


Investigating the Newly Discovered Rock Relief from the Sasanian Era in England

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Abstract

The Sasanian, the last Iranian dynasty before the Arab invasion of Iran, overthrew the Parthians and ruled the region for more than four centuries between 224-651 AD. One of the structural characteristics of the Sasanian state was the establishment of an official religion and the concentration of political and religious sovereignty. The official recognition of the Zoroastrian religion led the Sasanian kings and priests to build numerous fire temples in various parts of Iran, and many archaeological evidences of Sasanian era burials have been found, which are intertwined with art. The kings enriched the art of this period by creating rock carvings to display various matters. A rock carving in the Sasanian style was accidentally discovered a few years ago at a local airport in England. When this discovery was reported in the early days of 2023, the main question was whether it was an independent rock carving that had been detached from the mountain or whether it belonged to a structure? Based on the library studies and comparisons made with other works in this article, it seems that the newly discovered Sasanian rock carving from Stansted Airport in London was likely part of a stone structure similar to a fire altar or a Astōdān (one type of Ossuary), and it most probably dates back to the early Sasanian period.

Keywords: The Bas-relief; Exposed in England; Sasanian Era; Altar of Fire; Astōdān (Ossuary of the Bones).

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Introduction

The Sasanian, the last ruling dynasty of ancient Iran, governed this land for over four centuries (224 to 651 AD) and achieved a comprehensive identity across a significant portion of their empire, embodying the idea of Iranian nationalism within a unified homeland. The legacy of Ardashir Papakan identified his goal as the political reunification of Iran, which had fragmented due to Alexander's invasion (Hedayat, 1963: 639; Hamzeh Isfahani, 1967: 22). The Sasanian Empire, led by Ardashir Papakan, the priest of the Fire Temple of Anāhitā, began in Istakhr in the land of Fars and established a deep connection between governance and religion from the outset. In that society, religion oversaw individuals from birth to death, and it appears that many of the arts of the Sasanian period were somehow derived from religion. Many scholars have written many books and articles on this subject (see Rostami & Aryamanesh, 2020; Maksymiuk, 2021; Skupniewicz, 2022; Panjehbashi & Mohazab Torabi, 2022; Rahbar, 2023; Rahbar, 2024; Hozhabri *et al.*, 2024; Hozhabri *et al.*, 2025; Rahbar, 2025; Shahsavari *et al.*, 2025). The creation of Sasanian reliefs is no exception. Among the diverse artistic works of the Sasanian period, reliefs served as mediums conveying the messages of kings to both specific and general audiences, often accompanied by inscriptions (Vanden Berghe, 1983).

From the Sasanian period, 34 reliefs have been discovered in various locations, the majority of which are in the regions of Fars, including Barm-i Delak, Tang-i Chogan, Tang-i Qandil, Sar Mashhad, Firoozabad, Guyom, Darabgerd, Naqsh-i

Bahram, Naqsh-i Rajab, and Naqsh-i Rostam; with some found outside Fars in Salmas, Shahr-i Rey (now destroyed), Taq-i Bostan (Canepa, 2013), and even one in northern Afghanistan at a place known as Rag-i Bibi, 10 kilometers south of Pul-i Khumri (Grenet, *et al.*, 2007: 243). What is evident in most Sasanian reliefs is that the artist, using a rectangular frame in rock and stone, expressed symbols of power while maintaining proportions among the figures. The themes of Sasanian reliefs include: 1. Religious scenes from three groups: the coronation scene of Ahura Mazda, the coronation scene of Anāhitā, and the worship scene; 2. non-religious scenes including: cavalry battle scenes; victory scenes; family scenes; scenes of the king and courtiers; scenes of battles with animals; and hunting scenes (Overlaet, 2013). Therefore, various approaches can be proposed for dating Sasanian reliefs, such as historical approaches, iconographic studies, stylistic analysis, and carving techniques (for more information, see: Mousavi Haji and Sarfaraz, 2017). Most of the reliefs from the Sasanian period belong to the first two centuries of this era.

