

Numerous sites have been recognized in the Gorgan plain, which are characterized by a distinctive material culture. For example, pottery consists of four categories: simple ware, grey or black ware, red burnished ware and *clinky* ware. As for Dehistan, the only site, Orta Depeslik, had produced pottery datable to the Parthian period, if to proceed from its comparison with that of Gorgan. O. Lecomte has noted that this is a problem of recognizing the material remains. Such was the case of the Early Iron Age assemblages belonging to the Archaic Dehistan culture, which have only recently been recognized as having been in use even later — in the Achaemenid period (Lecomte 1999: 145; 2007: 301).

This border region of the Sasanian power has recently been investigated within the bounds of a major project in the Gorgan plain by the joint Iranian and UK-based team under E. Sauer's direction, which carried out surveys and soundings within these confines of the Sasanian empire (Sauer et al 2013).

The region of Dehistan is a frontier zone that had a very different fate than the Gorgan plain did. For the better understanding of Late Antique Dehistan, our research goal is to realize the archaeological survey of Dehistan, which will consist, above all, in confronting the available historical knowledge for the Parthian, Sasanian and early Islamic periods with the archaeological sites and related landscape features in the Dehistan region.

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THE ROCK RELIEF AT RAG-I BIBI: CAN IT BE CONSIDERED AS SASANIAN?

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НАСКАЛЬНЫЙ РЕЛЬЕФ В РАГ-И БИБИ: МОЖНО ЛИ СЧИТАТЬ ЕГО САСАНИДСКИМ?

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Ключевые слова: *Раг-и Биби, сасанидские рельефы, кушанское искусство, сцена охоты, композиция.*

The rock relief at Rag-i Bibi located near the village of Shamarq in Northern Afghanistan had scientifically been discovered in 2002 (but local inhabitants were aware of it before) and was shortly published — initially and very briefly by F. Grenet (2006) and then, in much greater detail, by F. Grenet together with J. Lee, Ph. Martinez and F. Ory (Grenet et al. 2007). Without much ado and strong argumentation F. Grenet attributed it as Sasanian, and later this opinion was sustained by several scholars. The current paper aims both to offer an alternative attribution based on analyzing the iconography of the monument and to link it with another historical events.

The relief (fig. 1) is approximately 6,5 m wide and up to 4,9 m high. It depicts the hunt of two galloping riders, turned right, for rhinoceroses. The main personage is placed close to the center and shoots a bow. He is followed by another rider depicted to the left. On the right side there are two rhinoceroses, one is dying and another is already dead under the mango tree. Between a tree crown and the main personage's torso there is a smaller standing figure.

Iconographic analysis. Execution — deep relief, almost full sculpture. The early Sasanian reliefs are representing graphical valour and are relatively shallow. There are only few examples of full sculpture in the early Sasanian period — the Bishapur colossus and decorations from the «palace» in Hājīābād. They all indicate the inability to use the three-dimensionness in full. The powerful statue of Shapur I at Bishapur seems rigid, with the graphical value. It, being a strong declaration of the king's power remains stiff, even incompetent (compare with the late antique colossus of Barletta, which, although technically inferior to the sculpture of mature antiquity, and against their background seems stiff and sluggish, but is much more dynamic than the Shapur colossus). Early Sasanian art did not seek such qualities as body, depth, space. The decoration of the «ayvan» at Taq-i Bostan is a unique monument in this respect, but it belongs to the later period and one cannot exclude a specific reception of the «Eastern» tradition, however it is full of Western borrowings. The «full», almost three-dimensional, elements remain majestically immobile, while the flat, graphic representations on the walls of the «ayvan» are dynamic. It is justified to risk a statement that depth and body were not the features particularly valued in Sasanian art, but when they appeared, they were marked by a majestic weight, excluding dynamics.

The pursuit of the full body and the ability to use it as a valour (whether dynamic or immobility) is a feature of Gandharan art. The difference in the scale of performance is important, but the concept of developing a deep relief into a dynamic, multifigured scene brings Rag-i Bibi closer to Gandharan rather than to Sasanian aesthetics. The other works of art perfectly showing the ability to operate the mass as an aesthetic value in the monumental art, related to the ideology of power, are the reliefs at Khalchayan and the remains of the sculpture from Dalverzin Tepe. The difference in the technology of execution can be claimed, but in the aesthetic concept both the Khalchayan and later Kushan monuments indicate an interest in spatial effects and a tendency to three-dimensional, dynamic treatment. It is also visible on the «Bactrian/Hephthalite» silver vessel with the hunt scene from the Hermitage, where the upper parts of the characters were developed in much deeper relief (almost three-dimensional) than in Sasanian or Kushano-Sasanian silver, which corresponds to the method of constructing the Khalchayan reliefs. It might suggest that the aesthetic principles were transferrable between the media. It should be also remembered that the monumental, gigantic, almost full Buddhist sculptures indicate the knowledge of this visual technique in Late Antique Bactria, despite their majestically immobile character.

