



# ARDAŠĪR I II. ROCK RELIEFS

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The first Sasanian ruler Ardašīr I (224-241) established the Sasanian tradition of rock carving, which flourished until the reign of Šāpūr III (383-88) and made an impressive resurgence under Kōsrow II (590-628) (H. Luschey, *Iranica Antiqua* 11, 1975, pp. 127ff. and plates 21, 22; D. Shepherd, in *Camb. Hist. Iran* III, 1983, pp. 1085ff. and plates 94ff.). Ardašīr's rock reliefs differ markedly from the few preserved Parthian specimens (as do his coins) and foreshadow a new monumental form. His three earliest reliefs are in various styles and do not show any clear development. Only the fourth, namely the investiture relief at Naqš-e Rostam, attains a well-defined form, which reappears in the rock carvings of Šāpūr I and his successors. The chronological order of Ardašīr's reliefs is a matter of some controversy, with certain details still remaining unresolved. The problems of figure identification has been discussed in the detailed study of all Ardašīr's reliefs by W. Hinz, (*Altiranische Funde und Forschungen*, Berlin, 1969).

*The bridge relief at Fīrūzābād.* Ohrmazd, standing, invests Ardašīr, also afoot, by handing the ring of sovereignty to him over a fire altar. Behind Ardašīr stand the crown prince Šāpūr and two more princes. Dimensions: 7m x 3.70m (Plate VI A). The very well-shaped figures are in profile and arranged like those in the relief of Mithridates II at Bisotūn (E. Herzfeld, *Am Tor von Asien*, Berlin, 1920, pp. 35ff., fig. 11 and plate 21; D. Schlumberger, in *Camb. Hist. Iran*



III, 1983, p. 1041 and fig. 7). The carving, however, shows a radical departure from Parthian work and a reversion to Achaemenid tradition.

This type of investiture scene became a recurrent theme of Sasanian rock carving. Its source, and the exact significance of the ring-like object which the god bestows, can evidently be traced to a line of tradition through the 3rd millennium Anubanini relief at Sar-e Pol (Kurdistan), where a goddess hands over a ring (Herzfeld, *ibid.*, p. 3, fig. 1; B. Hrouda, *Iranische Denkmäler*, Lieferung 7, Reihe II C, Berlin, 1976, pp. 7ff., plates 5 and 6); to Darius's relief at Bīsotūn, where a winged man emerging from a circle and holding a ring, who is commonly identified as Ohrmazd (see most recently P. Lecoq in *Orientalia J. Duchesne-Guillemin Emerito Oblata*, Acta Iranica 23, Leiden, 1984, pp. 301-26, who defends this identification against the alternative one as *xwarrah* "Royal Fortune," see A. Sh. Shahbazi, *AMI*, N.F. 7, 1974, pp. 139ff. and M. Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* II, pp. 103ff. with references; Luschey, *AMI*, N.F. 1, 1968, pp. 63ff., plates 25ff.), and to the portrayals of this same winged figure at Persepolis (E. F. Schmidt, *Persepolis* I, Chicago, 1953, III, 1969, *passim*). In the relief of Artabanus V at Susa, the king invests a satrap by giving him a ring (Schlumberger, in *Camb. Hist. Iran* III, p. 1042 and plate 67). Furthermore, on certain Parthian coins the goddess Tyche hands a garland to a figure on horseback (E. T. Newall, in *Survey of Persian Art*, p. 489, plate 143; G. D. Sellwood, in *Camb. Hist. Iran* III, pp. 279ff. and plates 1ff.; P. Calmeyer, in *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 94, 1979, pp. 347ff. and fig. 2); no doubt this coin design was influenced by Greek portrayals of garland-presentation by the goddess Nikē. Some recent researchers see the conferred badge of office as a ring, others as a diadem. There are grounds to suppose that the ring was the original form and that the diadem was a later development (R. Göbl, *WZKM* 56, 1960, p. 37 note 5; P. Calmeyer, *AMI* 10, 1977, p. 167).

