

IRANIAN ART & ARCHAEOLOGY: SASANIAN DYNASTY A REVIEW OF SASANIAN IMAGES & INSCRIPTIONS

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Abstract: In this article we will provide some descriptions of Sassanid images and inscriptions including (1) Naqshe Rajab, coronation ceremony, the king and his courtiers, a coronation scene, (2) Firoozabad including coronation ceremony and a scene of battle, (3) Naqshe Rostam including coronation ceremony, a scene of victory, a coronation scene, (4) Naqshe Bishaboer, (5) Darabad, (6) Baram Dalak, (7) Naqshe Bahram, (8) Bahram's hunting and (9) Hajji Abad inscription.

INTRODUCTION

Stone cutting and engraving and construction of glorious buildings was not so popular in the Sassanid period as in Achaemenid period. Perhaps if one compares these two periods the Sasanian rank was far loftier than the Achaemenid period. Nevertheless like their Achaemenid ancestors (the Sasanians believed to be the true descendents of Achaemenid Dynasty which had been overturned in 330 A.D. by Alexander) were interested to record important events during their reign such as victory over enemies, ascension to the throne, coronation, and displaying the magnificence of their courts on the breast of mountains in Iran and particularly in Pars or Fars province.

The majority of these images are accompanied by inscriptions from Ardashir I or Shapour I of the Sassanid Dynasty, but some are void of inscriptions.

With the exception of engravings that have survived at Taq-e Bostan near Salmas all the Sasanian images were made in Pars (Fars) province because the Sasanians were very much in love with their original birthplace. Most the inscriptions in Pars are religious or symbolic in nature whereas the images and inscriptions in Taq-e Bostan are less religious and mostly refer to private and royal ceremonies and the glory of their courts. But since the Sasanian kings believed that kingship was a divine gift bestowed by Ahura Mazda, such a definition are frequently visible in the majority of their inscriptions particularly in Pars.

In this short article we hope we can introduce to some extent the Sasanian images and inscriptions to interested readers. In conclusions it must be noted that these images and inscriptions are the most important and most valid sources to trace the Iranian history and it would be appropriate to do more and more to preserve them.

- NAQSHE RAJAB CORONATION CEREMONY

According to Zareh the founder of the Sasanian Dynasty has most probably crowned himself in his headquarters at Anahita (Venus) Temple at Estakhr, Pars province, where Sassan, his ancestor had been a grand mubid (Zoroastrian monk). It was in that temple or at Naqshe Rajab valley near Estakhr that four hundred years after Ardashir, the last Sasanian king crowned himself because Ardashir and Shapour had engraved their coronation on the stone in that region.

The ceremony of anointing Ardeshir as king of kings by the grand mubid is shown in two places - Naqshe Rajab and Naqshe Rostam - near the caves where the Achaemenid kings are buried. Therefore according to Zareh the Naqshe Rajab engraving was made before Naqshe Rostam. The ceremony in Naqshe Rajab has not been wholly preserved intact and many of its details have been erased or are obscure due to erosion or disintegration of the rocks.

The grand mubid is holding the royal ring at his right hand and the royal staff by his left hand and is presenting both these royal insignias to the king. The king wears the ring on his right hand and has raised his left hand and forefinger as a token of respect and obedience. The grand mubid is wearing a corrugated golden crown. The king in this image resembles the pictures imprinted on his coins during the beginning of his reign. He is bestowed with a long and square beard and short hair and the grand mubid and the king and the other personalities in the image are down on their feet. Zareh has spotted the face of two children in the space between the God and the king.

This image has been described in the following manner as well:

Ardeshir is standing on the left side with a crown which seems to have been installed overhead and the grand mubid is standing on the right side and extending the crown to Ardeshir. The representatives of the royal dynasty is standing as shown from the marks on his cap and Shapour, Ardeshir's son and prince royal is standing beside the mubid which means that he is the king's successor. Behind them one can behold the image of Ahura Mazda and a famous lady which is either the mother or the chief lady of Ardeshir. The image is 2.5 meters high and 4.5 meters long.