It should be noted that both the Kushan stone and clay sculptures and late Bactrian silver followed similar aesthetic principles that were not shared in Sasanian Iran. The presence of full sculpture in Arsacid Iran is confirmed by fragments of statues preserved in the Old Nisa. The full



Fig. 1. Rock relief at Rag-i Bibi (Northern Afghanistan) (photo by F. Ory, after: Grenet et al 2007: pl. 6)

Рис. 1. Наскальный рельеф в Раг-и Биби (Северный Афганистан) (фото Ф. Ори, по: Grenet et al. 2007: pl. 6)

sculpture was popular in Hatra and Palmyra, however, reliefs of more or less graphic valour were also made there. It is possible that the reluctance to operate the three-dimensional masses smoothly and dynamically may have resulted not only from technical difficulties but also from ideological needs to refer to the monumental pre-Parthian art. This would be further fueled by the inability to differentiate between Achaemenid and Assyrian art. It should be remembered, however, that in majority the Parthian rock reliefs are characterized by graphical rigidity, most likely resulting from technical imperfections. It seems that due to their relatively small size and local character, the Parthian reliefs may not have posed an aesthetic challenge unlike the sculptures of Hatra and Old Nisa.

Composition. The relief in question refers to older, pre-Hellenistic, conventions of showing violence, passing from the subject of fighting between warriors to hunting for dangerous, life-threatening beasts. Both the themes emphasize the heroic character of the protagonist, therefore, it is easy to use common compositional formulas. In the Roman world, battle violence was depicted in the state, in monumental art, in crowds, without separating individual «heroic moments», although the motif of the victorious rider survived in the provincial tombstones of cavalry officers.

Numerous examples of «heroic horsemen» in pre-Hellenistic, Hellenistic and Roman iconography show the main personage with an accompanying assistant, whether running after him or following him on horseback. The popularity in the East of the motif of the assistant following the main personage can be observed on the reliefs from Yemen and Tang-i Sarvak, but also on the Sasanian reliefs with the scenes of mounted duels at Naqsh-i Rostam, where the warrior

running after the victorious rider was replaced by the horseman. It seems that the placement of the second rider could jeopardize the central role of the hero. However, in Iran, where horseback riding was even carried out at short distances, it was a step towards adding realism to the convention, as it was unlikely if the warrior of the royal class would be accompanied by the attendant on foot.

Also, the placement of the tree in the scene at Rag-i Bibi, one of the permanent elements of post-Hellenistic «icons of violence», could have a conventional character. It should be noted that in the discussed formulas the tree usually closes the composition on the right side and is usually placed behind the victim. An outstanding exception is naturally the famous «Mosaic of Alexander» from Pompeii.

The relief at Rag-i Bibi is an example of the convergence of the popular formula to show the victorious warrior fighting mighty beasts. Undoubtedly, Sasanian toreutics is an example of the adaptation of these old formulas, but in the compact formats of the Sasanian plates, the presentation of the followers of the victorious personages was completely abandoned. It should, therefore, be concluded that the relief at Rag-i Bibi was designed before the formation of the «royal or princely hunting» model in Sasanian art. It seems that the relief is a direct reference to post-Hellenistic traditions and certainly does not derive from any models of Sasanian toreutics. It may rather be an intermediate step in their development. It should also be added that an uncertain dating of Sasanian silver does not allow to consider it as a model for the relief. On the contrary, models like the one on the relief could, after simplification and modification of the format from horizontal rectangle to circle, become an inspiration for decorations in toreutics.

