

# A Preliminary Note on a Painting from Kuh-e Khwāja in the New Delhi National Museum

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Nel 1915 Aurel Stein esplorò il tempio di Kuh-e Khwāja, dove rinvenne un dipinto murale, che fotografò e descrisse. L'originale è stato inviato al Museo di Delhi e non è più accessibile, quindi forniamo qui una resa grafica basata su un ingrandimento della fotografia sullo schermo. Oltre a Farīdūn e Zāhhāk (già riconosciuti da Guitty Azarpay), proponiamo di identificare Ahriman travestito da cuoco di Zāhhāk. I costumi degli inservienti raffigurati nel registro superiore indicano il V o VI secolo. Paralleli testuali si trovano negli *Yasht* dell'Avesta, nella letteratura pahlavi, ma soprattutto nello *Shāhnāme*, nonostante il divario cronologico.

In 1915 Aurel Stein explored the temple of Kuh-e Khwāja. Among his discoveries was a wall painting which he photographed and described. The original was sent to the Delhi Museum and is not accessible anymore. We give here a graphic rendering based on an enlargement of the photograph on the screen. In addition to Farīdūn and Zāhhāk (already recognized by Guitty Azarpay), we propose to identify Ahriman disguised as Zāhhāk's cook. The costumes of the attendants depicted in the upper register indicate the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century. Textual parallels are found in the *Yashts* of the Avesta, the Pahlavi literature, but mainly in the *Shāhnāme* despite the chronological gap.

The Kuh-i Khwāja, “Mountain of the Lord,” is an archaeological site on a basaltic plateau rising over the waters of Lake Hamun in Iran (Sistān-Baluchestān province), close to the Afghan border.<sup>1</sup> The walled settlement measures ca. 2.7 hectares, of which the northern half is occupied by a temple complex, the only one so far in pre-Islamic Iran where wall paintings have been discovered.

The site was first investigated in 1915 by the British archaeologist Sir Mark Aurel Stein, who drew the first plan and recorded some paintings. In 1925 and 1929 the German archaeologist Ernest Herzfeld conducted a more systematic study. The only stratigraphic excavations were carried out in 1961 by a team from the University of Turin; limited in scope, they produced little reliable data for the overall chronology. Subsequent visitors occasionally reported masonry falls that brought to light other paintings, and samples of wood were taken for radiocarbon analysis. Although there is evidence that the site was sacred for Zoroastrians as early as in the Avesta (*Yasht* 19, presumably from the Achaemenid period), the safely or relatively safely datable architectural remains, by comparisons and radiocarbon analyses, date from between the late Parthian period (2<sup>nd</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE) and the late Sasanian period (early 7<sup>th</sup> century), possibly with an occupation until the early Islamic period. There is no

<sup>1</sup> For a general presentation see Ghanimati 2015; Callieri 2021.