltani, 2018: 732).

To create the relief, the artisans carved out the middle floor of the rocky

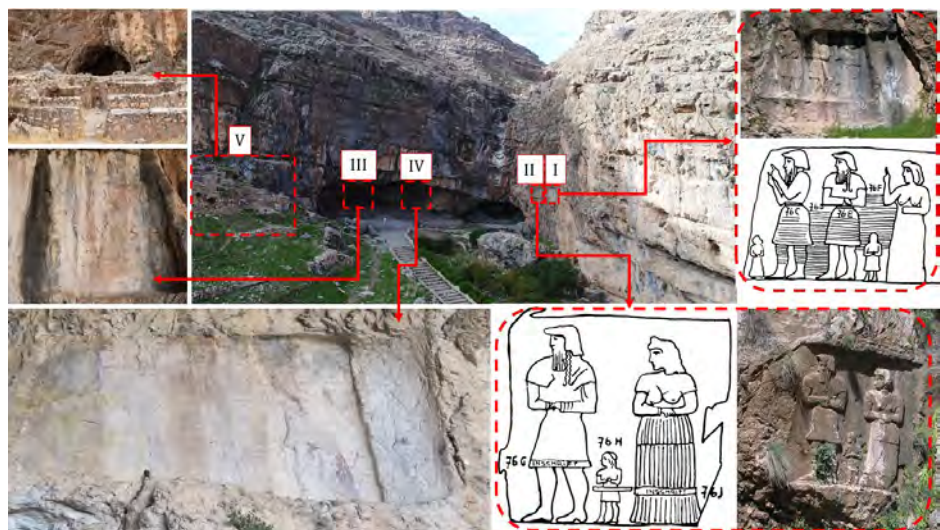


Fig. 5. Eshkaft-i Salman Complex and the Positioning of its Rock Reliefs (Archive of the National Ayapir Center).



Fig. 6. Shahsavari Rock Relief (Soltani, 2018).

outcrop. Owing to the irregularity of the rock's surface, the carved panel never achieved a perfectly geometric shape; its borders are uneven and asymmetrical. The approximate dimensions of the relief panel are 5 meters by 3 meters, with the depth of the recess varying from 60 cm to 120 cm. The flat floor of the carved niche is about 4.8 meters long and 1.2

meters wide. The rock's western face has been chiseled to accommodate the scene (Fig. 14).

On the right side of the relief, a seated figure measuring approximately 26 centimeters in height is depicted sitting on a 6 by 6 centimeters platform. The platform itself rests on legs about 5 millimeters high (Fig. 15). As is typical of Elamite



Fig. 7. Khungi Azhdar 1 Rock Relief (Soltani, 2018).










Fig. 8. Qaleh Tol Rock Relief (Stein, 1940).

reliefs from this period, the figure is presented frontally from the chest upward, with the head shown in profile and the

legs depicted in a grounded seated position. With a bent elbow, the figure's right hand is raised toward his face, while the

Table 1. (Roach, 2008: 719-730).

Ur-Nammu	Puzur-Inshushinak
 <p>Shulgi</p>  <p>Shulgi (cont.)</p>  <p>Amar-Sin</p>  <p>Mesopotamia Ishbi-Erra</p>	 <p>Ebarti I</p>  <p>Ebarti I</p> <p>Ebarti I</p> <p>Elam Idaddu I</p> 