With the discovery of a portion of a newly found Sasanian relief at Stansted Airport in London, it became evident that the relief had been improperly smuggled after being cut from its original base. Initial investigations indicated that this cultural artifact was likely smuggled by sea to the southern Persian Gulf and then flown to England. The artifact was found in poor condition inside a wooden box and had sustained damage. What is certain is that the relief was cut from a stone base. Following the news of this

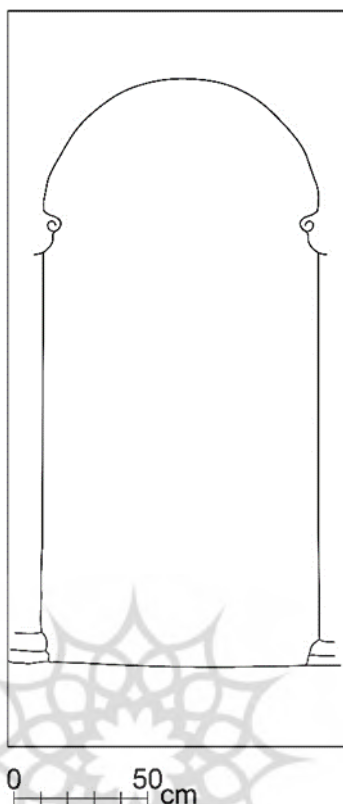


Fig .1. Details of the Arch Reconstruction (Zatollah Nikzad)

discovery, many questions arose regarding this relief, and doubts about its authenticity emerged. In this article, we will examine this relief by comparing it with other examples from the Sasanian period and conducting field research, discussing its date and usage. There is no doubt that the newly discovered relief belongs to the Sasanian period and is likely associated with a stone structure such as a fire altar —with its specific definition (Yamamoto, 1981)— or alongside a carved Astōdān (Ossuary of the Bones).

Story of Discovery

According to The Guardian, British border officers at Stansted Airport in London on January 16, 2016 (26 Dey 1394), accidentally

became suspicious of a shipment that was packaged in a way that suggested it contained worthless items. However, upon inspection, they encountered a one-meter relief that had been cut into two pieces. Their guess was that the discovered shipment was intended for sale in the British black market. John Simpson, a senior curator and Middle Eastern archaeologist at the British Museum, stated: “We have almost never encountered a case where a rock relief has been cut with such a level of brutality.” He also suggested that this relief might be part of a larger collection and that more pieces could exist. Although the case of this Iranian artifact has been investigated by Interpol and the National Crime Agency, no one has been arrested



Fig. 2. Newly Discovered Relief (Photo: Shahin Aryamanesh)



Fig. 2. Details of the Newly Discovered Relief (Photo: Shahin Aryamanesh)

in connection with it so far. It appears that the Sasanian relief was smuggled from the southern borders by sea to the UAE and then flown to Europe and London. Simpson, confirming the authenticity of the artifact, raised the possibility that “this relief was carved from a rock in Shiraz because stylistically, it resembles one well-known

in the region. I think this is probably part of a larger context and there may be more pieces” (Simpson, 2023, Apr, 3).

In any case, after initial restoration of the artifact at the British Museum, it was decided that once the museum officially announced the temporary custody of the item, the relief would be displayed at the



Fig. 4. Gesture of Respect: The Relief and Inscription of Kartir at Naqsh-i Rajab (Herrmann & MacKenzie, 1989: Plate. 19); Part of the Relief Depicting Anāhitā Crowning Ardashir I at Naqsh-i Rostam (<https://isac.uchicago.edu/>); Narseh Relief at Naqsh-i Rostam, Fars (Herrmann & Howell, 1977: fig. 2).

British Museum for a maximum of three months, after which it would be returned to Iran through legal formalities.

Description

The newly discovered Sasanian relief is carved on a limestone block that was cut from its original base using mining