In the opinion of K. Erdmann (*Die Kunst Irans zur Zeit der Sasaniden*, Berlin, 1943, pp. 52, 56), investiture reliefs should not all be dated from the beginning of a king's reign, but are likely to have been carved successively during the whole of the reign as expressions of gratitude for divine favor. V. G. Lukonin (*Iranica Antiqua* 8, 1968, pp. 106-17) argues on the basis of coin designs that all Ardašīr's rock reliefs date from the years 235-240, i.e., from the last part of his reign. This theory, however, presents difficulties; moreover it would invalidate all attempts to understand the stylistic development, particularly if the Firūzābād combat relief had to be dated from those years, as Lukonin



maintains.

*The mounted combat relief at Fīrūzābād* (see [Figure 14](#) and [Plate VI C](#), [Plate VI D](#)). This depicts a scene from Ardašīr's victorious battle against the last Parthian king, Artabanus (Ardavān) V, in 224. Eighteen meters long and nearly four meters high, it is the largest surviving Iranian rock relief (*Camb. Hist. Iran III*, fig. 1 on p. 1078, and plate 89). Six mounted figures are shown in three groups of single combatants: right, Ardašīr transfixing Artabanus with a lance; center, crown prince Šāpūr overpowering Artabanus's chief minister Dādbundād (mss. d'bn'd, d'dbnd'r), left, a page grappling with a Parthian knight. The portrayal is strikingly dynamic as well as rich in detail. Hair and beards, armor (chain mail), and horse trappings are represented with remarkable precision. The carving is in relatively low relief and has been damaged by weathering in the lower part. The treatment conforms with Parthian tradition showing affinities with the rock relief of Gotarzes (one of the Arsacid kings of that name) at Bisotūn (Herzfeld op. cit., pp. 40ff. and plates 21-23) and with the fresco of galloping knights in armor at Dura Europos (M. Rostovtzeff, *Dura and the Problem of Parthian Art*, New Haven, 1935, pp. 273, 280, 283, and figs. 71, 79, 82-85; C. Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, in *The Excavations at Dura Europos. Final Report VIII*, 1, 1956, p. 93 and plate 55). The theme is resumed in the later mounted combat reliefs of Bahrām II (276-293) and Hormozd II (303-309), both at Naqš-e Rostam (E. F. Schmidt, *Persepolis III*, p. 130 and plate 89, p. 135 and plates 91-94).

*The investiture relief at Naqš-e Raġab*. The scene (5m x 3m) shows ([Figure 15](#)) Ohrmazd entrusting the ring of sovereignty to Ardašīr in the presence of six onlookers (Hinz, op. cit., pp. 123ff. and plates 57ff.; E. F. Schmidt, *Persepolis III*, pp. 123ff and plates 96ff.). The accompanying figures are: left, crown prince Šāpūr and a page; right behind Ohrmazd, the spouses of probably Ardašīr and Šāpūr; center, two small figures identified by Hinz as Ardašīr's grandsons Bahrām and Heracles. This relief represents a third stylistic trend. With its heavy, larger-than-life-sized forms, it foreshadows the specifically Sasanian style of rock carving but remains cramped by a provincial clumsiness peculiar to itself.

*The investiture relief at Naqš-e Rostam*. (Width 6.30m; height 4.20m): it shows Ohrmazd handing the ring of sovereignty to Ardašīr (Schmidt, *Persepolis III*, pp. 121f. and plates 80ff.; *Camb. Hist. Iran III*, p. 1079 and plate 90). Both figures are mounted. Under the hoof of Ardašīr's horse lies the defeated Parthian king Artabanus V, and under the hoof of Ohrmazd's horse lies a



figure symbolizing Ahriman. Behind Ardašīr stands a page holding a fly-whisk (Plate VI B). The relief is made more explicit by two inscriptions: on the breast of Ohrmazd's horse, "This is the effigy of the god Ohrmazd" in Middle Persian, Parthian, and Greek, and on the breast of Ardašīr's horse a corresponding identification of Ardašīr (Schmidt, op. cit.; M. Back, *Die Sasanidischen Staatsinschriften*, Acta Iranica 19, Tehran and Liège, 1978, p. 282).

