

Once more on the Bandiān Inscriptions

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Abstract: The complex of Bandiān counts among the most important archaeological discoveries in Iran in recent years, opening as it does entirely new perspectives on North-Eastern Iran in the Sasanian period. The monument itself has been variously interpreted since Mehdi Rahbar's first publications, while the Middle Persian inscriptions found on the stuccos have been differently read by Rasul Bashshash and Philippe Gignoux. The reading of the inscriptions and more specifically of inscription E, where Bashshash recognized the name *optalit* (Hephtalite) is very important to date the monument. In fact this reading led the Iranian philologist to postulate that the monument had been erected to celebrate Wahrām Gōr's victory over the Hephtalites, possibly in 425 CE—a position shared by Rahbar who moreover believes that Bandiān was pillaged and destroyed by the eastern Huns in 484, thus assigning it a relatively brief life span. In this paper the writer discusses once again the five inscriptions, proposing an interpretation differing both from Bashshash' and Gignoux's, but closer to the one proposed by the French scholar. More specifically, according to this writer, the ethnonym *optalit* does not occur anywhere in these inscriptions, though they may well have been written in the 5th century CE as shown by the script. A new hypothesis, far from definitive is proposed here for Inscription E, its contents being read in the light of the evidence in the other inscriptions found on the Bandiān stuccos.

Keywords: Bandiān, Sasanians, Middle Persian, Inscriptions, Khorasan, Hephtalites.

During my years in Tehran I often had the pleasure to meet Dr. Mehdi Rahbar, who regularly advised me on which archaeological sites to visit to gain a better understanding of Iran's millenary history. Later, when I had occasion to visit these sites, I was able to better understand them thanks to the precious information I had obtained from my illustrious Iranian colleague. I remember his kindness and immense learning as well as many conversations on the most diverse subjects. On the occasion of one of our meetings, Dr. Rahbar asked me to contribute to his forthcoming report on the excavations at Bandiān by writing a short chapter on the inscriptions found on the gypsum bas-reliefs in the complex. Pressed by my work at the Italian

Embassy, at the time I did not find the time to write on the subject, but I hope that the dedicatee of this volume may consider this short paper as an answer, however belated, to his request.

The important and disputed Sasanian complex of Bandiān in North Khorasan (Rahbar 1376; 1998;¹ 1378; 2004; 2007; 1386; 2008; 1389; Azarpay 1997; Gignoux 2008; Callieri 2014: 93-98) was discovered accidentally in 1990 and then from 1994 onwards excavated by a team of experts of the Iranian Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization led by Dr. Rahbar. The site of Bandiān is on the border between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkmenistan, about 20 km. from Daregaz and

1. Being the French translation of Rahbar 1376.

less than 80 km. away from Turkmenistan's capital city, Ashgabad (Rahbar 2007: 455) in an area that represents a natural border between the Iranian highland and the Central Asian steppes.

According to Rahbar, there are two distinct levels of Sasanian buildings in the sacred area of Bandiān. The first dates to the reign of Wahrām V (420-438 CE) and may have commemorated a victory of the sovereign over the Hephtalites,² while the second can be dated to the long reign of Khosrow I (Rahbar 2007: 466).

The set of Sasanian buildings found at Bandiān has been convincingly interpreted by Rahbar to be a ritual area, centering on a Fire Temple. This interpretation was challenged by Gignoux (2008) who believes it to be a luxurious manor that may possibly have belonged to a *marzbān*. The French scholar prefers to interpret the building as a mansion mainly for the following two reasons. Firstly he claims that the plan of the building does not follow Zoroastrian purity rules as would be necessary in a proper Fire Temple, though he does not exclude the presence of a domestic fire and believes that room G may well have been a temporary repository for the bodies of the dead, the latter being quite a convincing suggestion.³ Secondly, he remarks that the word *dastgird* indicates an estate, be it material or spiritual, and is not fit to designate a Fire Temple.⁴ Rahbar convincingly answers Gignoux's criticism in a passionate and vehement article printed in Iran in 2010. Later, in 2014, Callieri persuasively argues that considering a number of formal criteria suggested by Huff and the similarities with the site of Mele Hairam studied by Kaim (Huff 1993; Kaim 2002; 2004),⁵ the complex found on Tepe A in Bandiān is likely to be a ritual building. Moreover, he argues that the older and yet not fully studied layers of Tepe C may reveal a residential phase dating to the same age as the religious complex and thus justifying the use of the term *dastgird* for the entire estate.⁶ Again, a religious complex such as a mausoleum may well have been endowed with an estate to provide for its needs and I share Callieri's idea that the three tepes should be considered as an unitary site that taken as a whole may well be described as a *dastgird* (Callieri 2014: 54).⁷ Nonetheless, I will not discuss here the details of a dispute that goes far beyond my knowledge of Sasanian material culture.

