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The new discovery of the Khoshik rock relief and endangered rock reliefs on the eastern banks of the Sirwan River

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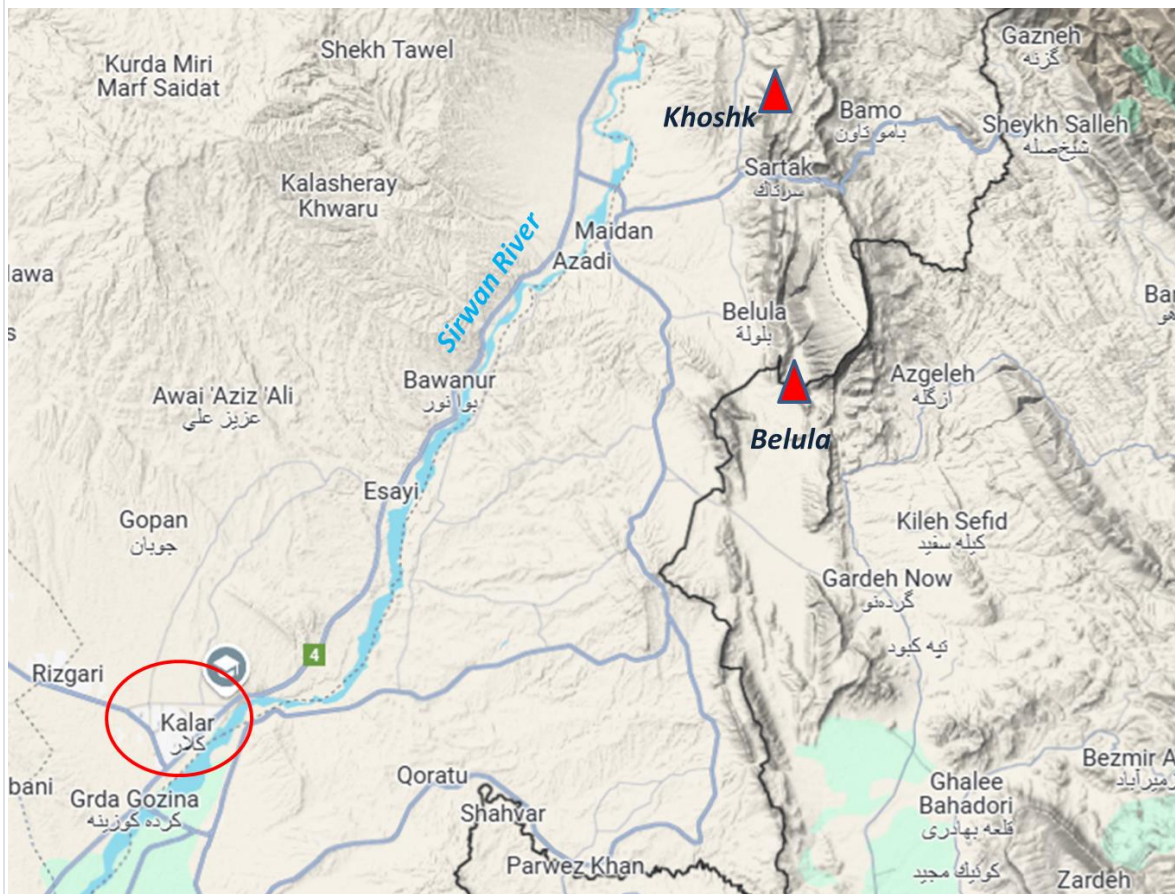
Article Info		Abstract:
Received	April 2025	<p>Local and foreign enemy kings carved rock reliefs on the rock faces of the mountain passes in many places in the Zagros ranges. The mountain ranges east of the Sirwan River also have a number of mountain passes. At two of these mountain passes, two local kings of the ancient Zagros in the Middle Bronze Age carved their rock reliefs, commemorating their victories over their local opponents from neighbouring kingdoms. The Belula rock reliefs and the recently discovered Khoshik rock relief show the image of the victorious king in a larger size than their defeated enemies. These rock reliefs are near the modern Iraq-Iran border, making them vulnerable to smugglers, looters and vandals. This paper addresses the real threats to these rock reliefs. Besides the challenges posed by nature and harsh weather, human threats to these rock reliefs are significant. Smugglers and looters promote the idea of hidden treasure behind these rock reliefs, leading them to target the Khoshik rock relief. Additionally, vandals target the Belula rock relief, using weapons and snipers from the opposite cliff to shoot at these monuments. This paper sheds light on these threats and explores possible solutions.</p>
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: Introduction