THE KING AND HIS COURTIER

Here Shapour and his children, his wife and the elders of the court are mounted on horses. The first standing figure belongs to Hormozd, son of Ardeshir, which means he is the crown prince. Behind him Shapour Shahmishan, the other son of the king is standing. The third image belongs to Nersi, another son of Shapour and king of Turestan, Sekestan and India and behind Nersi one can see Bahram, another son of Shapour, the king of Gilan, along with Azar Nahid, Shapour's first lady. In the second row and at a little lower elevation Bidaksh and Hezarbod, the elders of the court, are standing and behind them the representative of famous families as well as army commanders.



Fig. (Click to enlarge)

The details of the images are signified by the marks on the caps they wear. The courtiers are standing according to their rank. It can be in fact said that the images in Naqshe Rajab exactly represent the list and titles of the elders of the royal family in Shapour's inscription in the Zoroaster's chief temple. From the picture of Shapour Shahmishan one can trace the history of engravings. An engraving made approximately 262 years B.C. shows that Shapour Shahmishan was not alive and Dinak, his wife, ruled his territory. This shows that the images were engraved before 262 A.D.

Maybe appointment of Hormozd Ardeshir as crown prince led to the engraving. On the breast of Shapour's horse there are inscriptions in Parthian, Middle Persian and Greek languages. The Middle Persian text says: "This is the portrait of the grand mubid, the Mazda worshipper Shapour, the king of kings of Iran and Atiran whose face resembled that of God. He was son of Mazda worshipper Ardeshir, the king of kings of Iran whose face resembles God and was a descendent of Papak Shah."

The history and particulars of reign of Shapour 1 (272-243 A.D.):

In this image only the image of Shapour I and Hormozd Ardeshir are portrayed with all their special features. On the right side of the image one can see the bust and writing by Mubid Kertir.

CORONATION

The third image in Naqshe Rajab is the coronation of Shapour I. Here the King is shown receiving the royal ring from the grand mubid. This is an imitation of the coronation of Ardeshir in Naqshe Rostam. Here also both the king and grand mubid are mounted on horse and they both wear the same dress. The only difference is that in Shapour's inscription the grand mubid is standing on the left side of the king and the man fallen on prostrate on the ground in Ardeshir's image is not shown in Shapour's image.



Fig. (Click to enlarge)

As mentioned earlier in this image the king is portrayed on the right side on a horseback stretching his hand to receive the royal ring from the grand mubid. A Grecian and Middle Persian text is inscribed on the breast of the king's horse. The Middle Persian text says:

"This is the portrait of Mazda worshiper, Shapour, the king of Iran and Aniran whose face resembles that of God. He is son of Mazda worshiper king Ardeshir, the king of kings and a descendent of Papak Shah."

The parts of the king's crown are not distinguished. Perhaps in this image the king is not portrayed with the crown of Shapour I. Thus there is a contrast between the royal ring and the inscription on the breast of the horse.

From the method of face sketching this image closely resembles the coronation of Bahram I in Bishapur. Such a resemble is not only visible in the combination of different parts such as the king's and grand mubid's dress and the sinews of the horse but even in small details such as the saddle and accouterments and special form of the royal ring and lace.

Such resemblance shows that these two images have been engraved at the same time. Although I cannot take the responsibility to solve the particulars of the king's image, I wish to remind the reader that I don't think the engraving was made in 243 A.D. when Shapour I was crowned.

On the contrary it seems that this image belongs to the end of the reign of Shapour I or the rule of Hormozd Ardeshir. In such a case one might say that the image was engraved after Shapour's death.

In this image the face of the king has been badly damaged and the details cannot be clearly distinguished. The grand mubid is wearing a corrugated crown and his curling hair is visible outside his crown. The woven hair falls on the neck and shoulder and his cloak is tied to his chest by ornamental fastenings under the pearl necklace and the trousers above his leg carries tender plaits.

The neck and breast of the horse is adorned by round images in the form of chains and the above mentioned rectangular disk is shown in front of the horse's legs.