While sharing Rahbar's general understanding of the monument, I am much less certain about

his precise dating of it, since I do not agree with Bashshash' reading of inscription E, as we shall see in the following pages. According to Bashshash (1376: 35) the personages mentioned in the inscriptions were active at the court of Wahrām Gōr and this together with his reading of the name *optalit* (Hephtalite) in inscription E, leads him to consider the monument to have been erected to celebrate the victory of Wahrām V over the Hephtalites, possibly in 425 CE. Rahbar (2004: 19) shares this opinion and goes one step further to say that Bandiān was pillaged and destroyed by the eastern Huns in 484, its existence spanning only the brief spell of time between Wahrām's triumph and Pērōz's defeat.⁷ Thus he assigns the building a relatively short life span, less than sixty years. Gignoux (1998: 254-256) doubts Bashshash' identification of the names *Web-Šābuhr* and *Web-Mihr-Šābuhr*, both found in inscription A, with those belonging to two Sasanian dignitaries attested in Armenian sources, though he acknowledges that the attested Armenian forms do correspond to the Middle Persian names (Gignoux 1998: 254-255).⁸ Moreover, he does not agree with Bashshash' reading of inscription E (Gignoux 1998: 254-256; 2008: 171), a position that I share, though proposing a different reading still. Nonetheless, he concedes that from a linguistic and paleographic point of view the inscriptions belong fully to the Middle Persian tradition and may well be dated to the early part of the 5th century CE. Considering the inscriptions together with the stuccos decorating the main room there seems to be no grounds to doubt

2. See further below.

3. See also Callieri 2014: 97-98, where the Italian author suggests that «A partir de l'ensemble des témoignages, donc, il me semble plausible de proposer que l'édifice du Tepe A ait pu être le complexe destiné aux rites funéraires du *dastgird*, où le *dādgāh* dans lequel était allumé le feu sacré était précédé d'une salle de cérémonie avec des décors figurés en stuc qui célébraient la geste de la famille, et flanqué d'une pièce contenant les *ostodān* pour les membres de la famille et d'une autre, circulaire, liée aux rites relevant de la pratique funéraire plutôt qu'à ceux de purification».

4. Humbach and Skjervø 1978-1983: 3.2, 31, in the meaning of "landed property" and "spiritual property", the word is discussed in some detail in Gignoux 1996, with earlier bibliography.

5. On Sasanian religious architecture see Callieri 2014: 72-102, with a detailed synthesis of earlier studies.

6. Though the mansion that has been excavated in the upper layers of Tepe C is not as old as the structures found in Tepe A, see further Callieri 2014: 95-96.

7. Moreover, Rahbar (2004: 20) identifies a new phase of building that he assigns possibly to the reign of Khosrow I.

8. *Web-Šābuhr* is attested in a passage by Lazar P'arpe'ci dealing with the reign of Yazdagerd I, while *Web-Mihr-Šābuhr* is said to be the first Sasanian *marzbān* in Armenia after the fall of the local Arsacid dynasty. On both names see further Justi 1895: 341 s.v. Wa(h)umisa.

a 5th century date of the monument, though we may not be able to link it to specific historical events.⁹

