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OBSERVATIONS ON THE BIRTH AND DEVELOPMENT
OF THE SASANIAN ROCK RELIEFS CRAFT TRADITION

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Abstract: The group of the Sasanian rock reliefs is one of the most important documents to understand the ideology of the Sasanian dynasty of Iran (from the 3rd to the 7th century AD) because the main role is played by the king, represented in various actions: investiture, or gift of the *khwarrah* by a deity; homage to the king by the family and dignitaries; king and his entourage; victory and triumph over the king's enemies; individual equestrian battles. Initially, scholars were mainly interested in the interpretation of the motifs represented and the identification of the characters who animated the scenes, based on the comparison with the monetary portraits, identified by a legend. Moreover, the figurative language of the reliefs is not entirely clear, and sometimes it is quite difficult to interpret complex scenes safely. The codes, expressed by the postures, gestures, hairstyles and attributes of the characters, which were clear to contemporaries, often appear enigmatic to us.

However, the purpose of this work is not to discuss the different interpretations proposed for the iconographic motifs, but to study the theme of the birth and development of this or these craft traditions, with a methodology that starts from the assumption that the complex technical aspects underlying their production characterize the works of art in relation to the skills shared by the craftsmen of the different «production centers»: they are linked to a school that keeps a certain tradition alive, with a slow evolution, on which, however, an external agent can act quickly.

Keywords: Iran, the Sasanian dynasty, rock reliefs, tradition craftsmanship, sculpture.

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The group of rock reliefs represents one of the most important documents for understanding the ideology of the Sasanian dynasty, the last of the ancient Eastern empires [Harper, 1986, p. 585] but at the same time one of the foundations of the subsequent medieval Islamic civilization.

Mainly on account of the richness of their themes and iconographic motifs, a powerful visual counterpart to the textual sources on this dynasty, the large panels of monumental appearance soon have started to arise the interest of scholars.

Thirty-nine Sasanian rock reliefs are known: thirty are located in Fars, in the south of the Iranian Plateau, six others are in Taq-e Bostan, near Kermanshah, in the western part of the Plateau; one relief is at Salmas in the West Azerbaijan province of Iran, in the north-western part of the Plateau, while the last relief was discovered in 2002 in Bactria, in northern Afghanistan. Finally, a relief initially in Ray, near Tehran, is known only from 19th century drawings.

The reliefs are concentrated in the first two centuries of the dynasty, the 3rd and 4th centuries; no reliefs are known for the 5th and 6th centuries, until the advent of King Khusraw II, at the end of the 6th-first quarter of the 7th century.

On the Sasanian rock reliefs, the main role is played by the king. The subjects of the representations are thus: the investiture, or bestowal of the *khwarrah* – the royal power of divine origin – to the king by a deity; the homage paid to the king by his family and dignitaries;

the king and his entourage; the victory and triumph over the king's enemies; equestrian fights with the king engaged.

But unlike the Roman bas-reliefs, which were the part of the urban architecture and celebrated historical actions, the Sasanian rock reliefs were more often sculpted in isolated or at any rate barely accessible places, and in positions that didn't allow for a close-up view. They were always near a water point – maybe now dried up – because water was considered to be the element of residence of *khwarrah* [Callieri, 2006(2)].

It is therefore clear that their main function was not to visually tell the people important events in the king's career: for this function the reliefs would need to be easily accessible. On the contrary, the location of the reliefs indicates that they intended to evoke meanings of a spiritual, even magical nature [Vanden Berghe, 1983, p. 58]: they were not testimonies of actual episodes of historical nature but rather symbolic and magical representations, also if they depict events. At the same time, they did not have an expressly religious function, for religious iconography is absent: deities were indeed represented only with the sole function of enhancing royal dignity.

Obviously, the aspects that initially captured the researchers' interest were mainly the interpretation of the motifs represented and the identification of the characters animating the scenes, the latter being rarely completed by inscriptions. Thanks to the comparison with the portraits depicted on coin obverses, on which the Sasanian rulers are always represented with a personal crown and identified by a legend, it was relatively easy to identify the ruler on a large part of the reliefs, and thus to propose interpretations for the various scenes on the basis of the knowledge of the political history of the dynasty.

On the other hand, the reliefs' figurative iconographic language is not self evident, and a safe interpretation of complex scenes at times is difficult [Vanden Berghe, 1980]. The language expressed by the postures, hairstyles and attributes of the characters, which was clear to the contemporaries, often appears enigmatic to modern observers.

In spite of the vast bibliography on the subject, we are still far from having reached a broad overall consensus on many of the aspects relating to Sassanid rock reliefs.

Numerous recent studies, on isolated reliefs or on specific themes, have brought about sometimes substantial modifications to what can be considered as the *communis opinio*, expressed by the positions presented by the Belgian archaeologist Louis Vanden Berghe in the catalogue of the 1983 photographic exhibition «Reliefs rupestres de l'Iran ancien» [Vanden Berghe, 1983] and shared by one of the latest overviews on this subject [Canepa, 2013, p. 862–863].

From the point of view of the interpretations of the iconographies of the reliefs, therefore, an overall work of comparative evaluation of the new interpretations against those of the *communis opinio*, even those hitherto considered to be certain, would be necessary, with preference to a global approach that seeks to identify the codes of the language of the Sasanian reliefs, both at grammatical and syntactical level, as suggested by A. Soudavar [Soudavar, 2009].

However, the purpose of the present work is not to discuss the different interpretations proposed for the iconographic motifs, not only because the subject is so vast that it would require a monographic study but also because most of the existing studies have already concentrated onto this subject.

I would like, rather, to dedicate my contribution to the subject of the birth and development of the craft tradition which is behind these reliefs, meaning, as craft tradition, that of handing down from master to student technical skills, iconographic schemes and stylistic approaches elaborated in a long process that feeds on commissions: this subject has been touched on only indirectly by a few scholars and I addressed it for the first time in a comprehensive way in one of the «Conférences d'études iraniennes Ehsan et Latife Yarshater», published as a chapter of

the monograph of 2014 [Callieri, 2014, p. 129–161]. Subsequent reflections suggested that I return to the subject with the present paper, which allows me to better focus about subjects in which new ideas developed.