From the third millennium BC to the first millennium AD, Zagros Mountain rock reliefs were carved in various areas, particularly in mountain gorges, by local kings and invaders to mark military victories, irrigation projects, religious festivals etc. This paper focuses on the discovery of a royal inscription on Mount Khoshk and also refers to the nearby Belula rock relief located in the pass of Belula, east of the Sirwan River and the main mountain range of Bamu. These reliefs contain many endangers, and this paper will focus on identifying these endangers and their possible solutions.

I. The Khoshk Rock Relief:

Name of the rock relief: The rock relief was first recorded by the Garmian Directorate of Antiquities in 2022 and later visited by some staff members of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Sulaimani. This rock relief was recorded by archaeologists at the Garmian Directorate of Antiquities and named it the Mount Khoshk Rock Relief because it was engraved on the surface of Mount Khoshk (Map1.).



Map.1. Location of Khoshk and Belula rock reliefs. (Google map, the names added by the authors)

Location: The rock relief is located in the Khoshk Mountain, east of the Sirwan River and Darbandikhan town.

Description of the relief: The relief was carved in an irregularly shaped frame (4.04 m x 2.86 m), with the front part slightly protruding. This flaw indicates that the sculptor was not an experienced artist and was unable to sculpt the scene according to the frame. As a result, part of the enemy's body fell outside the frame. The frame is slightly deep to protect the relief from wind, rain, and snow, while allowing it to be

seen from a distance. Furthermore, in ancient art, each artwork had a frame (Figure 1).

