



## LION TOMBSTONES

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**LION TOMBSTONES** (*šir-e sangi*; or *bardšir*, “stone lion” in Lori), a type of tombstone in the form of a lion, found mostly on the graves of Lor and Qašqā’i nomads in the west, southwest, and parts of southern Persia. These stylized, sculptured lions stare out from isolated Baḳtiāri graveyards in many valleys and along the migration routes of the tribes across the Zagros Mountains, from Lāli in Khuzestan (Ḳuzestān) to Zardkuh, the highest point of the Zagros range, in the Bāzof̄t district of the Baḳtiāri region. Found both individually and in clusters, they mark the graves of unknown chiefs and warriors who died in local battles. The great difference in the number of these stone lions in various cemeteries could be an indication of the wealth of the individuals whose graves they mark and the sanctity of a particular burial ground.

It is difficult to account for the history of the use of stone lions by the Baḳtiāris to mark their tombstones. They were made mostly by professional, non-Baḳtiāri stonemasons who traveled seasonally between Baḳtiāri territories. Their use had stopped by the mid-20th century, but they began to appear again in recent years, and this in itself is indicative of the way the Baḳtiāris have responded to changes in their recent history.

The stone lions can be divided into two groups according to their shape: some have round or cylindrical bodies, while others are box-like, with sharp angles most noticeable on their flanks. Except for these two distinctions, the lions generally share common features in their composition. The head is the part that conveys a sense of emotion most strongly. Its impact is enhanced by the gaze of two large eyes, imbued with a realistic aura. Their mouths contain



sharp, threatening teeth shown in an array of different poses. The depiction of the lion's torso, flanks, and paws are all coordinated to convey a harmonious effect. The paws, whether together or separate, are stretched out in front in a threatening pose, and the claws, looking very strong and sharp, enhance the lion's overall menacing appearance. There are reliefs carved on the lions' flanks, most of which depict motifs of horses, horse riders, rifles, swords, and daggers.

A close analysis of the inscriptions on the graves may throw light on the reason for the placement of a stone lion on a certain grave. For example, reference to a major battle, whose occurrence can be confirmed by other sources, may account for the presence of stone lions in a particular area. Moreover, trends in the use of titles (e.g., *ā*, *āqā*, *k-ān*, *karbalā'i*, *qā'ed*, *mirqā'ed*) can be indicative of the social status or political rank of the person whose grave is marked by a lion.

Stone lions continue to have an enduring significance today. In the absence of a written history, they represent one way in which the Baḳtiāris are able to celebrate their past. Songs and ceremonies associated with funereal traditions, such as traditional lamentations (*gāgeriva*), are extremely important in recording the events of the Baḳtiāri's past that are related to these lions. Thus the stone lions evoke for the Baḳtiāris the memory of an idealized past wrought with heroics and wars, a stark contrast to their contemporary situation.

The word for lion is often used to refer to a hero, and it is also attached to the name of certain individuals, the most well known of whom is perhaps Šir-'Ali Mardun (Šir-'Ali Mardān), a heroic figure who is the subject of many folk songs. The use of the term lion (*šir*) as the symbolic designation of a hero is common in Persian literature, most notably in Šir-e Ḳodā/Asad-Allāh (The lion of God), which is often used to refer to Imām 'Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb. Today the stone lions are a bitter source of pride for the Baḳtiāris, a reminder of the changes to the very foundations of their lifestyle and culture that have occurred over the last few centuries. They remain one of the two major examples (the other being ram tombstones, in Azarbaijan) in Persia of the culture of objects that are related to funereal traditions based around the depiction of animals.

**Figure 1.** Headless lion tombstone at Ḳezr-e zenda shrine in Lāli, Khuzestan.

**Figure 2.** Drawings of some lion head designs found in the Lāli Plateau,



Khuzestan.

Figure 3. Drawings of some of the motifs found on the flanks of lion tombstones.

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