I would like to point out that the methodology of investigation based on the assumption that technical and stylistic aspects mostly characterize the works of art in relation to the mechanisms of their production by the different “production centers” – from the organization of the worksite to the specialized craftsmanship, from the sketching of the drawing to the tools used for the realization of the different phases of the work – is what I learned during my many years of activity with the Italian Archaeological Mission of IsMEO in the Swat Valley (Pakistan), under the expert guidance of Domenico Faccenna, a scholar who cultivated intense scientific, academic and human relations with the great names of Soviet Oriental Studies, from Boris A. Litvinskij to Boris I. Marshak, from Grigorij M. Bongard-Levin to Boris Ja. Staviskij. This work is written as a humble homage to these masters.

An important element of investigation into craft traditions, in addition to those of design and composition, and of sculptural technique and instruments used, is indeed that of technical-stylistic rendering, which confronts the way in which iconographic details are rendered in the various reliefs.

This statement derives from the observation that, in each artistic medium, every craftsman during the apprenticeship phase learns from his master certain ways of dealing technically with the problems related to the realization of the different elements of the image. This baggage serves the former apprentice, who has become a craftsman, to work with more confidence using the previous tradition, unconsciously taking this tradition through decades and even centuries. It is modified only for specific needs, which may be linked to technical problems, such as the use of different materials or new tools that come from abroad and that some more open-minded craftsmen laboriously begin to use, or to choices made by the client. A careful study of the details of the images, therefore, allows to recognize what perpetuates a tradition and characterizes a «production center» as a virtual workshop linked to craftsmen.

An analytical comparison of such elements in each Sasanian rock relief and subsequently in a comparative perspective between other reliefs of the same site and then of other sites would require a detailed and thorough autoptic examination which has not been possible so far. The observations proposed here should therefore be only understood as an attempt made on the basis of quick observations of the reliefs and a more detailed work on photographic documentation. Nevertheless, they allow to highlight groups of craftsmen-workers who can be active in a continuous way in a single center or move over the territories of the empire according to the various needs. In this way, we can pass from a purely technical analysis to the study of the production centers.

The subject of production centers is therefore of major importance, not only for the understanding of each of the themes and motifs, but also for understanding the role of this production in Iran during the Sasanian era. Understanding the mechanisms of production, the subdivision of the various phases of work among the workers; understanding whether there was a centralized workshop the members of which moved to meet the demands of the empire or, conversely, several workshops working simultaneously; understanding the dynamics of the birth and development of the production centers, given that the Sasanian dynasty created original rock reliefs from a tradition too remote in time to have allowed continuity: these are questions of primary importance which deserve adequate attention, as they link the works of art to the artisans who produced them and to their social context.

The beginnings of the production of Sasanian reliefs coincide with the reign of the first Sasanian ruler Ardashir I, who reigned as a King of Kings between 224 and 241 AD. The decision to adopt this particular form of expression, an ancient tradition used on the Iranian

plateau since the 2nd millennium BC to express themes underlying dynastic ideology but silent since long, must be attributed to him.

For this founding action of a new artistic medium, Ardashir obviously needed craftsmen with the capacity to receive his commissions, thus giving life to a new tradition. As pointed out by T. Kawami, stone sculpture is one of the most complex artistic means, involving the use of different tools for sculpting, the creation of large-scale compositions and the organization of a complex workshop (cf.: [Kawami, 2013, p. 751]).

In order to locate the possible origins of these craftsmen, it is necessary to reconstruct a chronological sequence between the reliefs representing Ardashir I, in order to look for indications of possible models in the nearest predecessors.

There is no uniform view of this problem. The only relief on which opinions do not diverge is that at Salmas, near the lake of Orumiyeh (West Azerbaijan), in which the joint presence of the figures of Ardashir and Shabühr I refers to the period of co-regency at the end of the reign of Ardashir I [Hinz, 1969, p. 115–143].

As for the chronological sequence of the other reliefs, scholars' opinions differ, particularly with regard to the position of the two reliefs of Firuzabad, the site in south-central Fars from where Ardashir started his ascent to power. These reliefs are those of Firuzabad I (*Fig. 1*)¹ which symbolically represents the military victory of the Sasanian army guided by Ardashir I over the army of the last Arsacid King of kings Ardavan IV, and Firuzabad II (*Fig. 2*), with the investiture of standing Ardashir by Ohrmazd also standing in front of him.

G. Herrmann considers Firuzabad II earlier on the basis of the simplicity of its compositional scheme and its technique, which she sees close to the reliefs of Elymais. Firuzabad I, even though with its not very marked relief but characterized in her opinion by a good surface finish and good modelling, would be later [Herrmann, 2000, p. 38–39].

The *communis opinio*, on the contrary, accepts the chronological sequence Firuzabad I – Firuzabad II [Vanden Berghe, 1983, p. 62]².

From an iconographic point of view, the Firuzabad I relief remains in the wake of the Iranian tradition of the Arsacid period, which is familiar with victory of a warrior on horseback such as at Bisotun [von Gall, 1990, p. 11–13]. From the point of view of the technical and stylistic rendering, Firuzabad I is placed in a horizon very close to that of the rock reliefs of the Elymais³ (southwestern Iran), commonly dated to the 2nd–3rd centuries AD. It seems reasonable to propose that Ardashir, wishing to organize a building site for the realization of the relief, had recourse to active labor available in the neighboring region. Indeed, Fars had not produced any rock reliefs for centuries, given that the latest pre-Sasanian sculptures, in the so-called Temple of the Fratarakās of Persepolis and at Qir-Karzin in southern Fars, are both safely considered earlier than the 2nd century BC [Sinisi, 2013, n. 127].

