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*xšnaoθrahe ahurahe mazdā*

Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

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**Part I**  
**Articles**

## Some thoughts on the rock-reliefs of ancient Iran

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THE rock-reliefs of ancient Iran have been the object of numerous studies since the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> With the exception of a few rock-reliefs in the territories of the Hittite civilization or in the Assyrian empire, the art of rock-reliefs is essentially Iranian in both form and content.

The rock-reliefs of ancient Iran were visited first in the seventeenth century. Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, the French traveler, was the first to mention the reliefs at Taq-e Bustan and at Barm Delak near Shiraz. Another Frenchman, the celebrated Jean Chardin, left us a substantial description of the Achaemenid and Sasanian monuments in Fars, including the rock-reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam. Chardin's skillful painter, Grelot, produced the first reliable views of these monuments. As for the reliefs at Bisutun, Guillaume-Antoine Olivier was a pioneer in publishing, from his travels during 1792–98, sketches of the monumental reliefs of Darius the Great and also that of the Parthian ruler, Gotarz. The full history of the exploration and study of the Iranian rock-reliefs is yet to be written.

A glance at the multitude of rock-reliefs in Southwest Asia shows that the practice of carving rock-reliefs indeed originated in the mountains of western Iran. The four Lulubi reliefs at Sar-e Pol-e Zohab on the westernmost ridge of the Iranian Plateau are the earliest of their kind, going back to the third millennium B.C. These reliefs as well as the Elamite rock-reliefs in southern Iran served as prototypes for later monumental reliefs until the sixth century B.C. A thorough examination of these early Zagros reliefs would have provided a better understanding of the practice of carving bas-reliefs and their function in ancient Iran.

The reliefs and inscription of Darius the Great are the most important historical documents of the Achaemenid empire. According to the revisionist re-assessment of the early phases of the history of the

Achaemenid empire, Darius I is seen as a usurper who killed the second son of Cyrus, Bardiya, to seize the Achaemenid throne. The revisionist interpretation that questions the veracity of Darius's sayings in his inscription at Bisutun emanates from a distorted view that authentic ancient sources can be discarded for sensationalist reconstructions.<sup>2</sup> This view has affected the way we interpret the reliefs in connection with the text.

The other issue, I think, is the relation between Achaemenid and Sasanian reliefs. A number of scholars have attempted to see a continuity between the two. It should be made clear that the Achaemenid rupestrial art and sculpture differ from preceding and succeeding rock-reliefs in both essence and form. The Bisutun reliefs are the only "true" rock-relief of the Achaemenid period, and they can be compared with the commemorative rock-reliefs of the Zagros region, namely the reliefs of Anubanini at Sar-e Pol-e Zohab.<sup>3</sup> With the exception of the reliefs at Bisutun, the Achaemenids never used cliffs and rocks to produce individual, free standing panels carved with figures and symbols. With the foundation of royal centers at Susa and Persepolis, the art of carving in relief departs from the previous tradition in that it became an integral part of the architecture. The reliefs carved on the jambs of the great stone door-frames of the palaces depict either the royal hero fighting fantastic creatures or the unnamed king walking with attendants. Even the audience scenes found in the Treasury showing the seated king and his crown prince do not bear any inscription or identification. What is called Achaemenid sculpture is, in fact, the architectural decoration of palatial buildings at Persepolis or the façade of royal tombs which is the representation of the entrance or portico of an Achaemenid palace. In this way, the sculptures were used to promote and symbolize the building to which they were attached. This art is universal, impersonal, and timeless.<sup>4</sup>

\*This is a revised and expanded version of a short note published in response to M. Canepa's article in *Of Rocks and Water: Towards an Archaeology of Place*, edited by Ömur Harmanşah, Oxbow books, Oxford and Philadelphia, 2014.

<sup>1</sup>Two important, general works deserve to be cited here: N. Debevoise, "The Rock Reliefs of Ancient Iran," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 1, No. 1, 1942, pp. 76-105; L. Vanden Berghe, *Reliefs rupestres de l'Iran ancien*, Brussels, 1983.

<sup>2</sup>The issue has been fully dealt with in some excellent publications such as A. Shapur Shahbazi, "Darius iii: Darius I the Great," *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. 8, 1994, pp. 41-50; F. Vallat, "Darius le grand roi," *Le Palais de Darius à Suse: une résidence royale sur la route de Persépolis à Babylon*, J. Perrot (ed.), Paris, 2010, pp. 50-71.