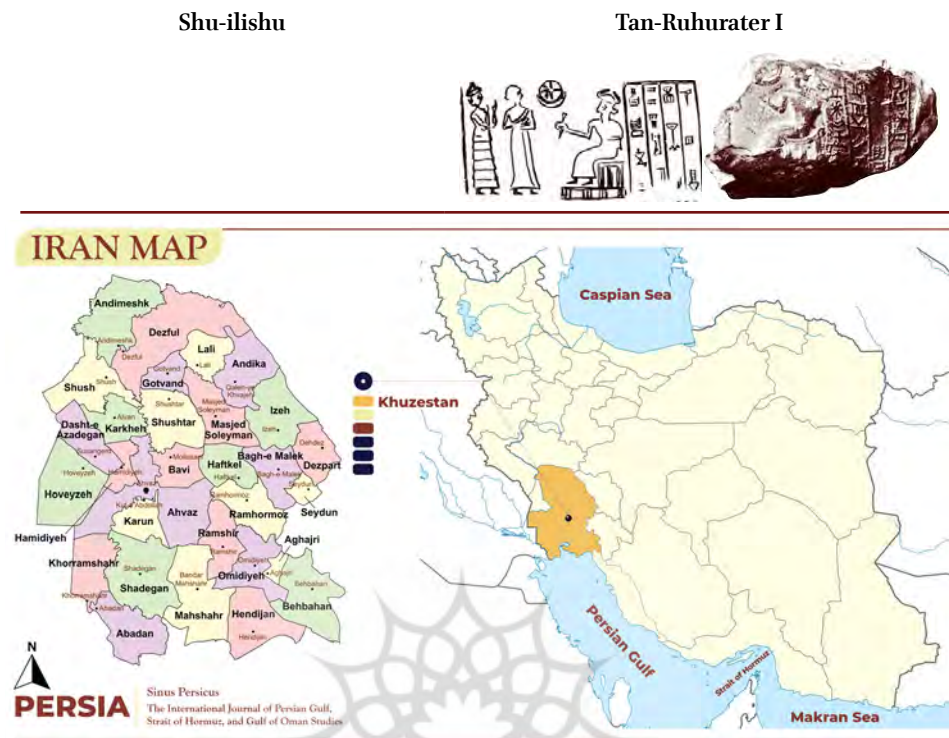


Fig. 9. Map of Iran and Khuzestan Province, Position of Izeh County in Iran's Administrative Divisions (Adapted by *Sinus Persicus* from a Map from Wikimedia Commons under a Creative Commons Licence CC BY-SA 4.0)

left rests on the seat. A robe, possibly of ceremonial or religious nature, is clearly visible extending to just above the ankles. A diagonal sash appears to run from the left shoulder to the right hip, connecting to a belt.

Due to erosion, any object that may have been held in the right hand is no longer identifiable. The figure wears a headband, although much of its detail has been lost over time; only the ribbon-like end of the headband, hanging down the back, remains visible. The face is heavily worn, making its features indistinct, but remnants of a vertically zig-zag-patterned beard rendered in a chiseled technique are still visible, indicating the figure is male.

Above and in front of the seated figure, a circular disc with slight relief — approximately the size of the head — has been carved. This may represent a symbolic motif specific to the period. Dashed lines in the documentation represent hypothetical reconstructions of the damaged components. Due to extensive weathering, it is no longer possible to identify whether other figures or objects were originally present before him.

On the niche floor, in front of the carved figure, two step-like platforms are visible. The first platform measures approximately 60 cm in length, 30 cm in width, and about 23 cm in height and is connected to the middle of a second, larger platform. The second platform



Fig. 10. Spatial Relationship between the Alhak Rock Relief and the Elamite Rock Reliefs within the Izeh Cultural Domain (Google Earth, 2024).



Fig. 11. The View in Front of the Alhak Complex (Photo by Soltani, 2024).

measures about 95 cm in length and 43 cm in width. Together, they form a low staircase (Soltani, 2018: 733) (Fig. 15).

### Examination and Analysis of the Relief

The Elamite rock reliefs of the Izeh plain are located at Kūl-i Farah (six reliefs), Es-hkaft-i Salman (four reliefs), Shahsavari (one relief), and Khung-i Azhdar (one relief). The Alhak relief, the thirteenth

Elamite rock relief of the Izeh plain, exhibits notable similarities with the reliefs of Shahsavari and Khung-i Azhdar. The common feature shared by all three is the depiction of an Elamite deity or king seated on a throne, and the dimensions of the figures are roughly comparable. However, the Alhak relief bears greater stylistic and compositional affinity with Relief No. 4 at Kūl-i Farah (Fig. 17)—par-



Fig. 12. The Historical Spring of Alhak (Soltani, 2024).

ticularly in the rendering of the long, ankle-length garment, the simplistic structure of the throne and table before the seated figure, and the raised right hand gesture.