On the Elymaean reliefs, as on the first relief of Ardashir I, the main way of obtaining the figures consists in carving the background, around the figures, to make them appear in relief: this technical similarity was already pointed out by V. Lukonin [Lukonin, 1977, p. 138]. At Firuzabad I, as in Elymais, the following step is more of a «drawing» than sculptural nature; the plastic and volumetric modelling is limited to the upper part of the figures, mainly to the heads of the figures, while the rest of the sculpted surfaces remain flat⁴. The composition is

¹ Illustrations for the article are placed on the colour plate.

² The difficulty of dating the Firuzabad I relief is also increased by the fact that, as underlined by V. Lukonin [Lukonin, 1969, p. 47–48; Lukonin, 1979, p. 18–19], the king wears not a crown but a war helmet.

³ This origin had been first suggested by P.O. Harper [Harper, 1981, p. 96]; see also [Herrmann, 2000, p. 36; Sinisi, 2013, n. 127].

⁴ In 2014, commenting on H. von Gall's remark that the whole lower part of the relief is damaged [von Gall, 1990, p. 20], I expressed the doubt that this was more probably never finished [Callieri, 2014, p. 138 and n. 403]. I have to thank M.L. Amadori, professor of archaeometry in the University of Urbino, Italy, for having explained to me, during a

also rather simple, despite the effort made to give the impression of movement to the relief, and the rendering of the figures of the three single combats is rather clumsy. The horses in particular, which will benefit from a naturalistic rendering in the following reliefs, have stocky bodies and small legs, like that of the Elymaean relief of Tang-e Sarvak, Rock III [Kawami, 2013, fig. 38.109].

The two reliefs with scenes of investiture on foot, Firuzabad II and Naqsh-e Rajab III (Fig. 3)⁵, constitute an original elaboration that transforms the investiture scenes known in the Arsacid world, such as the relief of the Arsacid era, possibly of king Gotarzes I or Gotarzes II, at Sarpol-e Zohab [Trümpelmann, 1977, p. 16; Vanden Berghe, 1983, p. 45].

From the iconographic point of view, both reliefs have a closer precedent in the stele of Susa representing the Arsacid King of kings Ardavan IV who invests the satraps of Susa, Khwasak, dated AD 215 [Kawami, 1987, p. 48–51, 164–167].

From a technical point of view, the two reliefs depicting the on-foot investitures show a modelling much more evolved than at Firuzabad I. The figures have indeed acquired a greater plasticity.

It is the relief of Naqsh-e Rajab III⁶ that appears to be the more mature of the two in the greater dearth of details. Therefore, it is the relief of Firuzabad II that marks the radical change from a completely flat and design-oriented conception to an approach that endows the figures with a remarkable volumetry, despite the fact that, according to D. Huff [Huff, 2008, p. 39], it was not finished.

The relief with the investiture scene on horseback (Fig. 4), carved in the location of a Palaeo- and Neo-Elamite natural sacred place at the western end of the rock cliff of Naqsh-e Rostam I, outside the area with the tombs of the Achaemenid kings enclosed by a fortification wall, corresponds to the final phase of relief production by Ardashir I, and illustrates «Ardashir's success in developing a distinctive visual language suitable for reproduction on a large scale» [Herrmann, 2000, p. 38–39].

The king, on the left, receives from the god Ohrmazd, on the right, a ribboned ring, traditionally interpreted as the symbol of *khwarrah*⁷, the «royal glory» which allows the king to reign, while the figures under the horses' hooves are respectively on the left the defeated Arsacid king, on the right the evil principle Ahriman, represented as a demonic creature: a visual expedient to demonize the opponent (see also: [Lukonin, 1969, p. 48]).

Various elements confirm the position of this relief at the end of the chronological sequence. From an iconographic point of view, the presence of the Arsacid King of kings under the hooves of the horse of Ardashir I indicates a date necessarily later than the battle of Hormizdagan of AD 224/225, in which the Sasanian king defeated Ardavan IV: a fact which, however, is also shared by the two previous reliefs. What is absolutely different is the execution technique and style, because this work is not only carved in higher relief but also characterized by a rendering of some iconographic features which betrays a naturalistic approach despite the static and majestic posture common to other Sasanian reliefs. Some details also are an intentional reference to the reliefs which were visible in the Achaemenid

visit to the site, that the relief has a real deterioration which is due to the nature of the geological formation, alternating rock layers of different compactness, which makes some parts of the rock extremely weak.

⁵ The king on these two reliefs wears the same crown which appears on coins dated to after the victory on Ardavan IV by V. Lukonin [Lukonin, 1969, p. 47–48] and M. Alram [Alram, Gyselen, 2003, p. 148]. B. Overlaet has recently proposed a stimulating but not enough solid interpretation according to which the character who confers the ribboned ring to the sovereign is a priest and not Ohrmazd [Overlaet, 2013].

⁶ The site of Naqsh-e Rajab must have been a true sacred place in correspondence with a spring that has now dried up [Callieri 2006(2), p. 342, figs. 14a–b], a “dynastic temple”, according to V. Lukonin on the site of the first coronation, and linked to the foundation of the Sasanian state [Lukonin, Dandamaev, 1971, p. 163].

⁷ B. Kaim has proposed to interpret this ring as a symbol of covenant [Kaim, 2009].

reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam and in Persepolis, only 5 km away [Trümpelmann, 1977, p. 62; Herrmann, 1981, p. 156; Canepa, 2013, p. 873].

The reference to the Achaemenid monuments which the Sasanian considered built by their semi-mythical ancestors⁸ is evident also in the fact that all the relief parts of the panel have been completely polished, even though the background is not polished: indeed polishing, carried out through abrasives, is a time-consuming process which implied a high cost [Nylander, 1970, p. 32; Wootton, Russell, Rockwell, 2013, p. 13] and in Iran had not been used in the long time-span after the latest sculptures executed in a Hellenistic style, around the beginning of the 1st century AD [Callieri, 2007, p. 72ff.].

The Sasanian ruler's choice of a polished finish and of iconographic details recalling the Persepolitan reliefs was not the first of the intentional references to the Achaemenid dynasty, which started in the transposition of the Egyptian cavetto motif visible on the standing architraves of the doors and windows of the Tachara on to the plaster decoration of the main *ivân* of Ardashir's castle of Qal'eh Dokhtar near Firuzabad, built before the victory on Artabanus of AD 224/225, with pure decorative function. The same motif was also used for the decoration of the domed square halls of the Ardashir palace in the plain of Firuzabad.

