



ŠĀPUR I: ROCK RELIEFS

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Seven rock reliefs from the time of Šāpur I are preserved, all situated in Fārs: Naqš-e Rajab I and III, Naqš-e Rostam VI, Bišāpur I to III and Dārābgerd. Apart from the two reliefs at Naqš-e Rajab, they are either focused on, or at least include, references to military victories over the Roman Empire.

There are four rock reliefs in the small rock enclosure of Naqš-e Rajab, just south of Eṣṭaḳr: an investiture scene of Ardašīr I (relief III), a bust with inscription of the high priest Kartir (relief II) and two reliefs of Šāpur I. Naqš-e Rajab I depicts Šāpur on horseback, identified by a trilingual inscription, followed by a group of nine people (PLATE I; Schmidt, pp. 126, pl. 100-101). Naqš-e Rajab IV is an investiture scene with the king on horseback reaching for the beribboned ring held by Ohrmazd (Overlaet, 2013). The king's head and crown are damaged beyond recognition. Herrmann convincingly identified this as an early Šāpur I relief based on stylistic arguments and tool working (Herrmann, pp. 75-76).

Šāpur I had a second and very similar investiture relief sculpted at Bišāpur (relief I). Like the prototype of this scene (investiture of Ardašīr I at Naqš-e Rostam) the horses are now standing on top of defeated enemies. In-between, a kneeling Roman emperor is shown pleading for mercy. The upper part of the relief is completely destroyed, and it is on the presence of this Roman that the



relief is generally ascribed to Šāpur I (Herrmann, Mackenzie, and Howell, 1983). The victory over Roman enemies is the principal subject of the four remaining reliefs. They represent Šāpur I with three Roman emperors. The identity of these has been a matter of dispute among scholars (see Herrmann and Curtis; Meyer, pp. 240-47, 300-301; Overlaet, pp. 461-63).

Šāpur himself refers to three Roman emperors in his *Res Gestae* (ŠKZ): Gordian III, Philip the Arab, and Valerian. Gordian III is not mentioned by name; it is only stated that he was defeated and died. He was probably killed by his own army after their retreat to Zaitha in northern Mesopotamia in 244 (Potter, pp. 234-36). His successor Philip the Arab is mentioned by name; he had to plea for peace and pay 500,000 dinars. Valerian was captured near [Edessa](#) in 260 CE, according to Šāpur “with his own hands,” and later died in Persian captivity.

B. C. McDermot was the first to notice that Šāpur’s ŠKZ fits perfectly with the image on the Naqš-e Rostam VI relief ([PLATE II](#); Herrmann, Mackenzie, and Howell, 1989). The two emperors who are named are shown in the way they are described: Philip the Arab is kneeling, asking for peace, and Valerian is physically taken prisoner by Šāpur. Consequently, the relief must be made after 260 CE. Since the same emperors were expected to figure on the Bišāpur reliefs, this would date Bišāpur I after 244 and Bišāpur II and III after 260.

However, these explanations failed to explain the remainder of the imagery of the Bišāpur II and III reliefs. Bišāpur III shows on the left the advancing Sasanian cavalry while on the right, there are five registers with people carrying vessels, textiles and arms, holding rings and military standards, bringing chained lions, a horse and wagon, etc. ([Figure 1](#); Herrmann and Howell). Bišāpur II follows the same concept (Herrmann, Mackenzie, and Howell, 1983). The central scene is almost identical ([Figure 2](#)) but there are only two registers on each side. The analysis of the items that are shown on Bišāpur III has recently led to the identification of the historic event (and the emperor) represented at Bišāpur II, III, and Dārābgerd (Overlaet).

The Bišāpur III scene illustrates the surrender to Šāpur of the city of Emesa (Homs in Syria) by the usurper-emperor Uranius Antoninus (d. 254 CE). Emesa was the centre of the sun-cult of Elagabal and housed one of the most famous baetyls of antiquity. This black stone had briefly been at Rome during the reign of Elagabalus (218-222 CE). This Emesene high-priest, who became Roman emperor at the age of 14, took the stone with him to Rome, built two