Nonetheless, a significant and defining distinction sets the Alhak relief apart from Shahsavar, Khung-i Azhdar I, and multiple other reliefs in the Izeh plain, including Kūl-i Farah Nos. 1, 2, 3 (depicting a figure on a litter), and No. 6. In all these, the carved figure appears on the left side of the panel, facing right toward the center. In contrast, the figure in the Alhak relief is carved on the right side of the panel, facing left. This compositional orientation is also observed in Elamite reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam and Kurangun in Fars Province.

Beyond rock reliefs, numerous cylinder seals unearthed during archaeologi-

cal excavations in Iran and Mesopotamia also portray enthroned figures facing left from the viewer's perspective (i.e., seated on the right side of the composition), examples of which are listed in Table 1. In many such seal designs, solar disks or crescent moons appear above or in front of the enthroned figure, often indicating divine or cosmic significance.

Due to their modest elevation, the two platforms in front of the figure in the Alhak relief, forming a short staircase approximately 50 centimeters high, are unlikely to have functioned solely as steps. Instead, they almost certainly served a symbolic or ritual function connected to the scene. Drawing parallels from the aforementioned cylinder seals and Relief No. 4 at Kūl-i Farah, these platforms may have served as altars or offering stands



Fig. 13. Conglomerate Formation in the Alhak Region (Soltani, 2024).



Fig. 14. Location and Geological Context of the Alhak Rock Relief (Soltani, 2024).

for votive objects presented before the seated figure.

Another noteworthy parallel is the Kassite-period victory stele from Meso-

potamia (Fig. 18), later appropriated by Shutruk-Nahhunte I of the Shutrukid dynasty of Elam. The Elamite king had his own image added to the scene, showing



Fig. 15. Image and Sketch of Alhak Rock Relief



Fig. 16. Alhak Rock Relief

himself (at left) in an attitude of worship before a Babylonian deity (at right) seated on a throne, with a radiant solar disc (Nahhunte) above them (Potts, 2006: 362).

Among the Izeh plain reliefs, the closest parallels to the Alhak carving in terms of stylistic execution, scale, construction, and posture are the reliefs of Khung-i



Fig. 17. Kül-i Farah Rock Relief (Soltani, 2018).

Azhdar I and Shabsavar, which are likely contemporary with the Alhak relief (Calmeyer, 1976: fig. 17).

Comparable scenes are also depicted on cylinder seals from the Old Elamite period and its contemporaneous Mesopotamian phases (Roach, 2008: 730). The abundance of cylinder seals from the Shimashki (Awan) period, the contemporaneous Third Dynasty of Ur, and the recurring motifs of full or crescent disks above enthroned

figures highlight the mutual cultural influences between these regions. This correlation becomes especially significant considering that the dynasty founded by Ur-Nammu in southern Mesopotamia—known as the Third Dynasty of Ur, ca. 2100 BCE—not only dominated Susa but also maintained connections with Iranian regions such as Anshan and its neighbors in the Iranian Plateau, including through dynastic intermarriage.



Fig. 18. The Stele of Shutruk Nahhunte (Calmeyer, 1995: Fig. 16)

The Shimashki dynasty emerged in the mid-to-late phase of the Ur III period as a political response, ultimately contributing to the collapse of the Ur III Empire around 2000 BCE. Kindattu, king of Elam, played a decisive role in this fall. Cylinder seals from this period—those of Ur-Nammu, Shulgi, and other dynasty kings—frequently depict enthroned figures with a crescent moon above their heads, and occasionally a combination of sun and moon motifs. Of particular note is the seal of Ishbi-Era, governor of Mari and later a rebel against Ibbi-Sin, the last king of the Ur III dynasty (Roach, 2008: 729).