The close bond with the Achaemenid dynasty in Ardashir's reliefs no doubt testifies to his admiration for the Achaemenid kings and his desire to copy their production.

However, scholars have often forgotten a fundamental question, namely how the desire to imitate Achaemenid art and its formal perfection (see lastly [Canepa, 2013, p. 873; Canepa, 2018, p. 260]) was made technically possible: the «detailed study» of Achaemenid sculpture, as it was suggested [Canepa, 2010, p. 576], required in any case great technical skills and the mere observation would not have allowed an inexperienced sculptor to succeed in the imitation of one of the most refined sculptural productions of all Antiquity.

The technical and stylistic distance between the first relief of Firuzabad I and that of Naqsh-e Rostam I, widely acknowledged, is enormous. This difference becomes huge if we remember that the entire production of the reliefs took place over a relatively short period of time, which can be fixed between AD 228/229 or 229/230 and AD 238/239, because the *korymbos* on the royal crown is present only in Ardashir's coins minted after the victory over Ardavan IV: and M. Alam gives these dates for the concerned crowns [Alam, Gyselen, 2003, p. 148]. Already in 1969 on the basis of coinage V. Lukonin had proposed similar dates specifically linked to the reliefs: Firuzabad II and Naqsh-e Rostam from the mid to the end of the 230s, Naqsh-e Rostam I from the end of the 230s to the beginning of the 240s [Lukonin, 1969, p. 47–48]⁹. The time frame of not more than 10 years based on the datings of the reliefs, and in any case that of Ardashir I's reign, cannot be considered sufficiently long to allow a sculptor of the level of the author of Firuzabad I to progress independently, arriving only with his practice at a level such that he can produce the relief of Naqsh-e Rostam I. Any art historian could share the view that such an evolution is absolutely not possible in such a short time span except with the intervention of an external master.

A possible explanation of this problem is suggested by the fact that clear reference to the Achaemenid kings was also exhibited by the polished stone blocks masonry of the fire temple at the center of the town of Ardashir Khwarrah (Firuzabad), known as Takht-e Neshin. In the study of this monument, D. Huff has found that the measurement unit used for its construction

⁸ Those who built Persepolis are likely to have been identified with the “ancestors” (*āhēnagān*) mentioned in the inscription of Shabahr I at Naqsh-e Rostam [Callieri, 2011, p. 189–190 with bibliography].

⁹ On Firuzabad I, on the other hand, Lukonin expressed an opinion contrary to that of most other scholars, that is, denying that it depicts the battle of Hormizdagan and the victory over Ardavan IV; the absence of a real crown, replaced by a war helmet, leaves the scholar free to underline some affinities with the relief of Naqsh-e Rostam – which we clearly see as completely contradictory – and to date it as akin to this in the final phase of the reign of Ardashir [Lukonin, 1969, p. 187].

is not the oriental ell of 46.50 cm but a unit of 29.27 cm, derived from the Roman foot (*pes*) of 29.60 cm [Huff, 1972, p. 540]. On this basis, the German scholar hypothesised the cooperation of masons brought from the Roman East [Huff, 1972, p. 539–540], even though when he published his architectural study of the monument there had been no evidence for Ardashir's military advances onto the Roman East. This hypothesis has found support in the subsequent works of historians which threw light on Ardashir's successful confrontation with Rome, culminating in the conquest of northern Mesopotamia in AD 235/236 [Kettenhofen, 1995, p. 177; Dignas, Winter, 2007, p. 19] or AD 237/238 [Edwell, 2008, p. 167, 178; Edwell 2013, p. 843], and has also been more recently confirmed by the German scholar [Huff, 2008, p. 53].

It therefore seems quite reasonable to us to think that Ardashir I, in his concern to imitate also the elegant Achaemenian sculptural production, called upon an outside sculptor of a remarkable technical level, whose most important contribution was to give impetus to an existing workshop, without necessarily introducing Roman iconographic motifs as proposed by H. Luschei [Luschei, 1986, p. 379] and M. Canepa [Canepa, 2009, p. 256, fn. 97]. The Sassanid sovereign could have spotted him during his conquests of the eastern territories of the Roman Empire in the same way as proposed by D. Huff for the architecture of the Takht-e Neshin.

To sum up, therefore, the production of the rock reliefs from the time of Ardashir I must be attributed to a workshop concentrating on holding the skills of the late Arsacid period craftsmen from Elymais, who were entrusted with the task of elaborating a new iconography based on the previous ones from the Arsacid period and which shows predecessors in the pre-Sasanian graffiti incised on the stone blocks of the so-called Harem of Xerxes and Tachara at Persepolis ([Callieri, 2006(1)]; see also: [Canepa, 2013, p. 873]), but M. Canepa's suggestion to attribute Firuzabad I to a «burgeoning workshop descended from the elaborate early preimperial graffiti etched into the window frames at Persepolis» [Canepa, 2013, p. 873] should be discarded «in the light of the significant difference between tiny etchings of small dimensions and rock carving of large dimensions, the former resembling drawings, the latter being major works of sculpture» [Callieri, 2017, p. 230].

The workshop, which would have started working in Ardashir Khwarrah for the relief Firuzabad I in a purely Elymaean approach [Callieri, 2017, p. 230], would have received the support of a more experienced sculptor, probably arrived with the same modality proposed for the construction of the Takht-e Neshin, would have experienced a technical improvement and gained that more volumetric rendering of the figures which characterizes the relief Firuzabad II, in which the new iconography of the investiture scene was first created¹⁰. The same workshop would then have moved to Estakhr, the main Sasanian town of Fars, about 200 km north of Firuzabad. In the vicinity of this city, it would have produced the relief of Naqsh-e Rajab III and, with an accurate study of the reliefs of the Achaemenid period still visible in the Terrace of Persepolis, would have succeeded in achieving the formal perfection of the relief of Naqsh-e Rostam I, which would serve as a model for later representations of figures on horseback.