In the next pages of this paper I will present a summary of earlier readings of the Middle Persian inscriptions brought to light by the Iranian team in two campaigns that took place in 1994 and 1995 respectively. These texts were read first by Bashshash (1997) and then by Gignoux (1998) who in 2008 returned once more to the subject, adding a few new comments to what he had said in his earlier paper. The interpretations offered by the two scholars differ markedly one from the other, this being true both for many details—as we shall see in the following pages—and for the analysis of the overall meaning of the inscriptions. Most important, as we have seen, Bashshash believes to have found the name *optalit* (Hephtalites) in one of the texts while Gignoux hotly disputes this interpretation and its effects on our historical understanding of the monument. Certainly, no easy solutions for inscription E are at hand, though Gignoux's overall remarks convincing. Moreover, according to Bashshash, inscriptions A, B and C should be read together as a somewhat unitary text and this may also be true for other ones. On the contrary, Gignoux believes that each inscription is independent from the others and should be understood on its own. Nonetheless, both scholars agree in saying that on account of the script used, which still preserves some of the characteristic of the so-called monumental or inscriptional alphabet as found in the royal inscriptions and in other (semi-) official inscriptional writings, as well as of the contents of the texts themselves, these may be assigned to the 5th century CE. However, comparison with the Middle Persian inscriptions from Dura Europos dating to the reign of Šābuhr I, when the city was occupied for a short time by the Persian army in 252-253 CE, show that the *ductus* has as much to do with the material on which one is writing as with the epoch of writing.¹⁰

The inscriptions were found in a large recessed niche (2.82×1.70 m.) in the north-western corner of the large central room (10.25×8.60 m.) entirely decorated with stuccos (Fig. 1).¹¹ The niche itself was adorned by images of a fire altar cared for by three dignitaries (Azarpay 1997: 193). In his 1998 article, Rahbar describes the inscriptions as follows:

Durant les dernières journées des fouilles de l'hiver 1995, une inscription de six lignes en écriture moyen-persé est découverte sur un petit mur qui devait se révéler être le mur oriental de la niche

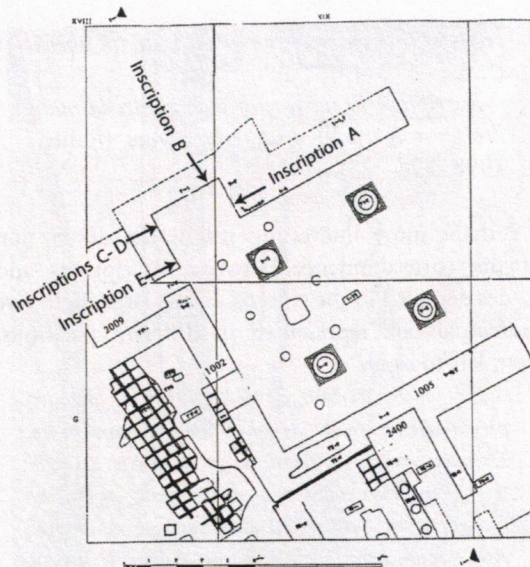


Fig. 1. Plan of the columend hall at Bandian showing the location of the inscriptions (after Rahbar 1998: fig. 3, with adoptions).

NO; cet espace pouvait être considéré comme un autel, à cause de sa situation particulière [...].

En 1995, outre le sceau dont nous avons parlé et qui porte l'inscription rôz-veh, quatre autres inscriptions sont découvertes à l'intérieur de la niche. À l'inverse de la précédente (= inscription A) ces quatre inscriptions (B-E) sont écrites verticalement. Elles seront étudiées de droite à gauche.

Inscription numéro B: sur le mur du fond de la niche à droite. Deux lignes gravées sur l'espace qui se trouve entre la main gauche du personnage et l'extrémité orientale de l'autel (...).

Inscription numéro C: à gauche de la précédente, de l'autre côté du cadre à trois rubans ornementaux, une ligne, gravée sur l'espace étroit qui existe entre le dernier ruban décoratif et l'extrémité du mur de l'autel. Cette inscription correspond au personnage représenté à gauche de l'autel, sur le mur perpendiculaire (...).

Inscription numéro D: une ligne gravée sur

9. On Middle Persian inscriptions found in northern Iran see Cereti, forthcoming.

10. As stated already by Henning (1958: 46-47): «Der Schrifttyp zeigt nicht nur, wie dem Schreibmaterial angemessen, grössere Weichheit und Flüssigkeit als die gleichzeitige Monumentalschrift, sondern nähert sich in manchen Buchstabenformen sowie in der Neigung, die Zeichen miteinander zu verbinden, den sonst erst aus späteren Jahrhunderten bekannten Schriften. Die antiquierende Tendenz, die bei der Festlegung der alten Monumentalschrift Pate gestanden hat, macht sich auch weiterhin geltend, und zwar besonders bei der formalen Buchschrift. Das beste Beispiel dafür bietet der in Bulayiq (nördlich von Turfan) gefundene christliche Pehlewi-Psalter...».

l'espace libre entre le cou et la patte du cheval (...).