This iconographic tradition also influenced Kassite-period seal designs in Mesopotamia. As indicated in Table 1, Shutruk-Nahhunte I of Elam took one such seal as war booty and brought to Susa. The widespread presence of similar

seals within the political structure of the Shimashki dynasty—alongside the relatively crude quality of the Alhak relief compared to later Neo-Elamite reliefs at Eshkaft-i Salman, Kūl-i Farah, and others—reinforces the hypothesis that the Alhak relief may date to the Shimashki period, roughly between 2000 and 1970 BCE. Supporting evidence may also be drawn from a composite example on the cylinder seal of Puzur-Inshushinak, king of the earlier Awan dynasty (Roach, 2008: 719).

The circular disk carved above the head of the seated figure in the Alhak relief may tempt researchers to identify the figure as Nahhunte, the Elamite sun god. However, without definitive evidence, this remains merely a possibility. The figure cannot be conclusively identified as a deity. Although similar figures seated on serpent-adorned thrones and wearing

horned crowns are seen at Kurangun and Naqsh-e Rostam, the lack of iconographic clarity in the Alhak relief precludes a firm identification as a god from the Elamite pantheon.

Examples such as the cylinder seals of Ur-Nanshe from Mesopotamia and Puzur-Inshushinak from Elam show enthroned figures with full or crescent disks above their heads, while intermediary figures—perhaps priestesses or goddesses—usher others into the king's presence. Cuneiform inscriptions declare: "Ur-Nanshe, the Great King" (Roach, 2008: 719).

Given the Elamite and Mesopotamian examples on cylinder seals, the most plausible interpretation of the Alhak relief is that it depicts an unidentified Elamite king seated in a posture of reverence or supplication, with arms raised—a motif clearly seen in Relief No. 4 at Kül-i Farah, as well as at Khung-i Azhdar I and Shahsavar. The thrones in these examples are simple, devoid of divine attributes, and the seated figures are typically engaged in acts of worship or receiving audiences. It is highly probable that smaller-scale figures once stood before the seated figure at Alhak, but they are no longer visible due to severe erosion. Further technical documentation—such as laser scanning and photogrammetry—may help to recover more details of the relief and support or refine this interpretive framework.

Further descriptive and comparative analysis suggests that Relief No. 4 at Kül-i Farah and the well-known victory stele of Shutruk-Nahhunte may offer the most compelling analogies for reconstructing

or interpreting the Alhak scene. While the Shahsavar and Khung-i Azhdar I reliefs also contribute to this comparative framework, Relief No. 4 at Kül-i Farah features a seated figure on the left, with an offering table placed in front of and behind the figure, suggesting the possibility that a similar element—a table or offering platform—was once present in front of the figure at Alhak. However, this feature is difficult to confirm due to the poor quality and eroded state of the conglomerate rock surface. This interpretation becomes plausible if one accepts that the two small stepped platforms in front of the seated figure at Alhak functioned as offering platforms.

Moreover, the profile of the seated figure, hairstyle, and probable headband in Relief No. 4 at Kül-i Farah parallels the figure depicted in the Alhak relief. Should we hypothesize that a second figure, now lost due to erosion, once stood before the seated figure at Alhak, the composition would closely resemble the Shutruk-Nahhunte I stele, in which the Elamite king is shown worshipping a seated Babylonian deity, with a solar disk hovering above (Calmeyer, 1976: fig. 17). In that case, the Alhak relief's solar disk motif may have derived from this well-known composition, albeit adapted to a local iconographic context. Notably, the Shutruk-Nahhunte stele itself was originally Babylonian and only later repurposed and re-inscribed by the Elamite king following its seizure as war booty.

The Elamite reliefs of Khung-i Azhdar I and Shahsavar also provide useful comparisons, particularly due to their

stylistic similarity to the Alhak relief in terms of technique and body orientation: a three-quarter perspective showing the head in profile, the torso frontally, and the legs in profile. This format is scarce at Kül-i Farah, where only the figure of Hanni, ruler of Ayapir, and the scenes at Eshkaft-i Salman (where figures appear with attendants) show comparable perspectives. Most figures in Reliefs Nos. 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 at Kül-i Farah are depicted entirely in profile (face, body, and legs), either from the right or the left.

