

NAQSH-e RUSTAM

By: Ursula Seidl



Figure 1. View of Naqsh-i Rostam cliffs.

The entrance to the tomb of Darius I is shown above two Sasanian reliefs.

The relief of Shapur I (NRm 6) is at the lower left,

and a relief of two jousting scenes (NRm 7) is directly below the tomb entrance.

Naqsh-i Rostam is a precipitous cliff at the south side of the Husain Kuh, located north of Persepolis, Iran, with rock reliefs ranging from Elamite (second millennium BCE) to Sasanian times (fifth century CE). Surrounding it are other rock installations and some Achaemenid and Sasanian architecture, most of which lies under several meters of debris and has not yet been excavated.

Elamite Periods

The only surviving monument from the pre-Achaemenid period is a relief that was mostly obliterated when the court scene of Bahram II (designated NRm 2) was carved over it. The surface of the original relief curves toward the left and slants back at the right end. The remnants of the scene show an attendant standing behind two seated deities, faced presumably by a standing worshiper, and a head with a mural crown. Only the attendant at the right is preserved in its major features. The bearded face is turned in the direction of the deities, and the hair, projecting in front, is covered with a cloth fastened by ribbons. The view of the body is frontal with the hands clasped at the waist. Only the lower portions of the seated deities are barely discernible. They wear flounced garments and sit on layered thrones representing coiled snakes. To the left of the later carving of Bahrain the partially visible feet of a standing figure point toward the deities. The crowned head preserved on the left belongs to a shorter figure whose preserved feet are correspondingly smaller. Another figure stood between this person and the worshiper next to Bahrain, as evidenced by the remnants of some curls and a heel. The original height of this figure cannot be reconstructed.

The main part of the relief resembles the central part of the rock sculptures at Kurangun, which can be dated to the late [Old Elamite period](#) (c. seventeenth century BCE); however, differences in the shape of the thrones and the slenderness of the figures point to a somewhat later date. The figure with the mural crown at the left may have been added in the early first millennium BCE.

Achaemenid Period

Four tombs of Achaemenid monarchs are cut into the rock of the cliff (Schmidt, 1970). A square tower erected in stone blocks (Kabah-i Zardusht) stands in front of the cliff, and some minor walls of built structures were detected in trenches dug there

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The sepulchral compartments tunneled into the rock differ in plan and in the number of burial cists, but their facades are essentially alike. The oldest (no. I) is dated to [Darius I the Great](#) (521-486 BCE) by his [inscriptions](#) (*see left fig*); the other tombs (nos. II-IV) can be assigned to his successors only through iconography and style (*see figure 2*).

The facade of tomb I, which faces southeast, lies about 15 m above the surface (*see figure 1*). Its total height is 22.93 m, but a vertical enlargement toward the bottom may have been intentional as the quarrying slots at the base suggest. The facade is divided into three registers: the bottom register is blank, the middle is sculptured to imitate the front of a palace, and the top shows the monarch at worship on the top of a piece of furniture that is supported by representatives of the nations in his realm.

The middle register, which gives access to the burial chamber, is adorned with a relief representing a building facade. Erich F. Schmidt (1970, p. 81) has shown that the model for it was the facade of the residential palace of Darius at [Persepolis](#) (tacara: a portico with two rows of four columns in antis). In addition to the architectural similarities, Schmidt notes that the principal dimensions are identical (length, height, distances between the centers of the columns, width of the doorway), except for the height of the columns (the lost palace columns are computed from the steps in the antae). This difference arises from a common misunderstanding resulting from the transposition of three-dimensional architecture into two-dimensional relief, however: the capitals, in the shape of addorsed bulls carrying the stepped architrave between their heads, are turned 90 degrees, to be seen in profile; the architrave is consequently shown in cross section and looks instead like small roof beams. If the palace columns are reconstructed with the architrave placed between the bulls' heads of the capitals, they have the same height as the relief columns carved at the tomb. The panels between the columns bear a trilingual cuneiform inscription of Darius I (designated DN b); an Aramaic inscription was added later.

The top register is adorned with a framed relief panel showing an imposing estrade (or dais) supported by thirty representatives of the nations of the empire, identified by cuneiform captions. They are arranged in two tiers of fourteen people with raised arms between the legs, and two people on the outside support the feet of the estrade. Unlike the sculptured supporting figures on Assyrian or Urartian furniture, the figures here are actually lifting the dais, and, as they are all facing right, they appear to move it in this direction. On the top, the king, standing on a three-stepped pedestal, faces a fire altar. A figure in a winged disk hovers above, between king and altar, and there is a moon symbol farther to the right. Since the last century, the man in the winged disk [[fravahar](#)] has usually been called Ahuramazda, but Shapur Shahbazi (1974) has shown that this interpretation is mainly based on a circular argument. On the tombs and in the Persepolitan palaces, the figure is not only related to the king by his position, he also wears the royal garment and crown; this, along with some written sources, and the Assyrian prototype, points to his being a royal daimon or daimon



of kingship. Behind the king is a second inscription of Darius I (DN a). The frame of the relief panel and the projecting side walls are adorned with reliefs. Behind the king stand his spear bearer, the bearer of his battle-ax and bow, and several anonymous spear-bearing Persians. On the opposite strip of frame and wall, several Persians, with their left hands raised to their mouths, face the king.