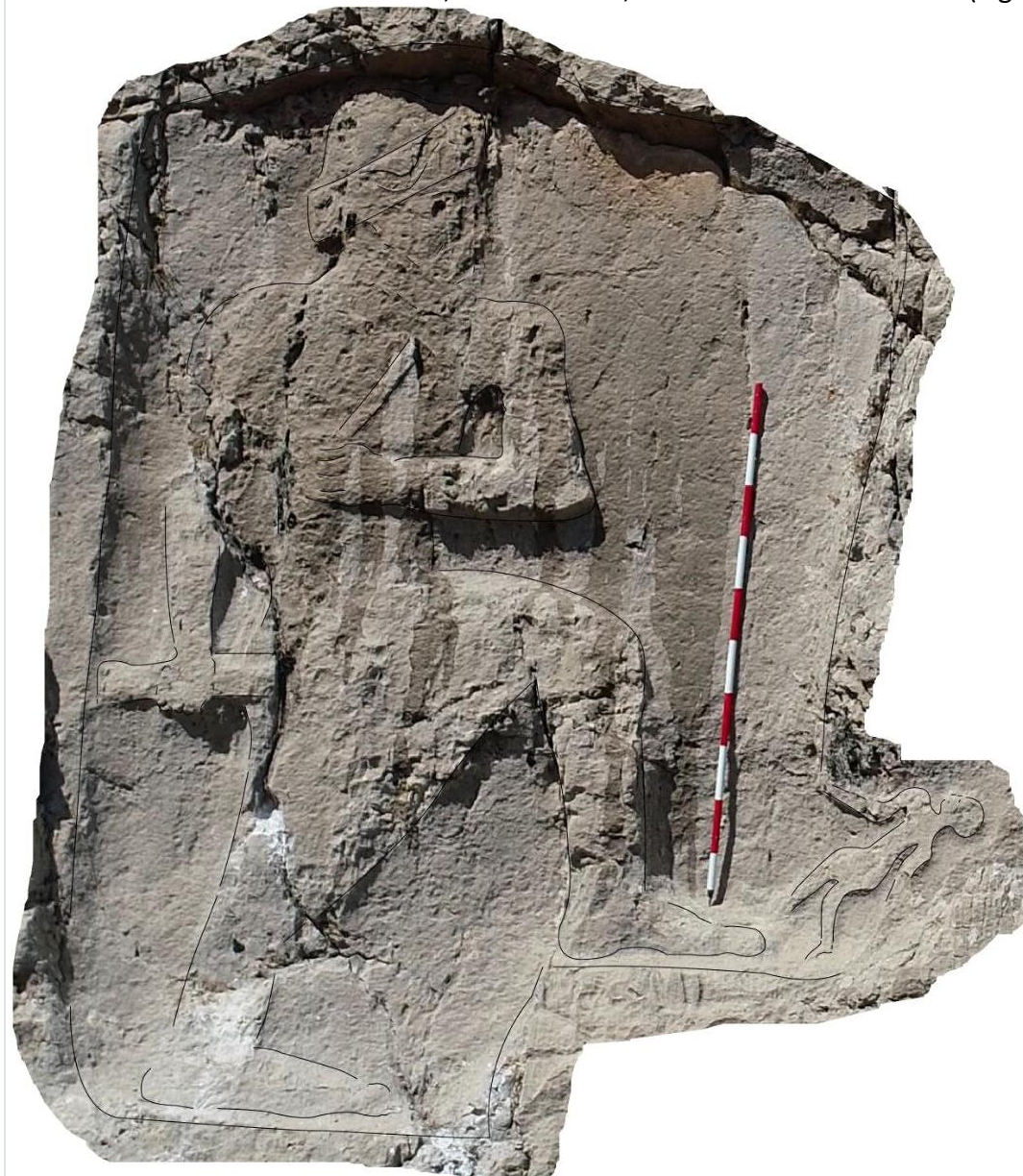


Figure 1: The Khoshk rock relief (Archive of the Directorate of Antiquities of Garmian).



Figure 2: The Khoshk relief in 3D model. (Directorate of Antiquities of Garmian).



Figure 3-a-b: The photo and the outline of the Khoshk relief (Nawzad Abdul Latif).

The scene of the warrior king is carved on a much larger scale than that of his enemy. The warrior king is climbing to the top of the mountain with his left foot forward. He is wearing a thick-brimmed hat with several moon crescent carved into its brim. The king is wearing a short skirt that reaches his knees to facilitate climbing. He holds a bow in his right hand, with his left shoulder and arm at a fixed angle, hand on the base of his bow. He wears a necklace and possibly a beard, though the scene lacks clarity. At his left foot, the king's enemy lies on his back, arms and legs spread apart, head down. The king's enemy is carved on a much smaller scale than the king. Unfortunately, the artist intentionally neglected carving the details of this image, because they considered him as nobody and not important perished person, besides also the rock face affected by weather, the details were eroded.

Comparison: The movement and style of the relief show that it, similar to the reliefs of Darbandi Gawar, Anubanini in Zahaw, Betwata, and Belula rock reliefs, depicts a warrior king triumphing over his enemy, his hat resembles those of Darbandi Gawr, Anubanini of Zahaw, and King Iddi(n)-Sin of Betwata, especially that of King Iddi(n)-Sin with the many moon crescent repeated in the thick fold of his hat, in the same rock relief, King Anubanini of Zhaw, King Darbandi Gawr, and King Idi-Sin of Betwata carry a bow on their shoulders and hold the lower part of the bow in their left hand. Like the King of Darbandi Gawar, he holds a thick bow in his right hand (see, Nasrabadi 2004, Abb.2; Shaffer & Wasserman 2003: 1-52; Postgate & Roaf, 1997: 143-155; Alibagi, et al., 2020: pp.21-40).

Date of the rock relief: According to comparisons and the carved style, this rock relief, like other reliefs in the region, dates back to the Middle Bronze Age. The excavation method is similar to the rock relief of the Darbandi Gawr, but the mountain surface is the rough sandstone type of Mount Khoshk, and the effects of climate and the sun have affected its preservation. If the hat bears crescent symbols, it is related to King Iddi(n)-Sin, the king of Simurru, who, along with his son Zabazuna, left a number of royal inscriptions and rock reliefs in Zhaw and Betwata. Moreover they are beardless, since these Hurrian kings of the Simurru kingdom, like other Hurrian kings, shaved their beards. (See, Shaffer & Wasserman 2003:

1-52).

II. The rock relief of Belula/Sheikhan:

Location: Located at the eastern end of Mount Bamo in the village of Darband Belula (Maidan – Khanaqin), which has been administratively part of the city of Kalar since 1991. The rock relief was carved on a mountain in a high and difficult location, more than 150 meters from the base of the mountain, and the relief itself is 90 cm high (Figure 4-5).



Figure 4: A photograph of the current rock relief of Belula. (Photo Archives of the Directorate of Antiquities of Garmian).