¹⁰ In my work of 2014, I proposed a different sequence, with the intervention of more experienced sculptors related only to the Naqsh-e Rostam I relief [Callieri, 2014, p. 142]. However, during the first season of the new Iranian-Italian project «From Firuzabad to the Persian Gulf», which started in November 2019, I was able to stay longer in front of the Firuzabad I and particularly of the Firuzabad II relief, that due to the complete drying-up of the river Tang-e Ab is now approachable to the base of the rocky side once lapped by river. There I have reached the conclusion that the fundamental point of passage that radically separates the two reliefs Firuzabad I and Firuzabad II is a volumetric rendering well present in the second and almost completely absent in the first. Ultimately the greater distance, which can only be justified by external intervention due to the short duration that makes internal evolution impossible, is not between Firuzabad II /Naqsh-e Rajab III and Naqsh-e Rostam I, but between Firuzabad I and Firuzabad II. This hypothetical contribution of the Roman-Eastern workers to Ardashir Khwarrah could be relative to the same time of the building of Takht-e Neshin (see *infra*).

Parallel to this technical success of the Persian craftsmen, another workshop or more probable some less-experienced craftsmen from the Estakhr workshop would have produced, without great technical skill [Canepa, 2013, p. 873], the relief of Salmas, in the distant territories of Armenia.

With the accession to the throne of Shabuhr I, the son of Ardashir, another situation occurred.

The production of reliefs by this king has been the subject of numerous studies, mainly concerning the identification of the Roman emperors defeated by Shabuhr, and which he constantly wanted to be represented in a symbolic way unifying events that took place over a period of sixteen years, between 244 and 260 AD, in a single scene; many of these studies propose hypotheses that contradict each other and it is difficult to see a *communis opinio*. The question is too complex to be synthesized in a few sentences [MacDermot, 1954]: the identification of the various figures of Romans proposed by Vanden Berghe [Vanden Berghe, 1983, p. 71] sees in the Roman emperor lying under the hooves of the horse Gordian III, in the Roman held by the hand of Shabuhr I, Philip the Arab and in the kneeling figure Valerian, the emperor captured in 260 BC who died in captivity, but I share the view of M. Canepa, who inverts the identification of Philip and Valerian [Canepa, 2013, p. 866], since the weakest of the three was in fact Philip, who surrendered before fighting.

Concerning the reliefs of Shabuhr I, there is a discussion among scholars about the relationship between the relief of Naqsh-e Rostam VI, in which the king on horseback is facing only two Roman emperors, and the three reliefs of Bishapur which include a scene of investiture on horseback with two defeated Roman emperors (Bishapur I), a large scale composition with a central panel dedicated to the emperors and side panels for Persian horsemen and non-Persian ally soldiers (Bishapur II: *Fig. 5*) and a large complex scenes of triumph populated by rows of soldiers, victorious and defeated (here Bishapur III).

To these we also add the relief of Darabgerd, variously interpreted, in which the contrasting elements of a king who wears the crown of Ardashir I but who faces the three Roman emperors defeated by Shabuhr I coexist: perhaps with a greater variability in the interpretations of scholars, the *communis opinio* however assigns the relief to Shabuhr I, interpreting it as a dedication of his victories to his father Ardashir I, who had begun campaigns against Rome.

Up to now, the explanatory proposals have mainly referred to a single chronological sequence, in which the reliefs of the two main sites, Naqsh-e Rostam/Naqsh-e Rajab and Bishapur, would occupy different positions.

The most reliable analysis by G. Herrmann, based on a close investigation of the technical-stylistic rendering of some significant iconographic details such as the belts and the cloaks, proposes a sequence with an earlier group, datable around AD 240, including the reliefs of Darab¹¹ and Naqsh-e Rajab I, followed by the two investiture scenes of Naqsh-e Rajab IV and Bishapur I, and a more recent group, datable around AD 260, consisting of the reliefs of Naqsh-e Rostam VI, Bishapur II and Bishapur III [Herrmann, 1989, p. 22]¹². Noteworthy is that since of the reliefs of Shabuhr I only that of Naqsh-e Rajab I presents the polishing, Herrmann believes that it can be considered

¹¹ Following in the footsteps of L. Trümpelmann [Trümpelmann, 1975, p. 16–18], M. Meyer identified two different phases in the Darab relief: an original one (Darab A) in the left half of the relief and one resulting from a rework (Darab B) in the right half of the relief [Meyer, 1990, p. 266–267].

¹² M. Meyer's position is different, placing all the reliefs of Shabuhr I in the years following 260 [Meyer, 1990, p. 284–286], with the exception of the first phase of the relief of Darab (Darab A), which she placed at the beginning of the reign of Shabuhr [Meyer, 1990, p. 274–276]. The polishing of Naqsh-e Rajab I, according to the scholar, would not have an origin in the chronology of the relief but would be linked to a choice of particular quality [Meyer, 1990, p. 288]. Also von Gall [von Gall, 2008, p. 150] places the relief of Darab after AD 260.

chronologically close to the last relief of Ardashir I and therefore the first of the reliefs of Shabuhr I¹³.

Precisely on the basis of these details, which have been associated with a chronological evolution, we would like to propose, on the contrary, the attribution of the reliefs of Bishapur and Naqsh-e Rostam/Naqsh-e Rajab to two different centers of production, also recognizable by technical and stylistic features that persist over time, including during the reigns of the successors of Shabuhr I, developing the suggestion that different groups of craftsmen may have worked at the various locations proposed by P.O. Harper in her important contribution for the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* [Harper, 1986, p. 585].

Naqsh-e Rostam/Naqsh-e Rajab, after the masterful execution of the scene of the investiture on horseback of Ardashir I, maintains, from the relief of Shabuhr I to that of Narseh of the end of the 3rd century AD, a strongly local characteristics, recognizable above all at the level of the drawing and of the relief, which is generally not very marked. The relief of Darab seems to be linked to the production by the same workshop that carried out the relief of Naqsh-e Rajab I, especially for the effort of perspective conferred by the presence of figures on several levels and for technical affinities detected by G. Herrmann [Herrmann, 1981, p. 21–22].