These inscriptions became known in the 17th century through engravings by Chardin (*Voyages en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient*, Amsterdam, 1711, II, pl. 73) and E. Kaempfer, *Amoenitates exoticae*, Lemgo, 1712, p. 307). Being trilingual, they were a great help to Silvestre de Sacy in his decipherment of the Middle Persian script in 1793 (*Mémoires sur diverses antiquités de la Perse*, Paris, 1793, pp. 106ff. and plate 1), an achievement long antedating the decipherment of the ancient Persian cuneiform script by Grotefend and Rawlinson. Ohrmazd was already named as the sovereignty-conferring god in the inscription of Darius at Bisotūn.

This is the most mature, and therefore certainly the latest, of Ardašīr's reliefs. With its balanced composition and fully lifelike sculpture, it falls little short of the earliest relief of Šāpūr I at Naqš-e Rājab (Hinz, op. cit., pp. 137ff. and plate 73; Luschey, *Iranica Antiqua* 11, 1975, p. 125 and plate 29.2).

While the first three reliefs above may be regarded as very dissimilar but basically commensurable first starts, and are certainly the work of different sculptors, this relief bears the stamp of the distinctive Sasanian style dominant in the later reliefs. There is also a borrowed foreign element in its subject-matter. The portrayal of the defeated adversary under the hoof of the victor's horse is derived from Roman monumental art, cf. Marcus Aurelius on horseback trampling the now missing figure of a vanquished king (W. Technau, *Kunst der Römer*, 1940, pp. 210f. and fig. 176; Luschey, *AMI*, N.F. 1, 1968, pp. 33f. and plate 19.1). Furthermore the horses are on the whole similar to the typical horse with a raised foreleg in Roman monuments—a characteristic maintained until the relief of Bahrām II (276-293) at Bīšāpūr (R. Ghirshman, *Bīchāpour* I, Paris, 1975, pp. 73f. and plate 16). Reminders of Persepolis also stand out in Ardašīr's relief. In the head and trunk of the figure of Ohrmazd, the features of the great king as shown in the central edifice at Persepolis (which was never covered by sand) are consciously reproduced, even to details of the hair and beard and the pleats of the clothing (E. F. Schmidt, *Persepolis* I, plates 75, 76; Luschey, *Iranica Antiqua* 11, 1975, p. 125). First signs of this influence are traceable, though not so cleanly, in the



investiture relief at Naqš-e Rājab.

*The relief at Salmās.* The scene (5m x 2.60m) represents Ardašīr and Šāpūr, both on horseback, investing two Armenian governors, who are on foot (W. Hinz, op. cit., plate 69). The workmanship is provincial and the style heavy and lifeless; from the later part of Ardašīr's reign, probably to be dated, as Hinz does, to 238 A.D.

It has recently been argued that the relief at Dārāb was carved in two phases, the first in Ardašīr's reign, the second in Šāpūr's (L. Trümpelmann, *Das Relief von Darab, Iranische Denkmäler, Lieferung 6, Reihe II D*, Berlin, 1975). This is unconvincing, if only because the style of the robes and other apparel of the royal figures belong in all respects to Šāpūr's reign. Moreover Šāpūr is the subject of this relief.

The rock reliefs of Ardašīr I are tokens of a momentous historical change. Their designs, like those of Ardašīr's coins, are the first manifestations of a swing away from outworn Parthian tradition. They announce the renaissance of Iranian tradition and the start of all-out confrontation with the Roman world. They were the basis from which Sasanian rock carving developed in the four centuries up to the relief of Ṭāq-e Bostān (left partly unfinished at the death of Kōsrow II in 628)—a much longer time than the allotted span of the Achaemenids.

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