- FIROOZABAD CORONATION CEREMONY

In this image Ardeshir is shown on the right side with the royal crown which seems to have been installed overhead and the grand mubid is standing on the left side and is stretching the royal ring to Ardeshir. A fire brazier is set between the king and the grand mubid. Behind Ardeshir the representative of his dynasty is standing with a fan which holds over the king's head. Shapour is wearing the mark of crown prince and two elders wearing octagonal caps without any insignia are standing beside Shapour.



Height: 4.5 meters, length 23 meters
(Click to enlarge)

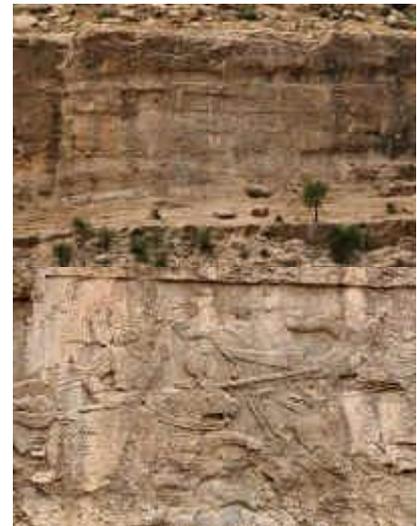
The image is related to the reign of Ardeshir from 225 to 243 A.D. and from the outstanding images and faces one can recognize that only Ardeshir and the grand mubid resemble each other.

SCENE OF BATTLE

In this image which is the largest icon surviving from the Sassanid period three scenes are portrayed:

a. Ardeshir is wearing a heavy metal armor, all in one piece, with a spear in his hand and Ardavan bears the same marks which is shown on his cap in Naqshe Rostam.

b. This image has been obliterated and it is difficult to fix its date. Here the king is wearing his fighting helmet. The helmet resembles a small crown surrounded by a dense hair. Part of the pieces of the image and the form of lace and method of dressing and especially the laces worn on the beard resemble the Naqshe Rostam image. This scene which depicts the king's battle is much similar to Naqshe Rostam from symbolic point of view. Here Ardeshir's victory over Ardalan has been portrayed. Meanwhile the marks worn by Ardavan is the same as in Naqshe Rostam. All these marks prove that the scene of battle was engraved at the end of Ardeshir's reign.



(Click to enlarge)

c. The military commander is wearing a heavy metal armor and helmet. It is difficult to determine the date of this image because the king has not been portrayed with his official crown but with a helmet. This cap resembles those which are printed on coins (a small crown with a lot of hair around it). From the point of view of shape of the lace, method of dressing and especially the lace of the beard, this face resembles the engraving in Naqshe Rostam.

The appearance of this image which portrays a scene of battle resembles the engraving in Naqshe Rostam. In this scene also the victory of Ardeshir over Ardavan has been depicted. Meanwhile Ardavan's royal marks are shown in both images. From all these factors once can conclude the scene of battle belongs to the end of Ardeshir's reign.

All art experts agree that the image was engraved at the beginning of Sasanian era. One can resort to the History of Tabari to describe the details of the image. In that book it is said that in a person to person battle between Ardeshir and Ardavan the 5th near Hormozdgan the latter was slain and the image has been apparently engraved to show that scene of battle.

- NAQSHE RUSTAM THE CORONATION SCENE

Ardeshir, sitting on horseback, is standing on the left side under the crown which seems to have been installed overhead and the grand Mubid, also sitting on the horseback, is standing on the right side and is extending the royal ring to Ardeshir. Ardeshir's beard is adorned with a lace and under the feet of his horse Ardavan the 5th is lying prostrate on the ground. An elliptic cap adorned with pearls at the margin is lying under the horse's leg. The hair of Satan (Ahriman) resembles a curling snake and the bridle of Ardeshir's horse is adorned by pieces which portray a lion. On the breast of the king's horse there are Parthian, Grecian and Middle Persian inscriptions. The Middle Persian says:



Fig. (Click to enlarge)

"This is the grand mubid, Ardeshir, the king of kings of Iran, whose face resembles that of God and is the son of Papak Shah."

Another inscription in Middle Persian, Parthian and Grecian on the breast of the horse of the grand mubid says "This is grand mubid (which is called Boroy in Grecian language)". The image is 4.20 meters high and 6.65 meters long.