<sup>3</sup>Vanden Berghe, *Reliefs rupestres de l'Iran ancien*, pp. 19-21, fig. 1.

<sup>4</sup>Again with the exception of the reliefs at Bisutun, any attempt

In contrast to Achaemenid reliefs, the Sasanian art of sculpture is temporal, highly personalized. The kings are either named or easily recognized by the form of their crowns. Some of the reliefs bear inscriptions. The other significant aspect of the Sasanian reliefs is their location, which is outside or in the proximity of urban centers. Locations such as the lower part of the cliff at Naqsh-e Rostam, the gorge at Naqsh-e Rostam or the cliffs on the river banks of Tangab and Bishapur were favored because of their symbolic value. No Sasanian relief is ever associated with the buildings of that period. As Herzfeld rightly pointed out some seventy years ago, the painting was the constituent factor and source of inspiration for Sasanian rock sculpture.<sup>5</sup> It is why the bas-reliefs stand independently from architecture. Another interesting question is that most of the Sasanian rock-reliefs belong to the first 75 years of the period. Then, there is a gap of some 70 years before Shapur III (383–388) placed the panel depicting the image of his father and himself at Taq-e Bustan, near Kermanshah. The last rock-reliefs were carved more than 200 years later at Taq-e Bustan by Khosrow II (610–628). The reasons for this hiatus are unclear but it seems that crucial political events, royal investitures, and military victories occasioned the realization of rock reliefs. No major relief was carved after Shapur II, whose reign was marked with military prowess and victories. Surprisingly enough, no bas-relief is known from the reign of Kavad and Khosrow Anushirawan, whose reigns were also full of political turmoil and military exploits.

In spite of a large number of publications devoted to the study of ancient Iranian rock-reliefs in the past two hundred years, a new methodology is called for: to investigate the surfaces of these reliefs with technologies such as photogrammetry or RTI photography (Reflectance Transformation Imaging) which results in the enhancement of the surface shapes, traces of paint, and any other anomalies; new fieldwork or excavation in the vicinity of the reliefs would be helpful in studying the relation of these reliefs and their environment; the last, but not least, is the major problem of preservation and conservation of these reliefs. None of the ancient Iranian reliefs is in a good state of conservation. The Lullubi reliefs were the target of shooting and suffered from bombings of the border of town of Sar-e Pol-e Zohab in the early years of Iran-Iraq war.<sup>6</sup> The Elamite reliefs, notably those in the area of Izeh, have unfortunately been the object of vandalism in the past forty years. As for the Bisutun monument, the relief and its inscriptions are situated on two separate geological layers; a natural line of separation runs between them, creating a gap with numerous cracks. Conse-

to discuss the identity of a particular king on the palatial reliefs at Persepolis is unconvincing and should be rejected.

<sup>5</sup>E. Herzfeld, *Iran in the Ancient East*, London, 1941, p. 313.

<sup>6</sup>Author's observation, the spring of 1988.

quently, the waters accumulated in the upper parts of the mountain coming out of these fissures and damage the rock-relief and its inscriptions. Each cold season brings considerable amount of rain and snow; the most dangerous factor is the frost action that has led to stone decay. There was a drain conceived by the builders of the monument to divert surface waters, which has stopped functioning.<sup>7</sup> The Sasanian reliefs are not in a better state of conservation. Those located in Tangab, near Firuzabad, have been largely eroded, and need urgent care. The Investiture relief of Shapur I at Tang-e Chowgan has suffered from waters that come out of the cliff. The site of Barm Delak, near Shiraz, with its three Sasanian reliefs, is used as a landfill. These are just a few examples.

The era of art historical studies on the identification of figures and styles, and their symbolism has passed. It is why I am convinced that any study related to the rock-reliefs of ancient Iran must involve fieldwork and conservation, otherwise in coming decades we could only appreciate these glorious monuments through pictures without being able to see and touch them.

<sup>7</sup>*Bisutun: The site and the rock-relief of Darius the Great*, the Bisutun nomination file, the World Heritage List, UNESCO, Tehran, 2005, p. 35.