In fact, the first three reliefs of Bishapur are marked by a great similarity between them and by a marked difference with the reliefs of Naqsh-e Rostam. The figures are still characterized by sculpted modelling and several elements have a quasi naturalistic rendering.

The differences between the two groups are such that we find it difficult to believe that the craftsmen employed in Bishapur were the same as those in Central Fars. For the site of Bishapur more than one scholar has referred to what Shabuhr I himself reports in his inscription of Naqsh-e Rostam on the Roman prisoners transferred among the other regions of Eranshahr also in Fars: finally, M. Canepa notes that «[in Bishapur] he uses captives and select artistic techniques from Antioch in memory of his western triumphs [...]. This presents the very likely scenario of Roman craftsmen contributing to rock reliefs inspired from careful, on-site study of Persepolis» [Canepa, 2010, p. 584]. The American scholar, following in the footsteps of other authors, recognizes for the reliefs of Bishapur II and Bishapur III «some influence of Roman sculptural and compositional elements on the early Sasanian style» [Canepa, 2013, p. 873], as well demonstrated on an iconographic level by M.C. Mackintosh [Mackintosh, 1973].

Indeed, the period of maximum intensity of cultural contacts between Rome and Sasanian Iran was reached during the reign of Shabuhr I, coinciding with the introduction of the mosaic paving technique at Bishapur and the hydraulic works in the Khuzestan plain, both attributed to the addition of specialized workers from the Roman Empire. During this period, therefore, after the initial episode suggested for Ardashir I, the conditions were ripe for the new and more evident incorporation of sculptors from the eastern regions of the Roman Empire into the artistic centre responsible for executing the Sasanian figurative programmes at Bishapur, naturally under Persian direction [cf. Canepa, 2009, p. 67].

The center of Bishapur underwent its own internal evolution, and the reliefs of Shabuhr I were followed by those of Bahram I (Bishapur V, with the king's investiture on horseback) and Bahram II (Bishapur IV, with the homage of a delegation of Bedouins to the king), considered as masterpieces of Sasanian relief sculpture.

A relief which poses great difficulties of interpretation, both iconographic and technical/stylistic, is that of Bishapur VI (*Fig. 6*), with the king facing the throne in the center of a complex scene. Indeed, it is incomplete in its sculpted part, and its various elements are

¹³ After this relief, polishing, which is the most difficult and longest phase of all the phases of the work [Nylander, 1970, p. 32], would have been abandoned because it was not suitable for rock reliefs, in favour of an increase in the size and complexity of the scenes, also in view of a simplification of the production method [Herrmann, 1981, p. 160].

left to different degrees of completion, for a stucco-based finish confirmed by evidence of plastering.

Vanden Berghe attributes the Bishapur VI relief to Shabuhr II, the 4th century AD powerful king, on the basis of a series of reasons, to which the identification of the figures whose heads have been cut off is decisive [Vanden Berghe, 1980, p. 277]. The Belgian researcher notes that in the Syriac acts of the Persian martyrs are mentioned either Hormuzd, an exiled Sasanian prince who had served in Julian's army, or above all Pir Gushnasp, son of an inbred brother of Shabuhr II, who had converted to Christianity and had been martyred for this reason at the age of twelve: both heads seem to wear the animal-headed Phrygian bonnet belonging precisely to the Sasanian princes, especially the beardless one of the young martyr. This interpretation is undoubtedly more solid than all the rest, and is the only one that provides an explanation for the execution of a member of the royal family that can be verified in the sources.

With the end of the 4th century, the production of rock reliefs leaves Fars, showing that the dynastic focus has left this region, and moves instead to a place located on the main road between the Plateau and Mesopotamia, in the vicinity of present Kermanshah: Taq-e Bostan, where in two different moments, two artistic centers both very different from those of Fars were established.

Of the first two reliefs of Taq-e Bostan, that of Taq-e Bostan I (*Fig. 7*) is attributed almost equally to Shabuhr II (AD 309–379) or Ardashir II (AD 379–383), while for that of Taq-e Bostan II there is greater convergence on Shabuhr III (AD 383–388). They confirm that in the 4th century, as already mentioned for Bishapur VI, a «drawing» trend was established with respect to the strong modelling of the previous century, as noted by M. Canepa [Canepa, 2013, p. 873]. However, for the main theme of this study, the aspect on which we must stop to reflect is the sudden creation of rock reliefs in this site of the Kermanshah region, which does not seem to be linked by any relationship of continuity with the previous production of Fars, in an era for which Fars itself lacks evidence of this class¹⁴. The differences with respect to the artistic centers of Fars are very evident, with chronological but also topographical reasons. In fact, we should not forget the existence in central-western Iran of rock reliefs of previous periods, from those of Sar-e Pol-e Zohab to those of Bisotun, up to those of Mirquli in Iraqi Kurdistan, which may have aroused the inspiration of the clients, in relation both to the different historical events and to an evident loss of the ideological centrality of Fars in favor of Mesopotamia, on the road of which is Taq-e Bostan [Harper, 1999, p. 318].