The dress of the grand mubid and the king is according to religious traditions (all the garments and royal marks in Sasanian images are repeated). Since the fourth century A.D. the marks of coronation in the official image of the king has changed.

In those times the symbols and royal insignias were important parts of a king's image and the dress of the grand mubid did not change until the end of Sasanian Dynasty. From the time of Naqshe Rostam under the reign of Nersi almost in every coronation scene important personalities are mounted on the horse. Thus Naqshe Rostam is in fact an example of coronation of Sasanian kings at the beginning of that dynasty.

In this scene the crown of Ardeshir I is the same which had been printed on coins which appeared after the engraving in Naqshe Rostam at the end of fourth century or the beginning of fifth century A.D. One important and official feature of the king's face is the lace enveloping the beard. Such laces are seen in all images from Shapour I onward and they were portrayed for the first time in Naqshe Rostam.

THE SCENE OF VICTORY

Emperor Shapour has engraved the detail of his victory over Valerianus. A giant image in Naqshe Rostam from Shapour shows that the king has forgiven the conquered Roman emperor. The king arrives at the scene mounted on a horse and the horse has lifted his right leg. The corrugated royal crown and the woven disc on it is so high that it is portrayed in a semi-circular form in the margin of the stone. The end of the king's curling and dense beard is compressed in a circle. His dense curling hair is shown at his back. Behind it the laces which form the royal dress with parallel pleats are visible. The king is wearing a tight jacket and his trousers is pleated on his leg.



Fig. (Click to enlarge)

The king is wearing a necklace and is seated on an ornamented saddle and is holding his sword by his left hand and extends the token of forgiveness to Valerianus who has kneeled before him. The emperor is still

wearing his laureled crown and his Roman cloak which shows that he has hastened to the king to beg his forgiveness. He has bent his right leg humbly. This is the best image surviving from Sasanian period. From the point of beauty and attractiveness figures in this scene look as if they are alive.

An Iranian is seen behind the king's horse lifting his hand as a token of respect. Under that man an inscription is made in Pahlavi language which has been destroyed in the course of time. This face seems to have been engraved on the stone at a later date. The same image with slight changes can be seen in the vicinity of Shapour west of Istakhr.

The victory of Iranian king over the Roman emperor has been engraved in Shapour Mountain as well.

CORONATION CEREMONY

Nersi has engraved his coronation ceremony in Naqshe Rostam in the ancient form. This is a standard and ancient method of coronation. In other words the king is receiving the laced ring which is the royal insignia from the grand mubid. Here the grand mubid is a woman and according to Zareh is Anahita. The king is wearing an ordinary ticket jacket. The crown worn by Nersi in some coins shows a short cap with vertical lines with a big woven disc over it while the dense curling hairs of the king spread over his shoulders.



Fig. (Click to enlarge)

His pointed beard which is tied with a ring at the edge, the laces dancing behind the head, and the pearl necklace are the standard royal marks from ancient times.

The grand mubid is wearing a wide corrugated crown on his head and a bunch of dense curling hair is exposed outside the crown. This is the special crown worn by the Sasanian royalty. The woven hair falls on the neck and shoulder and his cloak is tied to his chest by ornamental fastenings under the pearl necklace and he wears a belt over his clock.

THE KING AND HIS COURTIERS

Bahram II is portrayed here in full length. On the left side the bust of the king's wife (with a hat bearing a horse's front part) and the crown prince with a cap bearing the front part of a bird are seen surrounded by elders. The date of inscription is 283 A.D. because in this image one can see Bahram Jr., son of Bahram II, who was appointed as crown prince.

THE SCENE OF BATTLE

Hormozd, wearing a crown and royal dress, has hurled down by spear a military commander (Qaren) from his horse. The commander is wearing coat of mail and a Roman helmet and the cap of the officer bears an insignia. Behind the king one can see a warrior wearing coat of mail and helmet and hoisting a flag (two poles placed vertically one each other like a cross and tassels hanging on both sides).

The image shows the history of reign of King Hormozd (years 302-309 A.D.).

