

Beat: Travel

Open-air museum Gobustan.

Azerbaijan

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USPA NEWS - Gobustan National Park (Azerbaijani: Qobustan Milli Parkı) officially Gobustan Rock Art Cultural Landscape is a hill and mountain site occupying the southeast end of the Greater Caucasus mountain ridge in Azerbaijan.

The territory of Gobustan is cut up with numerous, sometimes rather deep ravines (in Azerbaijani: gobu). That is a suggested origin of the Gobustan geographical name.

In 1966 Gobustan was declared a national historical landmark of Azerbaijan in an attempt to preserve the ancient carvings, relics, mud volcanoes and gas-stones in the region. The mountains Boyukdash, Kichikdash, Jingirdag, and the Yazili hill were taken under legal government protection. These mountains are located near the Caspian Sea, in the southeast part of Gobustan.

Ancient Petroglyphs at Gobustan National Park, Azerbaijan. UNESCO World Heritage Site.

In 2007 Gobustan was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site considered to be of "outstanding universal value" for the quality and density of its rock art engravings, for the substantial evidence the collection of rock art images presents for hunting, fauna, flora and lifestyles in pre-historic times and for the cultural continuity between prehistoric and medieval times that the site reflects.

Gobustan occupies the south-eastern spur of the Great Caucasian Range and situated 60 km south of Baku. It is a monticulate semi-desert area dissected by numerous gullies and ravines and Gobustan, in translation, means "ravine land". Caves and rock outcroppings surround the region. Settled since the Stone Age the area is one of the major and most ancient museums of rock engravings (petroglyphs) in the world.

It was here in Gobustan, in the area of this fantastic destruction of mountains Beyukdash, Kichikdash, Jingirdag, Shongardag and Shikhgaya, in the 'sea of rocks', the witnesses to the past of Azerbaijan people of the Stone Age and subsequent periods are concentrated: these are rock carvings, settlements, tombstones etc. Among them ancient rock carvings are of a particular prominence. Ancient people used to cover the stone blocks near the caves and the walls of the caves with images of human beings and animals and various signs which had been carved with stone implements and, sometimes, with metal tools. These prehistoric art monuments reflect culture, economy, world outlook, customs and traditions of ancient Azerbaijan people.

The petroglyphs of Gobustan were not discovered by an archeological expedition. In fact, their revelation came about quite by accident. In the 1930s, work was going on there in a stone quarry. The area is full of huge boulders and rock formations. One of the quarry workers noticed some unusual carvings on the rocks. The more the rocks were cut out, the more the paintings could be seen. Before they had been hidden from view inside a huge pile of boulders.) Even more paintings were found inside what appeared to be man-made caves. Work at the quarry soon stopped so that the paintings could be examined more carefully. In 1939, archeologist Isaak Jafarzade began the first archeological investigation of the petroglyphs at Gobustan. Due to assiduity of the archeologists such as I.M. Jafarzade, D.Rustamova, F.M. Muradova and so on, from that time to nowadays about 6000 rock pictures have been discovered and recorded in Gobustan. As a result of archeological excavations 40 barrows and scientifically attributed 105 thousand subjects of material culture were found. The most ancient petroglyphs have been identified as belonging to the 10-8th century BC. However, it is assumed that life existed here even earlier and that Gobustan was one of the cradles of civilization.

Gobustan may be seen as a unique source of knowledge on the period from the 10,000 B.C. to the Middle Ages covering the fields of history, culture, art and archaeology. A thorough and detailed study of Gobustan's rock drawings, particularly their overlapping and also their style, themes, way of composition, and technique of performance as well as comparison with similar dated rock drawings in this and other countries allow some suggestions about their dating. The rock drawings of Gobustan are very diverse as to their themes and content. Among them one can find pictures of human beings, wild bulls, deer, bezoar goats, lions, gazelles, horses, wild asses, some of them being nearly life-size. There are also drawings on some rocks, representing collective labour processes, reaping, sacrifice, hunting scenes, battle scenes. There is a picture of a group dance for instance, which is done in a circle with arms on each other's shoulders - forerunner of the yalla danced in Azerbaijan to this day. Linguistically "yalla" is cognate to "yal" which means "food". The "food dance" was presumably a magic rite done before hunting. It might also have served as good training for huntsmen-nimble synchronous movements are essential in collective chase. A very attractive relic of the past is so called "gaval dash" (tambourine stone), which emits a booming sound when it is struck, was probably used for accompaniment to the yalla dance.

