

IRANIAN ARCHAEOLOGY: POST-ACHAEMENID THE STATUE OF HERCULES IN BISTÛN

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Abstract: *The statue of Hercules by Bistoon, Bistun or Bisotun mountain in Kermanshah is among the rare Greek relics belonging to the period when the successors of Alexander II of Macedonia ruled in Iran. The statue was discovered in 1957. A tablet in Old Greek scripture leaves no doubt about its origin. The characteristics of the statue, some information on its discovery and the expert views on it are outlined in the present article.*



(*Bistun, Biston, Bisotun, Bisotoon, Behestun, Behistun*) The stone statue of Hercules by the mountain of Bistoon, facing a spring by Kermanshah-Hamedan road is one of the several historical attractions there.

It was unearthed during construction operation of the new Hamedan-Kermanshah road in the month of Bahman 1337 (Jan. 21 - Feb. 19, 1958). The stony work, attached to the rocks by the foot of the mountain, reveals a completely nude man who is stretching down on his left side on a lion figure under tree shade; his left hand is on the lion's head and his foot is on his buttock. The man holds a bowl in his left hand which is 14 cms in diameter and 8.5 cms in depth. His right hand is on his right foot while his left foot is relying on the other.

The platform on which the statue is erected is 220 cms in length and 150 cms in height. A step is constructed at the foot of the platform which is 46 x 69 x 69 cms.

A tablet and some carvings could be seen behind the statue. The tablet is in Old Greek scripture in seven lines and is 33 x 43 cms. The general appearance of the tablet resembles that of Greek temples. The carvings by the tablet show a tree on the branch of which a bow, its two ends resembling the peak of a duck, is stretched. A quiver full of arrows is also hanging from the tree. By the tree, a cylinder shaped knotted club could be seen.

According to the tablet, the date of the statue goes back to the years when Mehrdad I, from the Ashkanian (Parthian) dynasty (136 - 174 BCE) was ruling in Iran and had already passed half of his ruling term. The tablet reads: "In the year 164, in the month of Pandmoi of Hercules the shining conqueror, this ceremony was held by "Hiakin Tous", son of "Ian Tiakhous" on the occasion of saving of "Kal Amen" the chief commander."

Ali Hakemi, commenting on the date mentioned in the tablet, writes: "The construction date of the statue is mentioned to be the year 164. If we compare it with the original date of the Soluki calendar which is 312 B.C., it will come out as 148 B.C. Because the Greek year was calculated in the same way as the lunar year, if we work out the difference between the lunar and solar years with precision, there will be a gap of five years, which determines the date of the statue as the year 153 B.C. The date corresponds with the middle years of the ruling time of Mehrdad I the Great from The Arsacid dynasty."¹

A man, by the name Kal Amen, is mentioned in the Tablet as the chief commander. It is guessed that he took part in wars against Mehrdad I and somehow managed to save himself from the clashes. He may have set up this stone work by the foot of Bistoon mountain by Hiakin Tous, who might have had a position in the region, to commemorate his escape.

Ali Hakemi, who in addition to the discovery of the statue has been busy in excavation operations in the region for a time, is of the opinion that both the statue of Hercules and the lion on which he is relying have been constructed in the same date. He believes the illustration meant to depict the fur of the lion not the lion itself. To prove his theory, he refers to the old stories on victories of Hercules. Dr. Klaus, deputy chief of Iran-Germany excavation team, believes the statue of Hercules and the stone lion were done in different times: the stone lion which symbolized "city" was carved on the mountain's rocks in the second millennium B.C.. Later on, in Soluki period, when they saw the lion was already there, they carved Hercules on it.

The whole stone statue, according to the existing Greek scripture is a non-Iranian work done in Iran and is among the rare cases dating back to the Soluki era who were originally Greek. Following Alexander's invasion of Iran and his conquering the land, Greek immigrant groups set out for the conquered lands and built cities and temples, resembling those in their own culture and land, there. Thus, they formed Greek communities in the heart of the Iranian society. Their efforts to Hellenize Iran failed. No other major works, besides the Hercules, reminiscent of the period, exist now. Famous French archaeologist, Girshman, comments on the point:

"In Dinvar, close to Kermanshah, parts of a stony big bowl which is ornamented with the half length statues of Silnoses, Satirs, Yaran Dynysous, was discovered. The vast plain of Kermanshah was famous in ancient times for its horses and was called "Nesa". That is an epic geographical name which was carried along with the rituals used to be held for Dynysous. The word was used for a large area of lands spanning from Greece to India by the Greek.

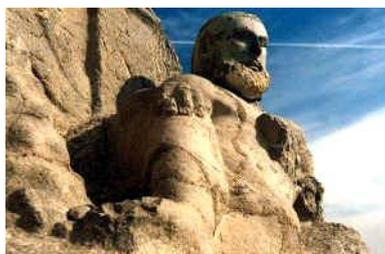
"The plain is identified with its numerous springs and rivers and is the source of the longest river in Iran. In short, it was commonly believed that Dynysous was born in a wet place and one of the literal meanings of his name was "born in marshes"... It is probable that the Greek, having compared the area with the region where their beloved god - who according to the tradition was the first to conquer India - was born, set up a temple for him where the above mentioned big bowl belonged to."

Girshman believes there has been a Greek temple in Bistoon and its whereabouts which proved the mountain, the plain and its rivers were considered as holy places by the Greek. The setting up of Hercules statue at the foot of Bistoon mountain by the spring could also be explained in this regard.

The knotted club, the olive tree, and a defeated lion on the skin of which Hercules is stretching or on which he is riding, all reveal the Greek origin of this stony work on Bistoon rocks. The event which inspired it also corresponds with the physical characteristics of Hercules and his strength: 'Kal Amen' has succeeded to force his enemy to retreat after great fights and struggles; this is the same duty that Hercules was trying to fulfill when killing the lion and emerging victorious from the struggle.

Of all historical relics found in Bistoon, the statue is the most wonderful work which emphasizes on the historical fact that Iranians, though their land under occupation, never surrendered to foreigners. Girshman says: "Iran's taking over by Alexander was in fact a defeat for the Hellenism. It was instead a peaceful victory for Iran."

Unfortunately, over the past recent years, some profiteers have repeatedly tried to cut off the head of the statue and take it out of the country. But fortunately, all these efforts have been foiled due to the vigilance of the authorities in charge. The head was returned to where it actually belonged.



http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Archaeology/Post_Achaemenids/statue_of_hercules_in_bistoon.htm