BISHABOUR - TANG-E CHOGAN

CORONATION CEREMONY

At the right side Shapour is seen mounted on a horse and stretching his hand to pick up the royal ring. On the left side a figure is mounted on a horse delivering the royal ring to Shapour. Gordianus, the defeated Roman emperor, is shown under the feet of Shapour's horse and another man is lying under the feet of the grand mubid. Between the king Philip the Arab, the Roman emperor, is kneeling on the ground.

The pieces worn by the figures in the image point to the date of the image which refers the 243 A.D. wars and coronation of the king. The image was engraved on the rock after the Shapour's coronation and during

Nowruz, the Iranian new year.

In the past it was thought that the inscription was related to Shapour's war with Roman emperor Philip, the Arab, and his victory over that emperor.

SCENE OF VICTORY

Shapour's victory over the Roman emperor has been engraved in two big images at Shapour Mountain (Bishabour, Fars) but it has been damaged in the course of time.

In one image Shapour is seen mounted on a horse and Siriadis is on foot. A man has fallen under the king's horse and the Roman emperor is kneeling in front of the king. The goddess of victory is flying overhead. At the left and right side two rows of Iranian infantrymen are portrayed showing different categories of Iranian soldiers and their weapons.



Fig. (Click to enlarge)

A far bigger image shows many figures standing in four rows from above to below. In the middle the Iranian king is portrayed mounted on a horse and Valerianus, the Roman emperor, is standing bareheaded in front of the king begging for forgiveness. The king is mounted on a fat horse and tramples upon a man who has fallen under his horse.

Siriadis is standing in front of the king. He has lifted his right hand and swears to remain faithful to the Shapour's heir apparent and the king is caressing his bare head. Opposite the king a man is standing who looks like a Roman. In front of the king 240 Roman officers are standing in a line and behind them four rows of 18 Iranian elders.

A big disc is placed on the king's head which serves as his crown and dancing laces are raised behind the king.

CORONATION SCENERY

Bahram I, mounted on a horse, is standing on the right side. He stretches his right hand to pick up the royal ring from the grand mubid. The following is inscribed in Middle Persian on Bahram's chest:

"This is Nersi, the Mazda worshipper king of Iran and Aniran, whose face resembles that of God. He is the son of Shapour, Ahura Mazda worshipper, the king of Iran and Aniran who has a divine face and was a descendent of Ardeshir, the king of kings.

BAHRAM II

The images of Bahram the Second can be easily divided into two parts: an earlier inscription and a later inscription. The scene of victory in Bishapour proves that there are two distinct images there. In one image the victory of Bahram over Hormozd, his nephew has been portrayed. Hormozd had been the governor of Turestan, Sekestan and India and had perhaps been appointed as crown prince.

Hormozd revolted in 283 A.D. but was severely defeated and his title which was Sekestanshah and the regent, was transferred to Bahram Jr., son of Bahram II. From that date the image of Bahram II was engraved in all official Sassanid works and in all these images he is portrayed with his wife and courtiers but without a successor.

SCENE OF VICTORY

This image is divided into two parts. In the center and at an upper elevation Bahram is standing in front of the royal throne. He is holding a banner in his right hand and a sword in his left. On his right side the Iranian warriors carry their prisoners and on his left his elders are portrayed.

At the left and at a lower elevation Bahram's special guard and courtiers are portrayed who are leading the king's horse. At the right hand side the Iranian army is shown bringing war prisoners and booty. One of these soldiers is carrying a head whose helmet proves to be Hormozd, the slain king of Sekestan.

The engraving of the king's crown does not appear to have been finished yet. Nevertheless the wings of the crown and the disc mounted on it can be distinguished.

- DARABGARD

In the middle of the image the crown of Ardeshir I is portrayed. Roman emperor Gordianus III is seen under the huff of the king's horse. Two elders are portrayed in front of the king. On the left side the royal guard and elders and courtiers and on the right side the Roman army are portrayed. From the royal crown one can deduce that the two images portray the victory of Ardeshir the First over Gordianus and the war between Iran and Rome. The special lace on the king's beard shows that the image was engraved during Ardeshir's reign or at the beginning of the reign of Shapour I or before the latter's coronation in April 243 A.D.