The rock drawings dating back to remote centuries suggest that the climate of Gobustan in the distant past was damp and close to

subtropical. This is evidenced by the pictures of people wearing loin-cloths as being typical of the inhabitants of tropical countries, and also by the representations of bulls, deer, and pigs whose existence is impossible without perennial water reservoirs and rich pastures. Rainfall was heavy enough in those ancient times, rivers and springs abounded in water, the herbage of the area was rich and diverse. An abundance of food made it possible for countless herds of herbivorous animals to graze in the pastures of Gobustan.

The carvings depicting male and female figures are characteristic of Gobustan. The earliest period is responsible for almost life-size silhouette representations of men and women full face and in profile in standing and squatting positions with bows over their shoulders. The women are naked, with big bosoms, narrow waists, wide hips, and thick legs; they have no arms though they carry/wear bows. The men in loin-cloths have tall and slender bodies, their strong legs with well defined muscular calves are slightly bent and planted wide apart. Their arms are marked with thin straight lines. In many pictures they have a kind of weapon, resembling an axe or a knife, in one or both hands. Heads and necks of the men and women are represented as short spikes. These human figures were carved when the climate in Gobustan was most probably tropical and its landscape resembled that of a savannah with rich flora and fauna. Using the available data as the base, these drawings were dated as far back as early Neolithic stage, i.e. the period from the 8th to 6th millennia BC, when mother was the head of the family commune.

The silhouette drawings of human beings are followed by life-size contour pictures of wild bulls, some of them about 240 cm long and about 140 cm high. Big and also smaller contour drawings of wild bulls and small pictures of people wearing loincloths and armed with bows are dated as belonging, to the period from the 7th millennium to the verge of the 4th millennium BC when hunting still retained its leading position in the life of man. Representations of gazelles, horses, pigs, dogs, and other animals, including beasts of prey, are common among the drawings dated to the period from the 6th millennium BC to the Middle Ages. These pictures are remarkable for their vividness, irreproachable preciseness of proportions, dynamic representation of motion.

Quite a number of drawings of that period represent boats with both armed and unarmed oarsmen and with an image of the sun on their bows. The ancient people believed, that, after declines in the west, the sun is transported at night by a boat that could again ascend in the east. The similarities between these petroglyphs and reed boats in cave drawings in Scandinavia attracted the famous Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl, who has been one of the most distinguished visitors of Gobustan. According to Heyerdahl, these drawings "testify to the fact that boats were of extreme importance to early man, as they provided security and transportation millennia before there were roads cut through the wilderness". Based on the archeological finds and on content of the petroglyphs Heyerdahl theorized as to the likelihood that the ancestors of Scandinavians, including Norwegians like himself, probably originated from the region presently known as Azerbaijan.

With time the technique of drawing was changing: the realistic manner of representation was preserved only in some instances. Silhouette pictures of human figures tended to be replaced by linear ones. In the Bronze Age and later the rock drawings of Gobustan began to show an increasing tendency to be diminished in size. Along with the development of art it happened as a result of using improved tools made of bronze.

Alongside these ancient records one of the rocks bears a Latin inscription dating back of 84-96 A.D. It describes the visit of a centurion from the XIIIth Roman Legion, known as the "Fulminata" (Lightning), who passed through Gobustan in the 1st century AD, during the reign of the emperor Domitian.

In the Middle Ages (8th-11th century AD and somewhat later), in view of ever decreasing economical importance of hunting, more frequent transfers of the pictures onto ceramic and metal articles, and negative attitude of the Moslem religion to representation of human beings and animals, the drawings on the rocks of Gobustan became even more outlined; they were drawn in straight lines only and resemble distorted geometrical figures. They changed their shape and, at times, became meaningless. The artists hardly followed nature. The pictures became even smaller in size. Traces of metal tools that were used to carve the drawings can be easily discerned but some of the pictures were also cut with stone implements. There are also Arabic inscriptions from the 12th to the 14th century.

The rock drawings of Gobustan occupy a prominent place among the similar cultural monuments of Karelia, Siberia, Central Asia, and other parts of the world. Many of them possess quite a number of common features with kindred rock drawings of Scandinavia, the Pyrenees, and Africa.

In 1966, to preserve the rich heritage of ancient culture along with natural remnants of the past, Gobustan was designated as a National Protected Heritage Site with an area of 4400 ha. The aim of the open-area museum is to preserve the Gobustan site, while keeping it open to the public. It's possible to visit the site today and Gobustan now attracts thousands travelers and tourists interested in the early history of civilization from all over the world.

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