Inscription E: sur le mur ouest, entre la main droite et le cadre orné, trois lignes (Rahbar 1998: 224-225).

Perhaps more interesting still is the description of the correspondence between inscriptions and scenes depicted in the stuccos. In the large niche five individuals are represented in different positions, from left to right:

De gauche à droit dans la niche, le premier personnage représente un roi ou un héros portant un vêtement grossier à carreaux, et de bottes décorées (...). Les cercles concentriques marquant les genoux indiquent qu'il est revêtu d'un costume de guerre. Assis sur un tapis ovale à dessins stylisés, il lève sa main droite qui tient le barsom. Sous sa main, une inscription en moyen-perse le présente probablement (=inscription n° E). (...)

Dans un autre cadre séparé, à droite, est représenté un personnage debout devant un cheval, les rênes à la main. Son vêtement long est plissé à la ceinture et, en bas, recouvert de fleurs (...). Une inscription moyen-perse verticale d'une ligne est grave devant le cheval (= inscription n° D).

Sur le mur de fond de la niche est figuré, au centre, un temple érigé sur une estrade à trois degrés en retraits successifs, rappelant le profil des bases de colonnes de la salle (...). Sur les côtés, deux colonnes, reposant sur une base cubique ornée de fleurs à quatre pétales, sont décorées de cercles concentriques tangents. Entre les deux colonnes, un épais rideau est serré au milieu par un ruban dont les deux extrémités flottent horizontalement. De part et d'autre du temple, deux personnages sont disposés en symétrie. Celui de gauche porte une blouse, une robe et un pantalon ample. Le bas de la robe est plissé. Le motif de la robe et du pantalon est la fleur de grenadier. Derrière, tombe un long ruban qui descend jusqu'à ses pieds. Le personnage tient une baguette (barsom) dans la main gauche, un brûle-parfum dans la main droite. À gauche, une inscription d'une ligne (...), en moyen-perse, se rapporte à celui-ci (=inscription n° C).

Le personnage de droite porte également une blouse et une longue robe plissée; il tient une baguette à la main droite et un brûle-parfum à la main gauche. Ses bottes, de même forme que

celle des autres, sont ici décorées de deux rangs de perles. Sur sa gauche, tombe un ruban court; au-dessous une inscription en deux lignes en moyen-perse mentionne ce personnage (inscription n° B). Ce n'est pas un hasard si les brûle-parfums que portent les deux personnages sont encore à trois degrés, comme les bases de colonnes et la représentation de l'estrade du temple. Ces deux personnages pourraient représenter l'un, une déesse comme Anahita, l'autre le Roi.

Le personnage que l'on voit sur le mur oriental de la niche doit être un prêtre (...). Il est vêtu d'un long vêtement dont les manches descendent jusqu'aux poignets. À la main droite, il tient une baguette, à la gauche un brûle-parfum. Ce personnage est présenté en six lignes, en moyen-perse, dans l'espace libre que se trouve sous le brûle-parfum (=inscription n° A)(Rahbar 1998: 221-222).

Let us now turn to the inscriptions themselves, comparing Bashshash' and Gignoux's reading, while making some new suggestions.

Inscription A (Bashshash I)

The inscription (Fig. 2) is written horizontally on the eastern wall, near a character, who may well be a priest as suggested by Rahbar (Callieri 2014: 122; Rahbar 1998: fig. 8).

Bashshash 1376	Gignoux 1998	Proposed reading
ptkly	ptkly	ptkly
ZNH	ZNH	ZNH
wydmtršhpwḥry	wydmtršhpwḥry	wydmtršhpwḥr(y)
BR<Y> wydšhpwḥry	ZY wydšhpwḥry	ZY (w)ydšhpwḥry
'rthštr' n	<ZY?> 'rthštr' n	<Z>(Y) 'lthštr' n
'ḥw	AHY	AHY

paykar ēn weh-mihr-šābuhr ī weh-šābuhr ī ardaḥšīrān brād

This is the image of Weh-Mihr-Šābuhr son of Weh-Šābuhr, brother of Ardaḥšīr

l. 4: **ZY** see Gignoux 1998: 252; 2008: 170, who criticizes Bashshash' reading BR<Y>, a Parthian form.

l. 5: The final part of **Y** is barely visible before the ' . The meaning is secured, since inscription B-D shows that *brād* refers to *Weh-Šābuhr*. On the suffix *-ān* see Gignoux 1998: 252 with reference to Tafazzoli 1994-95.

l. 6: On **AHY** see Gignoux 1998: 253; 2008: 170.



