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# Falconry petroglyphs in Iran: new findings on the nexus between ancient humans and birds of prey

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## Abstract

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Ethnoornithology is a multidisciplinary field of study that focuses on human-bird relationships and humans' knowledge of the Earth's avifauna.

Falconry (the use of trained birds of prey—usually eagles, falcons, and hawks—to hunt wild animals) is one type of human-bird relationship, with its origins obscured in poorly understood prehistoric times. We hypothesized that falconry would have been memorable enough to prehistoric peoples to be the subject of rock art, and that evidence of prehistoric falconry could be found in the petroglyphs of the Persian Plateau. To assess this hypothesis, we visited 13 major rock art sites in the

Persian Plateau, and searched for petroglyphs depicting a person bearing a bird on the forearm. We found, identified, and photographed 11 petroglyphs depicting falconry. Most ( $n = 10$ ) occurred in the archaeological region of Teymareh, most ( $n = 7$ ) showed a falconer mounted on horseback or elephant, and many ( $n = 6$ ) included an accompanying trained canid or cheetah. These tableaux suggest that falconry was but one aspect of a suite of human-animal associations developed and maintained by the prehistoric peoples of the Persian Plateau. Based on previous surveys of the petroglyphs of Teymareh, along with other evidence, we assume that most of the petroglyphs we discovered were inscribed approximately 4000 years ago, likely making them some of the oldest remaining evidence of falconry in the world. We suggest that our work indicates that future research on petroglyphs may be useful in further exploring and understanding the relationship between prehistoric mankind and wildlife.

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### Contributions

All authors contributed to writing the manuscript.

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data.

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## Ethics declarations

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Ethics approval

In interacting with local stakeholders and documenting petroglyphs, we followed guidelines developed by the Chartered Institute for Archeologists (CIfA) and recorded in the CIfA's Code of Conduct document (CIfA [2014](#)) available online at <http://www.archaeologists.net/sites/default/files/CodesofConduct.pdf>.

Consent to participate

N/A.

Consent for publication

N/A.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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