In the past the image was ascribed to the victory of Shapour I.

- BARAM DALK

This image is divided into two parts. The upper part. In this part the chief lady (Shapour Dokhtak) is portrayed with pleated dress stretching her hand to receive a flower from one of the elders who wears an elliptic cap, royal dress and sword.

At the lower part Bahram II is portrayed stretching his hand to receive the royal ring from the same person who is engraved in the upper part.

In the coronation image (upper image) Shapour Dokhtak, the elder wife of Bahram II, is portrayed and the coronation of Bahram is shown in the lower part. In both these images the royal insignia is not presented by the grand mubid Mazda worshipper but by Mubid Kertir, his representative on earth.

The date of the image can be traced in the coins of Bahram II. In these coins Shapour Dokhtak is portrayed without a cap and royal crown and the crown of Bahram II resembles those which are printed in petty coins or coronation coins. These prove that the image was engraved around 276 A.D.

The date and particulars of the reign of Bahram II with Izad Anahita, his wife, are portrayed in the image.

- BAHRAM'S IMAGE

The king and his court: In this image in Sarab Bahram (Mamasani) Bahram is standing in front of his royal throne surrounded by two elders at his two sides. On the left side mubid Kertir (who can be known from his cap) is standing and the two figures to the right seem to be Farmzar and Hoonam.

The image was engraved before 283 A.D. because the image does not show the king's successor.

KOYOM, THE IMAGE OF BAHRAM II

The image has been engraved at Koyom village, 39 km from Shiraz and near Qasroldasht, but regrettably it is so damaged that the details have been destroyed.

Bahram II is shown in full length lifting his right hand as a sign of prayer and holding a sword in his left.

The crown shown in that image are printed in his coins which prove that the image was related to the beginning of his rule.

BAHRAM'S HUNTING SCENE

Sarmashhad is a village west of Jarreh and south of Kazeroon and near Abgineh bridge. From that village the road leads to Famour and from there to Balladeh and Jarehta, 30 km from Mashhad. This is a difficult mountainous passage which must be crossed either by horse or foot. The plain at Sarmashhad stretch from south to north and its distance from east to west is about 10 kilometers and is surrounded by high mountains.

There is a Pahlavi script at the western mountain of Sarmashhad at a an elevation of 25 meters on the mountain breast. The image is 5 x 2.5 meters in size and portrays Bahram II. The inscription is one of the four Pahlavi inscriptions from Kertir, the grand mubid, and the subject is the same as in Naqshe Rostam. The grand mubid describes his efforts to consolidate the Zoroastrian religion and his success in that direction. He also speaks about punishment of sinners and praise of the virtuous and discovery of things which were revealed to him in a dream.

Herzfeld was the first scholar who discovered this inscription in 1924 and published a short article about that in 1926 in Zimg, a German newspaper. In his subsequent trips to Iran Herzfeld conducted a more careful study of the images and recorded his observations in his book called Iran in the Ancient East which was published in 1941.

Bahram II is cutting a lion into two halves with his sword. Another lion has fallen under the feet of the king. Apparently these lions had attacked his wife and child because by his left hand Bahram is holding Shapour Dokhtak, his wife. Kertir and his elders are standing behind the king.

The exact date of engraving seems to be in the ninth decade of the third century A.D. (390 A.D.) because here Bahram, his wife and successor are portrayed. Bahram's wife is wearing the same cap but his child is wearing the insignia of Sekestanshah.

HAJI ABAD INSCRIPTION

Haji Abad inscription belongs to Shapour I and is written in 115 letters in Sassanid Pahlavi and Parthian Pahlavi languages, but so far it has not been fully deciphered. Translation of the 15 lines is as follows:

"This image shows throwing an arrow by me, Shapour, the king of kings, the king of Iran, an image of God, son of Ardeshir, the king of kings of Iran and the grand son of Papak Shah. I hurled this bow in front of my elders and army commanders. When I descended into this valley I threw an arrow but there was no place where a target could be set. I ordered that a target should be set up at a farther distance and those who succeeded in hitting the target are considered good archers."

http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Archaeology/Sasanian/sasanian_image.htm