That it was a newly founded artistic center without a previous tradition to draw on, is perhaps indicated by the simple lowering of the background surface around the figures as the main means of their execution, which had manifested itself both in Firuzabad and Salmas, i.e. in the places where the artistic centers engaged in the production of the Sasanian rock reliefs first began. However, the sculptors of Taq-e Bostan show a much higher level of skill that limits the flatness and lack of volume to the legs of the figures alone, and instead makes it possible to achieve, in the upper part of the figures and especially in the representation of the heads in high relief, a plastic and volumetric rendering of considerable importance, accentuated by the slight twisting of three quarters that breaks the prevailing frontal setting. This is a completely new approach in the Sasanian reliefs, which before this relief had never given so much weight to the vision of three quarters. New on the Sasanian reliefs is also the step that marks the lower plane on which the figures rest, and that brings the figure of Shabuhr II on the right to be placed higher than the other two. Also new is the particular rendering of the figure

¹⁴ However, the proposal of H. von Gall [von Gall, 1990, p. 32–34] to attribute to Bahram IV (AD 388–399) the double equestrian combat scene of Naqsh-e Rostam VII, which would prolong the sculptural activity of Fars in the 4th century, should be taken into consideration, but also posing the problem of the relationship with the previous production of Naqsh-e Rostam.

lying under the feet of the two figures on the right, which is «contoured» by sculpting only the area adjacent to the figure to give it the necessary relief without acting on the rest of the area, as happens around the lotus flower on the left. To this must be added the high level of detail of a drawing type in the execution of all the components of the figures, from the physiognomic features to the hair, from the clothes to the attributes. The center of Taq-e Bostan, which at the end of the 4th century gives its best in the relief of Taq-e Bostan I (Fig. 7), appears to us as a workshop of remarkable technical skill expressed, however, according to stylistic modes of profoundly innovative characters, which are perhaps inspired by stucco work.

Also in this case, as for the other artistic centers, the question arises spontaneously of how the birth of this center was possible: in fact, perceiving its otherness with respect to the main line of Sasanian sculpture, a fine scholar such as U. Monneret de Villard, echoing E. Herzfeld [Herzfeld, 1928, p. 139] had proposed an influence on Taq-e Bostan II of the Kushan art of the sanctuary of Mat (Mathura, Uttar Pradesh), which the new chronological adjustments make completely improbable [Monneret de Villard, 1954, p. 83].

If we compare the Taq-e Bostan relief with Bishapur VI, we note that the latter, even in the unfinished work, maintains almost everywhere a sculptural plastic performance of the surfaces; the relief is generally low; every element of a «drawing» nature is missing, due to the absence of engraved details, and together the heads are rendered in full profile, with the exception of that of the king, seen from the front. In the relief of Taq-e Bostan I, the figures are characterized by a high relief that makes their upper surface stand out very much from the background, with a strong effect of chiaroscuro; the heads and busts are characterized by plastic performance while the surfaces of the whole part below are flat and with the elements of the drapery rendered almost exclusively by engraving; as seen, the heads are rendered by three quarters. Taq-e Bostan, therefore, although chronologically close to Bishapur VI, has no link with this relief as it is preserved today: perhaps it could have had links with the relief when it still had the stucco finish. But at the moment the center of Taq-e Bostan is a demanding creation of the end of the 4th century, for which it remains to be clarified where can be found the origin of the craftsmen with excellent technical skills who were evidently aware of the production of the sculptors of the previous period without, however, being linked to them by a direct tradition¹⁵.

In Taq-e Bostan, however, the greatest visual impact today is undoubtedly the great *ivân* that recreates a built space carving it in the rock, and which as a whole should be interpreted as a celebration of a royal ideology, according to P.O. Harper deeply linked to the Mesopotamian tradition [Harper, 1999, p. 318; cf. also Movassat, 2005]. The facade with its stepped merlons, the two winged creatures and the two pilasters with phytomorphic motifs similar to those of the capitals belonging to the architectural arrangement of the back wall, have no relationship with the rock reliefs; similarly the two side panels of the *ivân*, generally known as the Taq-e Bostan V and Taq-e Bostan VI reliefs, must be considered extraneous to the class of rock reliefs, since they are a stone reproduction of the painted stucco decoration present in the *ivân* of prestigious buildings [Callieri, 2014, p. 108–109 with bibliography].

The back wall of the *ivân*, however, partitioned in two registers, shows in the upper register the relief Taq-e Bostan III, which depicts a Sasanian sovereign in the center between two divine figures that give him a ring with long ribbon, and the underlying relief Taq-e Bostan IV which presents a powerful image of an armoured knight (Fig. 8). They undoubtedly belong to the category of rock reliefs even if they are transported within an architecture, and they illustrate the birth of a new workshop that from a stylistic point of

¹⁵ Cf. the different opinion of P.O. Harper, who speaks of “local artisans lacking the skills of the carvers who had worked on the royal monuments in the south” [Harper, 1986, p. 587–588]. Herzfeld had suggested that the reliefs were the work of painters rather than sculptors [Herzfeld, 1928, p. 139].

view appears different not only from the Fars reliefs of the 3rd and 4th centuries, but also from that of the previous workshop that produced the two reliefs Taq-e Bostan I and Taq-e Bostan II in the same place.

For the two reliefs III and IV, the *communis opinio* has now accepted a date to the 7th century, with different attributions to Khosraw II (see: [Vanden Berghe, 1983, p. 146–147; cf. Orsatti, 2019, p. 37–38]) or Ardashir III [Tanabe, 1985; Tanabe, 2006], while the attribution to Peroz (5th century), formulated by K. Erdmann [Erdmann, 1937, p. 39] and taken up by H. von Gall [von Gall, 1990, p. 38, 44–47], finds few supporters (see: [Russo, 2004, p. 802–803, 806]). The terms of the lively discussion between K. Erdmann and E. Herzfeld, who in 1938 had instead proposed the dating to the 7th century [Herzfeld, 1938], were already summarized in 1968 by H. Luschey, who indicated the existence of three successive phases but all of them of the 7th century [Luschey, 1968; Luschey, 1996, 122–123; Mode, 2006], given the *terminus post quem* of the 6th century for the development in Constantinople of the form of basket capitals also present in the Persian site [Luschey, 1968]. However, it seems to me that there is a lack of binding internal elements in favor of one position or another, due to the partial overlapping of the crowns of these sovereigns: without wanting to enter into a new attempt to find a definitive key, I intend to return to some considerations that I proposed in 2014 and that evidently had not been clearly formulated, since M. Compareti has misinterpreted them in such a way as to make me a new advocate of dating to the 5th century [Compareti, 2016, p. 72].