Description of the relief: The relief is carved in an irregular rectangular frame on a small area (90 x 89 cm). It depicts a warrior king holding an archer and a dagger, wearing a short, thick skirt, with his feet on the chest of one of his captives, and the other kneeling behind him, beside him. An incomplete cuneiform inscription, according to this inscription, which has been read in several ways, mentions the name of Tardunni. Archaeologists believe he was a regional king, although he was closer to the Hurrians because he is beardless. The position of the captives is similar to several other types, such as the relief of Shamshi-Adad I at Mardin, which describes his victories over King Bunu-Ishtar at the city of Qabra between the Lower Zab and Erbil (Marf, 2018, 149).

Although the inscription is well preserved, the problem is that some of the signs are not carved in a standard way, making it confusing for scholars who read this inscription. The carved inscriptions of the text show that the sculptor did not have experience in writing texts on rock reliefs in cuneiform inscriptions, and also that the scribe, could not read the cuneiform inscription, perhaps he was illiterate, so it might be that he drew the signs of the text, which have been written by someone on a tablet. Perhaps

it was carved by a sculptor who could not read and write cuneiform scripts, so he drew the signs prepared for him by a local scribe on a clay tablet (Marf, 2023, pp.220, 273).

Name of the relief: The name of the relief was originally recorded by Western travellers and archaeologists as the Shaykhan or Horen-Shaykhan Relief (Edmonds 1966: 159, Plate XLVII). Shaykhan is the name of a village located west of the pass of Belula, but this village is very far from the relief, and there are several other villages closer to the relief. However, the Directorate of Antiquities of Garmian later corrected the name and named it Belula Relief (Directorate of Antiquities of Garmian, 2010). It is an appropriate naming because the pass in which this relief was engraved is called Belula, which is, of course, an ancient name probably related to the Lullubies (Personal communication with the Assyriologist Rafida Qaradaghy).

The Iraqi Directorate General of Antiquities also lists the remains of Belula Castle and Grdi Minalana among the Middle Bronze Age and Iron Age monuments (Directorate General of Antiquities, 1970, 99).

History of the relief: There are different opinions about the date of the relief. The inscriptions on this relief appear to have been carved by an illiterate artist (sculptor), as the inscription is carved in a way that appears to be drawn, not written. Although the king's name on the relief is read as Tardunni, this reading is uncertain. Therefore, the age of this relief, based on a comparison of its artistic aspects, leads us to several conclusions about whether it recorded a victory scene of any king. However, since this king's name does not appear in any known records of the Zagros and Mesopotamia, it is not known what kind of people they were. There is no doubt that they were of a regional background and did not come from the Mesopotamian plains. The iconography of the king and his captives, especially the feet on the enemy's belly, resembles a scene of the relief of Shamshi-Adad I in Mardin, which describes his victories over King Bunu-Ishtar in the city of Qabra between the Lower Zab and Erbil. The king of Belula also wears a bracelet with a thick circle in the center. This type of bracelet was worn by a Babylonian musician on a clay tablet in the 18th century. It is also seen on the walls of King Zimrilim's palace in Mari (on the banks of the Euphrates River near the Iraqi-Syrian border), indicating that the king lived in the 19th or 18th century BC. However, the question that remains unanswered is which nation was Tardunni king of? Experts have proposed two points of view: either he was a regional king of the Hurri people, or he was a king of the Lullubi. For the Lullubi, the likelihood is far, as the Lullubi retained their beards, but the image of the king of Belula rock relief, was beardless. In this he is similar to the Simurru king Iddi(n)-Sin, pictured on his relief discovered in Betwata, west of Raniya, was later looted and sold and is now in the Jerusalem Museum (Shaffer & Wasserman 2003: 1-52). This was the kingdom whose capital was located in the Garmian region not far from these rock reliefs, probably this relief shows a king of the same Simurru dynasty after Iddi(n)-Sin (Marf, 2018, 149).



Figure 5: A current photograph of the Belula rock relief shows remains of the silicon and glue from the copying process that have affected the surface of the relief. (Archives of Garmian Directorate of Antiquities).