Cylinder seals from the Third Dynasty of Ur, the late Awan period, and the Shimashki period in Elam, as shown in Table 1, exhibit high degrees of consistency in depicting enthroned figures. Seals of Ur-Nammu and Shulgi from Mesopotamia, and those of Puzur-Inshushinak, Ebarrat I, Indattu I, and Tan-Ruhuratir from Elam, all present similar iconographic elements: a profile head, frontal torso, profile legs, a full or crescent disk above the head, the left hand resting on the throne armrest, the right hand raised in a gesture of reverence, the throne's simplified design, the seated figure located on the right side of the composition, and a long garment reaching to the ankles.

These recurring visual elements strongly support the hypothesis that the Alhak relief dates to the early second millennium BCE, most likely between 2000 and 1970 BCE. As previously noted, the figure cannot definitively be identified as a deity. Although Shulgi is portrayed with a horned crown on a cylinder seal (included in Table 1)—a divine attribute also seen at Kurangun and Naqsh-e Rostam—that crown was added after Shulgi's

self-deification in his twenty-third regnal year (Sigrist, 1992: 8).

By contrast, in the Alhak, Khung-i Azhdar I, and Shahsavar reliefs—as well as in the broader Elamite corpus from Kül-i Farah and Eshkaft-i Salman—there are no depictions of horned crowns, despite frequent portrayals of seated figures. Thus, although divine enthronement is undoubtedly part of both Elamite and Mesopotamian traditions, non-divine enthronement scenes are equally common. Nonetheless, the iconographic parallels among these works are substantial, and the proposed dating of the Alhak relief to ca. 2000–1970 BCE remains strongly supported by the available comparative evidence.

## Conclusion

The newly discovered Elamite rock relief at Alhak, located on the southeastern front of the Izeh plain, contributes a valuable piece to the fragmented mosaic of Elamite commemorative art. Distinct in its orientation, symbolic elements, and the unique conglomerate rock surface into which it is carved, this relief sets itself apart from the better-known examples at Kül-i Farah, Eshkaft-i Salman, Shahsavar, and Khung-i Azhdar. While it shares certain formal and compositional affinities—particularly with Kül-i Farah No. 4, Shahsavar, and Khung-i Azhdar—it introduces a different symbolic syntax by positioning the seated figure on the right, incorporating a solar disk, and employing a simplified throne and frontal platform.

The iconography of the Alhak relief, portraying a seated male figure in pro-

file with an upraised hand in a gesture of reverence or supplication, resonates with themes found on Elamite and Mesopotamian cylinder seals from the late third and early second millennia BCE. This alignment and the frequent appearance of solar and lunar symbols in those works point to shared conceptual frameworks and mutual influences during the Shimashki period. The absence of explicit divine attributes—such as a horned crown or serpent iconography—supports a more plausible interpretation of the figure as a king rather than a deity. Moreover, the probable presence of secondary, now-eroded figures—perhaps worshipers or attendants—further strengthens the interpretation of the scene as a ritual or ceremonial event, consistent with other seal and rock relief compositions.

From a material perspective, the choice of a heterogeneous and fragile conglomerate surface—unlike the dense, hard stones used in other re-

gional reliefs—likely contributed to the accelerated erosion of the Alhak scene. However, this choice may also reflect the adaptation of local artisans to available resources and their continuation of carving traditions in the mountainous regions following the decline of centralized Elamite authority in Susa.

The Alhak relief stands as an important testament to the regional diversity of Elamite art and expands both the chronological and geographic scope of southwestern Iran's rock relief tradition. The proposed dating of 2000–1970 BCE situates the work within the cultural horizon of the Shimashki dynasty, emphasizing the political and artistic dynamism of Elam during a transitional historical moment. Future research—particularly through advanced imaging technologies such as 3D scanning and photogrammetry—can reveal hidden details and facilitate a more accurate reconstruction of the relief's symbolic narrative.

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