Many of the scholars who have dealt with these monuments, regardless of the chronology chosen, have highlighted links of various kinds with the Byzantine world, presented as the place to which to bring back the external influences of the artistic center. There has been talk of an influence on the composition from the organization of the apses of the Byzantine churches [Mackintosh, 1980, p. 151]; the two figures of winged victories on either side of the rich archivolt have been seen as an iconographic hybrid between Graeco-Roman victories and Byzantine angels [Mackintosh, 1980, p. 159], underlining their stylistic affinities with late Roman ivories [Canepa, 2013, p. 873]; the Byzantine origins of the basket capitals and the phytomorphic motifs of the pilaster bands and capitals were highlighted¹⁶.

In reality, the compositional design reveals a profoundly Iranian taste for static and massive forms, from the majestic forms of the knight whose face is hidden by the helmet, to those of the sovereign standing frontally on a pedestal in the upper register, to those of the two gods at his sides, each holding a ribboned ring: Ohrmazd, facing three-quarters towards the sovereign to his right and Anahid, to the right of the king, identifiable by the jug held in his hand.

¹⁶ One of the few position against this idea, which sees the direction of the influence not from Byzantium to Persia but from Persia to Byzantium, is that of E. Russo, who starting from a study of the stone architectural decoration of the church of St. Polyeuctus in Constantinople (AD 524–527) emphasizes the affinities of the elements of architectural decoration with stuccoes of the Sasanian empire of earlier date. The set of elements already noted by others as Byzantine influences on Sassanian Persia, according to the Italian scholar, on the contrary, is the result of a Byzantine imitation of the Sassanian models based on the presence in the Constantinople workshop of a well-informed personality on Persian art [Russo, 2004, p. 764]. This interpretation is reflected in his dating of Taq-e Bostan, where the presence of «basket» capitals of similar appearance to the Byzantine ones, that first appeared in Byzantium at St. Polyeuctus, was previously used to date all the great *ivân* of Taq-e Bostan to a time after the 6th century [Russo, 2004, p. 803]. This dependence of St. Polyeuctus' architectural sculpture on Sassanian Persia has recently found more consensus [Barsanti, Paribeni, 2018, p. 32].

Another voice of dissent from the proponents of the Roman-Byzantine influence is that of E. Herzfeld, who in 1928 proposed for reliefs I and II an origin from the art of the Greek Bactria, which, isolated from the West for many centuries, would have been able to transmit again a Hellenism of archaic character, executed by a painter who worked exceptionally in the round [Herzfeld, 1928, p. 140]: «l'art sassanide est une manifestation tardive de l'art grec. Mais il n'a rien à faire avec l'hellénisme occidental de l'empire romain ou byzantin. Il hérite, en ligne directe, de l'art de l'hellénisme oriental, de l'art que nous aimerions tant à connaître, de l'art gréco-bactrien» [Herzfeld, 1928, p. 142].

There are some important iconographic differences with respect to the code of representation of all previous Sasanian reliefs, such as the breaking of the tradition that wanted the deity rendered in the image of the sovereign and mirrored to it – and that here is broken by the fact that the king has a higher pedestal and is therefore higher than the gods. Besides, from the stylistic point of view the reliefs are characterized by a volumetric performance of great plasticity, totally unknown to the previous production of the Sasanian reliefs, which also does not know the undercuts that almost everywhere characterizes the contours of the figures, a totally innovative technique in the panorama of the Sasanian art. A particularly flourishing modelling is combined with great care in the meticulous indication of all the details, either in relief or by engraving. On the whole, therefore, we are faced with a figurative program of outspoken Persian inspiration, however, made by sculptors of great skill and originality with an approach very different from that of the various previous traditions.

In the Byzantine Empire, however, the flourishing workshops of sculptors still working in a plastic and naturalistic approach to modelling were only active until the beginning of the 6th century [Erim, Roueché, 1982, p. 102; Dresken-Weiland, 2018], to decrease and cease their activity in the 6th century [Prusac, 2010, p. 77]. By the end of the 6th – early 7th century, the age of Khosrow II's reign, the tradition had probably been extinct since at least two generations, and it is unlikely that without any commission to the existing workshops some craftsmen could have the possibility to pass on their experience directly to their descendants, who would have come to Sasanian Persia in one way or another: the elements of relations with the Roman-Eastern world cannot date back to a period after the 5th – 6th century, when the sculptural production of high relief in the artistic centers of the Eastern Roman Empire ceased altogether (see [Firathi, 1990]). For the 7th century, therefore, the contribution of the Byzantine craftsmen, although theoretically possible for historical events, was not in fact due to the lack of fully active sculptors in Byzantium.

A possible source of skilled sculptors in the 7th century could have been post-Gupta India, which could have represented a source of skilled labour in rock sculpture: but it is a pure theoretical possibility, given the lack of specific iconographic and stylistic elements of Indian derivation, in the face of different elements of contact with the Roman-Eastern area.

In my publication of 2014 I have therefore highlighted the observation that if we are to state precisely that the new artistic center enjoyed an external contribution from the West, the dating of the two reliefs Taq-e Bostan III and Taq-e Bostan IV to the 7th century is quite unlikely, and it is therefore necessary to take into consideration the original attribution to Peroz proposed by K. Erdmann and reiterated by H. von Gall [von Gall, 1990, p. 44–47]. It was only in the 5th century, in fact, that the sculptural tradition still alive in the Eastern Roman world could have provided masters for a collaboration with the Persian craftsmen in the realization of a figurative program of enormous importance [Callieri, 2014, p. 158–159].

Now, this reflection has been interpreted as my acceptance of dating to the 5th century [Compareti, 2016, p. 71], in favor of which in fact I did not express myself.

What I was interested in emphasizing instead, that is the incompatibility between a Byzantine influence and the dating to the 7th century, has unfortunately not been understood. This fact confirms that very often scholars of art history do not ask themselves practical questions such as the organization of a building site and the presence of craftsmen who must have necessarily learned their wealth of knowledge and skills in a long process of apprenticeship with a master who in turn arose within a workshop.

Confirming my position of doubt, I closed the discussion by adding that the origin of the art center may have been represented by a local tradition that is now completely lost, about which therefore nothing can be said [Callieri, 2014, p. 159]. But that's another story.

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