



# SHAPUR I: THE GREAT STATUE

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## SHAPUR I

### The Great Statue

The great statue of Shapur (Šāpūr) I stands in the so-called cave of Shapur, a huge limestone cave in southern Iran ([Figure 1](#)), about 6 km from the ancient city of [Bišāpur](#). The cave of Shapur contains two different sectors. Sector A encompasses the entrance area of the cave and has five wide man-made terraces. The statue of Shapur I, situated circa 35 meters from the cave's entrance, stands on the fourth terrace of the sector A. Sector B is a huge hall with several corridors ([Figure 2](#)).

With a height of about 6.70 meters and a width across the shoulders of more than 2 meters, the monumental statue of Shapur I can be considered the most impressive extant sculpture dating from the Sasanian period (224-652). It is carved out of a huge stalagmite formed *in situ*. It is rich in details and sculptured on each side with extraordinary care and attention.

The head, topped by a crenellated crown, and the body of the sculpture, are in good condition. The constitutive parts of the arms and almost both legs are missing ([Figure 3](#)). The sculptor chiseled the statue in accordance with the same measurement and aesthetic canon that was used for other rock reliefs of Shapur I (240-272), such as Bishapur II and III (Garosi, p. 12). After its fall, most probably the result of a strong earthquake in the period between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, the sculpture was raised again in the 1950s on two



concrete pillars standing near its original feet. It is quite conceivable that the well-known proportions of the human body with division into nine head lengths were used for the chiseling of this sculpture. Accordingly, it is feasible that the concrete pillars are about half a head length too short.

The colossal statue has an athletic physique and muscular biceps, voluminous chest, and a flat stomach. The neck of the imposing figure is extraordinarily broad and strong. The right hand of the statue is akimbo, and the left hand is lying on the heavily weathered sword hilt.

The head and the hair of the statue have been carved out in all their particulars symmetrically. Under the diadem, the hair of the monumental statue flows out and lies on the shoulders. The king has a moustache, a short beard, and a long chin beard (Figure 4). He is also wearing three pieces of jewelry: a necklace, earrings made of large pearls, and a bracelet on the right wrist.

The garment of the statue consists of three pieces: an undershirt, an upper garment, and wide trousers. The upper garment of the sculpture fits tightly to the body and consists of a sheer fabric. Its skin-tight fashion emphasizes the contours of the shoulders, the upper arms, and the chest of the king. At the waist, the upper garment is held together tightly by a belt, while a second belt, which is hanging loosely around the hips, fastens the sword scabbard. The bossed ornaments on the upper garment are remarkable in the way they resemble flames flickering downward. They vary in length and are molded differently and irregularly arranged. Both belts are tied with a broad ribbon.

Only a small part of the legs of the colossal statue of Shapur I has survived. The small remains of the left thigh indicates that the ruler was wearing wide, fluted trousers. The same model of trousers can also be seen on all rock reliefs of Shapur I.

The feet of the statue are somewhat spread; the left foot is situated a little ahead of the right one. The original shoes of the statue are in different conservation status. The right shoe is largely destroyed, while the left one is virtually intact and has a round toecap. Today, the traces of the shoelaces are to be seen on the cave's floor and near the original shoes of the statue.

It is well known that in the Sasanian period the shape of the crown changed from king to king. Because of the crenellated crown and on the basis of art



historical considerations, the statue can almost definitely be identified as that of Shapur I, the second Sasanian king (Garosi, p. 8).

Shapur I is not always shown wearing a crenellated crown, but he is never represented with a crenellated crown without a corymb. This brings up the question whether there was originally a corymb on the crown of the colossal statue. On the vertex of the statue and within the crenellations of the crown, there can be seen a hole. This hole clearly evinces the existence of a corymb, made certainly not of stone but of metal, atop the crown.

The historian Moqaddasi, who visited the cave of Shapur in the 10th century, noticed green color on the crown of the statue and reported: “A *parsang* from al Nawbandijān is a likeness of Shapur, at the mouth of a cave; he is wearing a crown, at the base are three leaves of green ...” (Collins, p. 392). This suggests that the corymb of the statue was most probably made of bronze, which in the 10th century, when Moqaddasi saw the statue, had already been oxidized. The fact that no fragments of corymb have remained can be explained by the possibility that, after the fall of the statue, some valuable items were looted.

The great statue of Shapur I had been carved out most probably during his own reign (240-72) and can be dated back to the years between 265 and 270. The fact that the hairstyle of the statue, fashioned in curly strands of hair lying on top of each other, similar to what can be seen only on the rock reliefs of Shapur I, sculpted after 260, strongly supports this dating (Garosi, p. 27).

The question of the *raison d'être* of this statue in the cave is fraught with difficulties. There are no references to the Shapur cave in the many inscriptions dating from his reign. Furthermore, neither sector A nor sector B of the cave has been so far systematically explored. Unfortunately, the majority of the excavation findings and almost all excavation reports by Roman Ghirshman, who excavated in Bishapur (1935-1941), were irretrievably lost (Ghirshman, 1971, p. 6; Garosi, p. 5).

Despite of all these uncertainties, there are some speculations in *archeological literature* about the cave and its sculpture. For example, Ernst Herzfeld and Ghirshman hold that the cave was the gravesite of Shapur I (Herzfeld, p. 320; Ghirshman, 1962, p. 165), although there are no traces of a grave, or an *astodān* or a cenotaph in the cave.

In the Sasanian Period, there was apparently a cult in which water played an



important role. A building in Bishapur, constructed most likely under the reign of Shapur I, is the only ascertained archeological site dated from the Sasanian period that can be connected with a water cult (Garosi, p. 34).

With regard to the Shapur cave, it is not precluded that it once provided a site of the ruler cult. The fact that there are three water basins in the cave—two at the end of section A and the third at the end of section B—may well justify this claim. Furthermore, the original feet of the statue stand neither on a pedestal nor directly on the flattened cave floor. Instead, they stand in a rectangular deepening carved in the cave floor, which is now badly eroded. This shallow deepening with a depth of 30 cm could once have functioned as a water container. Thus, it is conceivable that the feet of the statue were standing always or at least on specific occasions in water. If this is the case, most probably the cave of Shapur had once functioned as a site for a ruler cult, with some correlation to a water cult (Garosi, p. 35).

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