Fig. 2 Inscription A (photo: M. Rahbar).

Inscription B (Bashshash II)

This inscription (Fig. 3) is by the side of a character first identified by Rahbar as Anāhīd (Callieri 2014: 122; Rahbar 1998: fig. 7). This identification led Gignoux (1998: 258) to suggest that the inscription carries the name of the artisan who completed the stucco or at least this part of them. However, this character is quite similar to the one depicted on the south-western wall and understood by Rahbar (1998: 221-222) and Callieri (2014: 122) to be a priest. Bashshash and Gignoux read this vertical inscription quite differently from one another. The Iranian scholar reads it from left to right as usual for vertically written Middle Persian; on the contrary, the French researcher suggests reading the columns from right to left as suggested by the presence of an *ezāfe* at the end of the left column and by the final *-ān* of the second name indicating a patronymic. As a matter of fact, should one understand the figure standing to the right of the fire altar to be a priest, chances are that this short inscription carries the name of the personage depicted in the stucco.



Fig. 3 Inscription B (photo: M. Rahbar).

Bashshash 1376	Gignoux 1998	Proposed reading
yzdt šh<pw>hr'n	dlw' nmtry [Z]Y	dlw' nmtry (Z)Y
dzw' n mwrwy W	yzdtšh[pw]hr'n	yzdtšh(p)<w>hr'n

druwān-mihr ī yazad-šābuhrān
Druwān-Mihr son of Yazad-Šābuhr

Dlw' nmtry and **yzdtšhpwḥr**: on these two names see Gignoux 1986: 190; 1998: 254; 2003: 34, 69-70.

Inscription C-D

The inscriptions (Figs. 4-5) labeled C-D are found respectively to the left and to the right of a decorative frieze in the north-western corner of the south-western wall of the niche. Their position led Gignoux to consider the two graffiti to be part of a single inscription, but this cannot be proven. In fact, Bashshash read these inscriptions separately, which may well be correct.

Inscription C (= Bashshash III)

Bashshash 1376 ¹²	Gignoux 1998	Proposed reading
ZNH dstkly kly	ZNH dstkry kly	ZNH dstkly kly



Fig. 4 Inscription C (photo: M. Rahbar).



Fig. 5 Inscription D (photo: M. Rahbar).

ēn dastgird kard “...he made this estate”

Inscription D (= Bashshash IV)

wyd <š>hpwhry 'hw wyd[š]hpwhry 'HY (w)yd(š)hpwhry 'HY
weh-šābuhr brād “...Weh-Šābuhr, the brother”

Gignoux (1998: 253) reads the two columns as a continuous text from left to right: *Weh-Šābuhr brād ēn dastgird kard*, translating them “Weh-Šābuhr le frère a fait ce domaine”. However, there is no way to tell whether the two inscriptions are complete nor if they go together; as a matter of fact, judging from the photos both texts may well have started on the upper and now lost part of the stucco decoration. Moreover, both seem to retain only the final part of a text, this being certainly true for inscription C, ending with a verb, but also quite probable for inscription D, ending with the heterogram for *brād* “brother”, as it happens in inscription A. Considering the archaeological evidence, if part of a single text, which I do not believe to be the case, the two parts were probably separated by a lacuna.¹¹

Inscription E

Inscription E (Fig. 6) is on the south-western wall, apparently immediately outside the niche and accompanies a stucco relief depicting a man sitting on a carpet, possibly wearing some sort of light suit of armor. The stucco has suffered deformation, making the text hard to read, though a few letters are clear. The inscription, on three lines is written vertically and in my hypothesis it should be read left to right as usual in late Middle Persian, though inscription B seems to be written the other way around:

Should my reading be correct, once more, its contents identify the character depicted in the stuccos:

Bashshash 1376	Gignoux 1998	Proposed reading
<L'w> ptlyt	gy/s(w/n..m)[l]t
		-<y>(s)n(y)
BRY wyhm ... <'wp>	BRY wyhm...	(B)R(H) šh(.)w(..)
tlyt 'ywl	tly(t) 'ywp	ml(t)ysny

(...)mardyasn pus <ī> Šāh(...) <ī> mard-yasn.