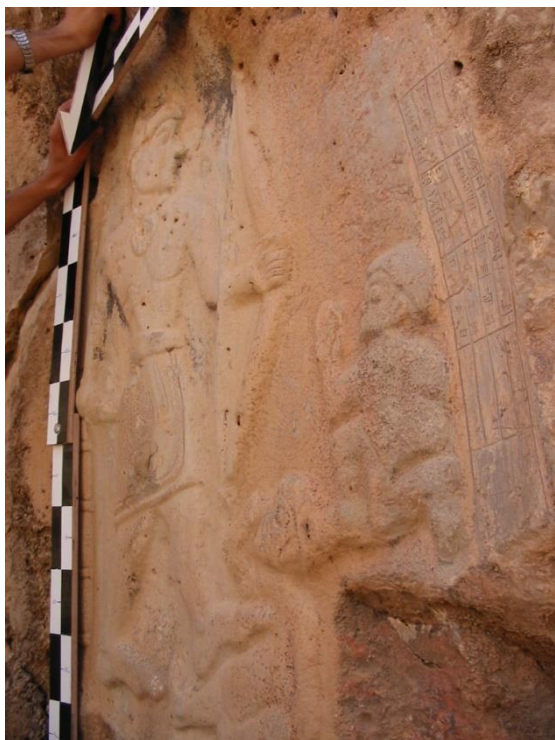


Figure 6: The Belua rock relief in 2003, where the surface is clearly better preserved and less exposed to bullets and silicon. (Photo by Dlshad Marf in March 2003).