temples for it, and proclaimed it the principal deity of the Empire (Cumont, pp. 2219-22; Turcan; Gradel, pp. 351-52). After his assassination, Alexander Severus sent the stone back to Emesa and rededicated the Elagaballium temple in Rome to Jupiter. The Roman historian [Herodian](#) informs us about the “Syrian” cult practices in Rome, including the offerings, rituals, clothing and transport of the stone between his temples on a chariot (Herodian, V.6.1-7). The stone, either in a temple perched by an eagle or on its chariot, figures on coins of [Caracalla](#) and Elagabalus (Baldus, pl. X-XII; Overlaet, pl. 26-27). After this Roman intermission, the cult continued to thrive in Emesa and during the political turmoil of the mid-third century; the city’s last priest-king Uranius Antoninus claimed the imperial purple, possibly to lead the resistance against the Sasanian advance into Syria. The precise circumstances remain a matter of dispute, however. Nevertheless, it is clear that Šāpur’s army marched on Emesa but did not go further into Syria (Kettenhofen, pp. 70-73; Dodgeon and Lieu, p. 54). The 6th century Monophysite Byzantine chronicler John Malalas informs us that Šāpur received the priest-king Sampsigeramos (the usurper emperor Uranius Antoninus; see Baldus, pp. 246-50) as an ambassador of his city. During this reception, one of the Emesenes would have killed Šāpur, causing the retreat of the Persians (Malalas, XIII.295-97; tr. Jeffreys, Jeffreys, and Scott, pp. 162-63). Although the story is obviously inaccurate, the fact that a priest-king stopped the advance of the Sasanian army is supported by a reference in the *Oracula Sybillina* (*Oracula Sibyllina*, XIII.147–54; Baldus, pp. 240-43, 252-55; Dodgeon and Lieu, pp. 54-55) and by Greek graffiti in Qal’at el-Haways (Baldus, pp. 250-51; Dodgeon and Lieu, pp. 56, 365 note 33). Uranius Antoninus minted coins at Emesa with the image of the stone until the end of 253/beginning of 254 CE and then disappeared from the historic records.

The iconography of the Bišāpur III relief suggests that the meeting with Šāpur did take place and that Uranius Antoninus pleaded for mercy, surrendered, and handed over the black stone. The surrender of the Roman emperor and its city/empire probably happened around November 253 CE (Baldus, pp. 126-27, 266-68). Šāpur may have been satisfied with Emesa as a client state and may have preferred to redraw before winter rather than to consolidate his grip on Syria. With the arrival of the Roman emperor Valerian, however, this gain may have become meaningless, which would explain why Šāpur did not mention Emesa in his *Res Gestae*. This identification makes it unlikely that the relief was sculpted later than 254 CE.

The central scene of Bišāpur III shows three in every aspect identical Roman



emperors: (1) descended from his horse and kneeling in supplication; (2) standing next to Šāpur's horse and holding on to his cloak; (3) outstretched under Šāpur's horse. It suggests that Šāpur accepted the plea and kept Uranius Antoninus in place as a vassal king. The trampled figure may have symbolized the victory over the Roman Empire as a whole or could eventually also indicate the killing of Uranius. This repetition of different stages of the event is repeated in the right part of the relief. The lower part shows the arrival of the delegation; the upper part the taking away of presents/booty. On the 2nd lower register, the stone of Emesa is taken from its wagon and lifted in the air. The chariot is followed by two men who carry large sacs on their back, probably textiles used for the stone. On the 4th register, the stone is carried off by two men, suspended with straps from a pole. Only one man with a sac follows the stone but a large textile, held by six men, is shown in the central register. Other objects in the delegation, such as military standards, large basins and vessels can all be linked to religious practices, temples or rituals.

The central scene of the Bišāpur II relief is identical to that of Bišāpur III, as is the general lay-out of the relief: on the left two rows of advancing Persian cavalry and on the right two registers with delegates bringing objects. Although the Emesa stone itself is not depicted among them, the relief must represent the same event in view of the identical central scene. Details of the clothing of the delegates had already suggested that they were of Syrian origin (von Gall, pp. 53-54).

The last relief with Roman emperors is found at Dārābgerd ([PLATE III](#); Trümpelmann). The king wears a simple skull-cap with a large *corymbos* (see [CROWN ii.](#)), a headdress characteristic for Ardašir I and worn by Šāpur I only during the co-reign with his father on the relief at Salmās. Because the style and execution are strongly related to the reliefs of Ardašir I, Herrmann ascribed it to this king. Nevertheless, most scholars attributed it to Šāpur because of the presence of the Roman emperors. Trümpelmann reconciled the early stylistic date with the later date implied by the emperors. He argued that the right part of the relief and the lying Roman cut in the background behind the horse's legs were later additions. He could thus date the original relief to the beginning of Šāpur's reign and dated the last adaptation after 260 CE. The presence of three emperors, of an usher with crossed arms and a short stick to introduce the delegation, and of two donkeys pulling a wagon, however, all relate the scene to Bišāpur III. It allows us to date the complete extension of the relief to 254 CE, immediately after the Emesa event.



See also SASANIAN ROCK RELIEFS.

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