Three copies of Darius's tomb facade (tombs II-IV) were cut into the same cliff by his successors, but definitive attributions to individual Achaemenid kings have not yet been reached.

The Kabah-i Zardusht (*picture on left*) is a square tower (12.50 m high and 7.32 m wide) with reinforced corners that stands on a three-stepped base. It is built of light-colored stone with false windows in dark stone.

Most of the tower is solid, but in the upper half a small room with a door facing the cliff can be reached through a stone staircase. An identical monument was built at [Pasargadae](#), ([Zandak](#) i

reached through a stone staircase. An identical monument was built at [Fasaigauae \(Zeruanh Sulaiman\)](#). The purpose of these towers is not known, but it has been proposed that it was either a royal tomb, a depository for objects of dynastic or religious importance, or a fire sanctuary. The third can be ruled out because there is no ventilation or outlet for smoke or gases. In the Sasanian period inscriptions of Shapur I and [Kartir](#) the high priest were cut into the tower (see below).

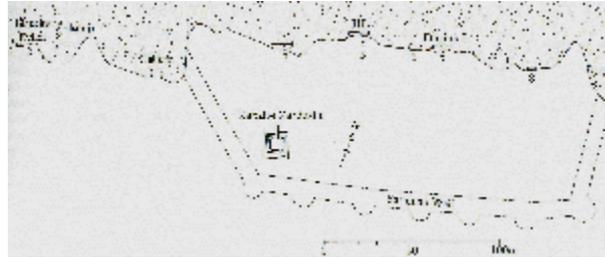


Figure 2. Plan of the site. Achaemenid tomb facades are numbered in Roman numerals. Sasanian reliefs are numbered r-8. (Courtesy U. Seidl)

Sasanian Period

Apart from the Aramaic inscription on the tomb of Darius I, presumably cut in the Seleucid period, nothing is known that can be dated to the time between the Achaemenid and the beginning of the Sasanian periods.

Eight rock reliefs were carved on the cliff by [Sasanian](#) King of kings (numbered from west to east NRm 1-8). Although most of the reliefs are difficult to date, they are discussed here in their assumed chronological order.

The oldest relief (NRm 1) was carved at the west end, near the Elamite relief (see above). It shows the investiture of Ardashir I (224-241 CE) by the god Ahuramazda. Both the king and the god are mounted. On the ground under or beside their horses lie their slain enemies, respectively the last Parthian king, Artabanus V, in his royal dress, and Ahriman, the [evil](#) genius in the shape of a naked man whose legs end in snakes and whose head is encircled by snakes. The nearby Elamite relief, with its snake throne and perhaps with snake attributes of the gods, was still clearly visible at the time of Ardashir's carving and could have inspired the fashioning of Ahriman.



Ardashir's son and successor, [Shapur I](#) (241-272 CE), was the next to carve a relief (NRm 6). He placed his "Victory over the Romans" relief near Darius's tomb (see figure 2). It shows Shapur I on horseback grasping the wrist of a standing Roman (Valerian ?) with his extended right arm. Another Roman emperor (Philip the Arab?) is kneeling before the Sasanian King. Later, during the reign of Bahrain II, the High Priest Kartir added his picture and a lengthy inscription.

The third relief (NRm 2) shows Bahrain II (276-293 CE) with members of his family and court. In carving over an Old Elamite relief (see above) Bahrain II made apparent his program to persecute all religions other than Mazdaism. Kerdir (kartir), the high priest of Bahrain II, writes in his [inscriptions](#), of which two copies are carved on Naqsh-e Rostam monuments (NRm 6 and Kabah-i Zardusht) section II. "and idols were destroyed and the abode of the demons disrupted" Was it only the negligence of the sculptor that the portion with the snake thrones remained visible, or was it the intention of a dissident sculptor? Narseh's (253-302 CE) investiture relief (NRm 8) was never finished. In the main part that is shown, the king receives the ring from the hands of a goddess ([Anahita?](#)) (*picture below*)

In the fourth century and perhaps also at the beginning of the fifth century reliefs with Justinian

in the fourth century and perhaps also at the beginning of the fifth century reliefs with jousting scenes were carved below the Achaemenid tombs: Hormizd II (302-309) vanquishing his adversary (NRm 5), placed below tomb III; two jousts in two registers below the tomb of Darius I (NRm; see Figure 2), attributed to Bahram IV (388-399) by Hubertus von Gall (1990); the latest joust (NRm 3), dated by von Gall (ibid.) to the fifth century placed below tomb IV; and a relief of a seated king (NRm 4) that is too eroded to be dated. The area of the carvings, excluding the reliefs of Ardashir and Bahram II (NRm 1 and 2), was enclosed by a wall sometime in the Sasanian period. Outside this wall are Sasanian installations that, according to Dietrich Huff (forthcoming), are related to burials: the column on the Husain Kuh, and the so-called fire altars are interpreted as *astodans* (burial urns for the bones of the dead).



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