



TANG-E SARVAK

TANG-e SARVAK (Gorge of the cypresses), an archeological site in eastern Kūzestān province, southwestern Iran. It is located in a gorge in the mountainous area approx. 50 km north of Behbahān, in the Baḳtiāri area. At an altitude of ca. 1200 m, it is only reached after a long climb. The site consists of four freestanding blocks, with rock reliefs consisting of thirteen panels and several inscriptions carved in the stone.

Tang-e Sarvak is considered as the most important open air sanctuary of the Elymaean dynasty and is generally dated between the 1st century CE. and the first quarter of the 3rd century. This sacred place, where, however, no remains of buildings such as a temple are to be found, was discovered by Baron C. A. de Bode in 1841. It was visited on several occasions in 1853 by Eḩtešām-al-Dowla, who published drawings of the carvings and the inscriptions. In 1892/93 Forṣat-al-Dowla wrote a brief note on the rock reliefs. The first photographs were published by Sir Aurel Stein in 1936. Better photographs, used by W.B. Henning to study the inscriptions, were taken by M. Rostami, photographer of the Irān Bāstān Museum in Tehran in 1950. In the 1960s and 1970s there was a renewed interest in the site, which was visited by Louis Vanden Berghe (1962), Eric De Waele (1972 and 1973), and Louis Vanden Berghe, Ernie Haerinck, and Erik Smekens (1975). Hubertus von Gall went to the site on several occasions (1970, 1979, 1996, and 1999).

Although Aurel Stein had proposed a numbering system for the sculptures, a new numbering brought forward by Eric De Waele is now more generally accepted.



The carvings are not of a very high standard, with a rather coarse, flat execution of the figures represented in a very static fashion. The rock carvings, although some still show details, are also badly damaged, and almost all figures are defaced. Their actual state of preservation gives rise to several diverging opinions about the identification of certain figures and even the interpretation of the depicted scenes. So, for example, the question remains as to whether or not females are represented. Also the question of the representation of gods, and their eventual identification, remains disputed. The iconography is restricted to the court attending the ceremonies, and battle, hunting, and cultic/adoration scenes.

Figures are usually represented larger than life-size or life-sized, although some smaller ones do occur. Most of the persons shown on these rock carvings are completely frontal and certainly with the face in strict frontality. Most wear baggy trousers with a tunic above and a cloak rolled over the left shoulder.

Block I. This is the first boulder (ht. 3.70 m) to be encountered. On the northwest side are to be seen two figures. One may be identified as a local dynast, while the other could be a priest. A possible altar is represented in front of the sacrificing priest. On the north side a naked person is shown. He is most likely to be identified with Heracles, since he also holds a club and a lionskin. On the east face, two standing figures, with a tiara, are depicted with a cylindrical object (altar?) between them.

Block II. This is the most important boulder, ca. 1.5 km from the first one. It is also the largest stone (total ht. 8.60 m.). Five inscriptions are present. The northeast side is sculpted with two registers. On the upper panel a man reclining on a couch is depicted ([PLATE I](#)). In his right hand he holds a ring of investiture, while in the other one he holds a bowl. The couch has legs in the form of birds. Behind him stands a man probably holding a horn of abundance. The identification of the two seated figures in front of him gave rise to numerous controversies. Firstly, there is the question of the gender of the figures. Also, their nature as humans (vassals, warriors?) or gods (two males or two females or one male and one female) remains much disputed. The headdress of one shows a kind of halo; the other one has a kind of helmet (with possibly a tail on top). Depending on the interpretation, the reclining man is showing, receiving, or giving a ring of investiture. Sometimes this scene is viewed as a secular ceremonial act, while others think it is to be situated in the religious-sacral sphere. On the lower panel three standing figures are

presented, who could be witnesses or guards during the investiture scene. On the north corner, a large standing man (Vorod/Orodes?) (PLATE II) is shown in front of a stepped altar with a beribboned conical object (a betyl-stone?) on top. He is the largest figure shown at Tang-e Sarvak and is, contrary to the others, well preserved; and his face still shows all details. The northwest side is made up of four panels or scenes (PLATE II). On the upper scene, probably a seated king is shown with his court. On the left side of the middle panel, two small and four larger persons are depicted. To the right a mounted rider kills a wild boar with a dagger/sword. On the lower panel a standing man is strangling a lion.

Block III. This is located some 40 m to the northeast of Block II. At some date half of the rock carving was detached and fell upside down in front of the block (ht. 5.90 m) and thus remains unknown. The panel is 2.20 m high and preserved over a width of 2.85 m. What remains shows an equestrian combat of a heavily armored horseman who opposes another warrior with his lance (PLATE III). Most likely the whole panel was an antithetic group of two mounted opponents. Behind the preserved rider two smaller persons are shown. One soldier is throwing a large stone, while the second is pointing his bow at the adversary.

Block IV. This is situated 420 m to the east of Block III. The boulder (ht. 4 m) is decorated on two sides. The north side shows two standing males, while on the east side a reclining person is holding a bowl.

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