



BISOTUN I. INTRODUCTION

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The original Old Persian form of the name Bīsotūn can be recovered from the Greek rendering *Bagistanon* (óros) “Mt. Bagistanon” in Diodorus (2.13.1, from Ctesias) as **Bagastāna* “place or stand of the god(s)” (cf. Markwart, *Ērānšahr*, p. 71). In the works of medieval Arabic geographers like Ebn Ḥawqal, Eṣṭakrī, and Yāqūt the Middle/New Persian form *Bahestūn/Behestūn* (lit. “with good columns”), a recast of an unattested **Bahistān*, occurs. The modern forms *Bīsotūn*, etc. (with or without anaptyctic vowel; lit. “without columns”), which are also used by Yāqūt, Eṣṭakrī, Qazvīnī, and Moqaddasī, represent popular transformations of *Behestūn* (Schwarz, *Iran* IV, p. 452 for the cliff, 487ff. for the village). Of the various archeological remains at the site, reflecting almost continuous use since prehistoric times, the most important is unquestionably the monument of Darius the Great on the last peak of a long, narrow range. It consists of a relief (ca. 3 m high and 5.5 m long, called by the natives “The Nine Dervishes”) carved out of the limestone cliff about 66 m above the springs on the plain, as well as a great trilingual inscription, the most famous and most important of the king’s proclamations.

The name clearly shows that the place had been holy from time immemorial and Darius’s monument was well known to the ancients: Ctesias (apud Diodorus, 2.13.1-2) speaks of Mt. Bagistanon with its sheer cliffs rising to a height of 17 stades as *hieròn Diós* “sacred to Zeus” (i.e., to the supreme god



Ahura Mazdā) and mentions a great park (Gk. *parádeisos*) laid out by Queen Semiramis. He also refers to an image of her and an inscription in Syrian (i.e., Assyrian) letters (cuneiform writing); obviously he took Darius's relief and inscriptions for a monument belonging to the legendary Babylonian queen. Moreover, Diodorus (17.110.5) tells of a Bagistánē district, through which Alexander the Great had passed, and calls it “best fitting for the gods” (*theoprepestátē*), an epithet recalling the etymon of the name. See further Isidore of Charax, *Parthian Stations*, ed. W. H. Schoff, London, 1914, par. 5, mentioning a city Bagistana (his emendation for ms. *Báptana*), situated on a mountain, with an image and stele of Semiramis; and Stephanus Byzantius, *Ethnica*, ed. A. Meineke, Berlin, 1849, p. 155, listing a Median city Bagístana and Mt. Bagístanon.

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(Rüdiger Schmitt)