It is difficult to find direct compositional analogies for the figure standing between the torso of the protagonist and the tree, as it seems to have been intentionally placed behind him. However, one can think of the investiture scenes with Fortune's figures, Tychai, the eagles with a diadem in their claws (often replaced by a putti in Sasanian iconography) flying before or above the ruler. Despite the fact that in Sasanian art they were most frequently placed on the triumphant reliefs and, it seems, they were adopted to the scenes of fighting the beasts came relatively late, it should be remembered that on the Palmyrean «Odaenathus mosaic», the tiger-hunting rider, shown in a mature and complete formula popular in Sasanian toreutics, is accompanied by a bird of prey carrying a diadem in his beak. The bird is placed behind the figure, but there was no other place in the compact, tightly packed composition. The personage standing behind, above or in front of the protagonist disturbs the perception of his heroic character, making his confrontation with the beast less individual and therefore less heroic. The companions following him are shown at a distance that prevents from doubting as regards who is the central figure; they follow him in the direction he chose, but they are not participating in the heroic act of killing the beast. Meanwhile, placed on the axis of the format, the smaller standing personage is closer to the beast than to the protagonist and, therefore, cannot take part in the hunt because it would raise doubts about the independence of the act performed. It is worth reminding that according to «Karnamag of Ardashir Papakan», the first conflict between Artaban and Ardashir arose about who hit and killed the game. Similar doubts would have not been shown in art. Of course, the function of «realistic» participation in the hunt of the standing figure is denied by his immobility, lack of visible weapons or even the position suggesting their use. He is not a participant but a symbolic figure.

The horse's movement. In contrast to the iconography of the Arsacid period, galloping mounts in early Sasanian art were presented only in «flying gallop». Over time, it seems that the horses depicted with their hind legs on the ground while galloping reappeared, however, the «flying gallop» as a stylistic feature remained in use until the end of the Sasanian rule. In early Sasanian art the «flying gallop» was an «obligatory» stylization differentiating from aesthetics of the earlier dynasty. Besides, the horse at Rag-i Bibi is not depicted in the stylization characteristic of Sasanian art.

The quivers. Archery was not in Iran a neutral matter. The quivers, or rather the elaborate *gorytoi* consisted of the quiver and two arrow cases, which are depicted on the relief at Rag-i Bibi, find analogies in Bosporan, Sarmatian and Central Asian art. They were a popular form of the archer's equipment of the steppe peoples, but never appeared in properly Sasanian art. Again, it is to be expected that avoiding to show such a common form of armament was intentional in nature. On all the royal reliefs the Sasanian kings had long, tube-like quivers, which, if not insignia *sensu stricto*, had to be of quasi-insignial nature. The quivers were meticulously cast in silver, even when the ruler did not use a bow. In a word, the quivers at Rag-i Bibi vary from the royal Sasanian archery equipment. They might have been in use in the third — fourth century, but they were not presented in royal Sasanian iconography.

The horse's equipment. Horse saddles fixed by a girth, breast strap and tail-strap are known in Gandharan, Parthian and Sarmatian art. The phalerae decorated with floral motifs are the most common finds that were associated with luxury horse decorations, both in Arsacid Iran and among the Sarmatians. One can risk to propose a hypothesis that the Sarmatian phalerae included more figural decorations, but the floral ornaments were not inferior to their popularity. Horse phalerae are also known from the Roman milieu.

The rhinoceroses. The hunted beasts are very stylized. They must be important from a semantic point of view, but they are not realistic as there are no species of the rhinoceroses covered with scales and having spiky, triangular teeth of predators. The beasts represented on the relief at Rag-i Bibi are greatly stylized and reveal the sculptor's unfamiliarity with the actual rhinoceroses.

Discussion. Why not Sasanian? The fact is that none of the characteristics of the monument in question speaks unequivocally in favour of its Sasanian attribution, which has been accepted just arbitrarily, without any in-depth analysis, on the basis of a cursory similarity with the motifs from later Sasanian toreutics.

Style. The only known Sasanian rock relief made in the borders of the country is the one at Salmas, which was made in crude, simplified way, by a local workshop as evidenced by its low artistic quality. Nevertheless, despite its provincial character, this monument preserved all the iconographic features of Sasanian royal relief art. The relief at Salmas as sponsored by the Sasanian kings had to follow the principles found suitable for royal message.

Composition. The composition of the relief at Rag-i Bibi relates to the same source as the «Royal and princely hunting iconography» of Sasanian Iran, but it cannot be influenced by the latter, as it contains the elements absent there.

Identification and meaning. The relief at Rag-i Bibi seems to have come from the period of the Kushan Empire and celebrated Kushan victories in India. Apparently, the figure at the center of the composition could hold some attribute of power, perhaps a diadem, which is given by him to the hunting ruler. He could also make a gesture of blessing*.

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* From the editors: the text is mainly presented in the authors' version with some editorial amendments.

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