*Mard-yasn son of Šāh[...] (son) of *Mard-yasn

l. 1: the initial sequence in the first line can be read **gy(n)**, **s(n)**, etc.; next one can read **m(.)t** and in the corner, possibly belonging to this same line a sequence that can be interpreted both as **-<y>(s) n(y)** or **-yn(y)**, I chose the former on account of the similitude with line 3.

11. Bashshash (1376: 34) suggests to read inscriptions A, B and C as a continuous text, translating: *in paykar-e vid-mehr-šāpur pesar-e vid šāpur ardaštīrān axw ast ke yazad pesar-e šāpur rā dežbān-e marv va in dastgird kard.*

l. 2: **(B)R(H)**: **BRY**, the reading suggested by Bashshash and Gignoux is plausible, but would represent a Parthian form. Considering that the final letter falls in a deformed area of the stucco and since the bottom line of a **b** is still to be clearly recognized I have tentatively emended to **(B)R(H)**. Other possible readings are **bgy** or much less plausibly **Y wy**. Choosing to read **bgy** would open the way to a name such as *Bay-Šābuhr* or the like (Gignoux 1986: 57), but one sign would be left to interpret between the two members of the compound. Moreover, though apparently somehow deformed, the inscription scarcely allows enough space for a **p** between **šh** and **w**, so a reading **Šābuhr*, suggested by the parallel with other family members, cannot be taken for granted.

l. 3: The reading **ml(t)ysny** is technically plausible, though its meaning is not immediately clear. The name **mltysny** /*Mard-yasn*/ is not attested as such, though both members of the compound are attested in Middle Persian onomastics, one, *mard*, very often, the other, *yasn*, very rarely (Gignoux 1986: 118-119, 189; 2003: 46-47).

Conclusion

The reading I give of the inscriptions on the stuccos of Bandiān is closer to that offered by Gignoux than to that by Bashshash, though I do not agree with the French scholar on some specific issues. More specifically, contrarily to what thought by our Iranian colleague, I do not believe that the graffiti should be read as a sequence, rather I think that they identify members of the family that are depicted in the accompanying stuccos. In some instances I differ from the French author, as is the case for inscriptions C and D, that cannot in my opinion be considered to be a continuous text, and for inscription B that likely identifies one of the characters depicted on the wall. Similarly, my reading of inscription E, which lacking a visit to the site must still be considered as an educated guess, suggests that this text as well identifies one of the characters depicted in the niche. Therefore, I share Gignoux's opinion that "Les scènes nombreuses, malheureusement tronquées, dont il manqué partout les parties supérieures, ne doivent pas être interprétés sans recourir aux inscriptions" but can only partly share the opinion he expresses in the second part of the sentence, where he says: "... qui, d'après mon déchiffrement, font mention essentiellement du nom et patronyme du propriétaire du domaine, indiqués on ne peut plus clairement



Fig. 6 Inscription E (photo: M. Rahbar).

par la phrase «cette image (est celle de)...., et du nom de celui qui a construit le bâtiment, à savoir le frère du propriétaire» (Gignoux 2008: 168). In fact the short texts inscribed on the stuccos are essentially employed to integrate and complete the narration of the stuccos, a usage that may to some extent be compared to that of the wall inscriptions on the paintings of Afrāsiāb (Livšic 2006). Though here the inscriptions only preserve the memory of the persons that were for one reason or another depicted in the stuccos of the niche. In this context, my tentative and incomplete reading of inscription E, presupposes that it contains a name and a patronymic as found in the other ones.

Generally, I believe that nothing in the inscriptions or in the plan of the building contradicts Rahbar's interpretation of the complex. In fact, Callieri (2014: 120) is certainly right in considering the Bandiān stuccos as an example of narrative art; moreover he is right in saying that the stucco reliefs suggest that the main hall was used for the funerary ceremonies of the members of the family and that the niche is a space dedicated to the memory of the members of the family that owned the estate as shown also by the presence of the inscriptions (Callieri 2014:

119, 124) that carry their names. In my opinion this shows that Rahbar's interpretation of Tepe A as a religious complex is largely correct (Rahbar 2008; 1389), though the inscriptions bear no evidence of a possible connection with specific events in the war against the Hephtalites. Rather, the complex seems to be a mausoleum celebrating the deeds of a noble family, whose members distinguished themselves, among others, in the war against their eastern foes.

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