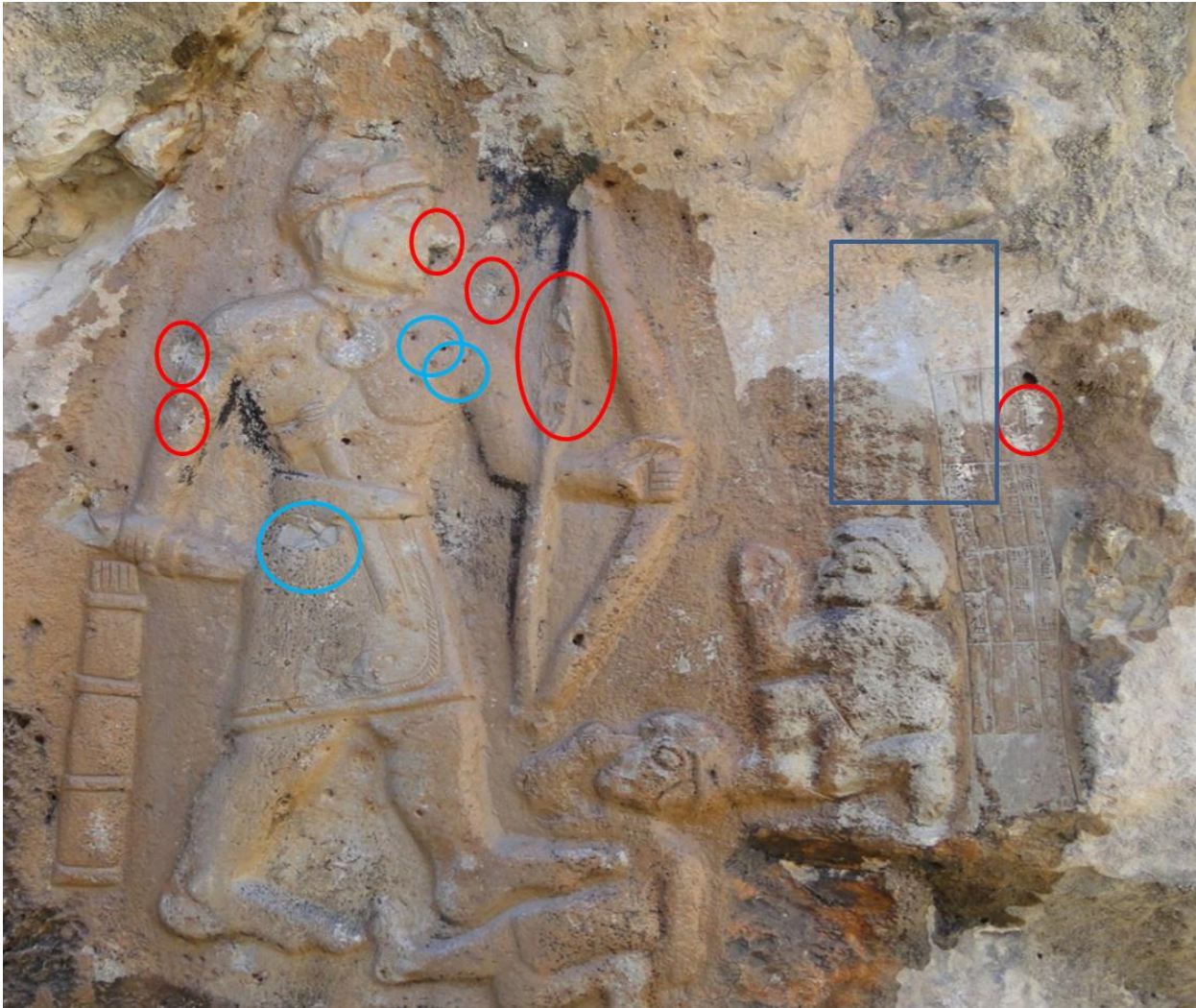


Figure 7: The relief shows the location of several old and new bullets that have deformed the statue in several places, as well as remains of the silicon that was used for copying the rock relief. (Archives of the Garmian Directorate of Antiquities).

Endangered rock reliefs:

There are many reasons that threaten the existence of the rock reliefs in their original locations, at least in a preserved condition. We can summarize the threats as follows:

1. **Smuggling:** The Khoshk rock relief was targeted by smugglers and antiquity dealers who attempted to dig it up and break it to find hidden treasures gates behind the reliefs. Authorities intervened to prevent this looting.
2. **Vandalism:** Some reliefs in the Zagros Mountains have been damaged by hunters and shooters.
3. **Targeting the images of the kings for fun.** Fortunately, the remote location of the Khoshk rock relief has protected it from such activities.

4. **Graffiti:** Tourists visiting the mountains often leave their names and signatures on rocks, including rock reliefs and castle walls. Spray writing is used to deface antiquities, but the Khoshk rock relief has not been affected by this damage.

5. **Climate:** The rock reliefs are carved deep into the rock to protect them from weather elements such as rain, snow, wind, and sunlight. The Khoshk rock relief has been more affected by weathering compared to the Belula rock relief.

6. **Mines and explosives:** The region was heavily mined during the Iran-Iraq War, posing a threat to ancient sites, including rock reliefs.

7. **The Belula Relief Moved to India:** In peculiar incident, Indian archaeologists, diplomats, journalists, and citizens demanded the removal of the Belula Relief to India, believing it to be associated with the Hindu god Rama. However, after receiving archaeological evidence and details about the Belula King from the Garmian Archaeological Survey, the Indian delegation realized that the association with Rama was a misunderstanding. (Sharda, Shelvi, (2019)). Despite this clarification, some Indian writers and organizations still believe in the connection between the relief and god Rama. (Six-thousand-year-old reliefs of Shri Rama and Hanuman are found in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq).

Conclusions and recommendations:

In conclusion, the region is exposed to the risk of mines and explosives, making archaeological surveys and excavations challenging. We hope to work on clearing these areas in the near future, as this effort will help further establish the history of these reliefs.

- The climate has significantly affected the Khoshk Mountain relief, while the Belula relief has preserved its surface.
- We need to raise awareness among hunters and local residents not to shoot at these rock reliefs.
- We need to eliminate border smugglers and those who promote symbol analysis and encourage people to destroy reliefs on the internet and social media under the pretext that there is treasure behind them.
- We need to spread archaeological awareness and prevent destructive tourism, which encourages the defacement of reliefs with spray paint, ink, and other materials, and pollutes the environment with tourist waste.
- However, the Slemani and Garmian Museums have started projects to preserve copies of each of these rock reliefs in their museums. The Garmian Museum copied the Belula rock relief, but unfortunately, the remaining silicon and glue used affected the surface of the rock relief badly.
- The Khoshk Mountain relief is being studied for the first time in this paper, and more work is needed to establish its history.

Recommendations and solutions:

In the field of archaeology, there is no perfect solution to the threats facing archaeological sites and monuments, but we can always work to reduce the risks to endangered monuments and sites. For the rock reliefs under this research, we can propose the following solutions:

1. Clearing planted mines and bombs in the surrounding areas and routes leading to the rock reliefs, securing distant minefields, and marking them on the ground and maps.
2. Creating replicas of the rock reliefs using materials that do not pose a threat to the surface of the reliefs and displaying these replicas in local museums.
3. Recording 3D images of the rock reliefs and preparing visual records for VR and virtual views for future documentation.
4. Establishing tourist sites near the rock reliefs and providing security with archaeology police.

5. Increasing awareness in nearby schools, villages, and communities living near these monuments to foster appreciation for their historical and cultural significance.

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