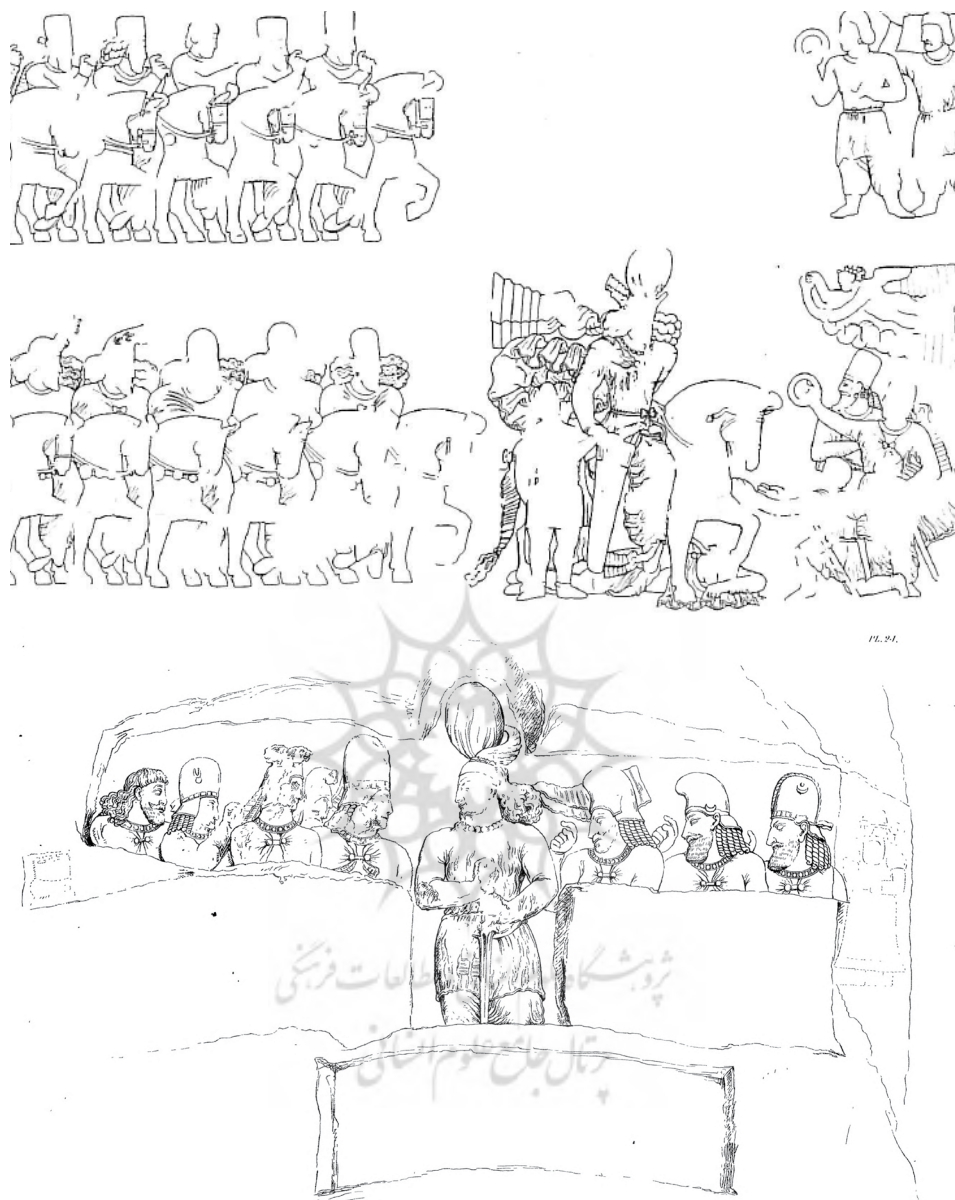


Fig. 5. Gesture of Respect: Part of the Relief Depicting Shapur I's Victory Over the Romans at Tang-i Chogan (Herrmann & MacKenzie, 1989: Fig. 7); Relief of Bahram II and his Courtiers at Naqsh-e Rostam by Sir Robert Ker Porter (Ker Porter, 1821: Pl. 21).

equipment, weighing 81 kilograms and measuring 102 centimeters in height; consequently, during improper handling, part of the relief has been damaged. The relief occupies most of the frame, leaving

little empty space; in fact, the creation of open and closed spaces within the image frame can also be seen as a tradition in Iranian art in later centuries (Haqshenas, 2011: 63).



Fig. 6.1. The Relief of Vologases at Bisotun (Photo: Shahin Aryamanesh)

1. Stone Carving

The carving of the relief, unlike the well-known Sasanian reliefs, lacks fine finish-

ing, and the marks of the carver are still visible on it. The lack of attention to the subtleties and stylistic features in the



Fig. 6.2. The Relief of Mirqoli in Iraqi Kordestan (Brown *et al.*, 2018, Fig. 10); The Mithras Birth Stele, Heddernheim, Germany, from the 1st and 2nd Centuries AD (Espérandieu, 1931: 105)

surface finishing of the relief, if not evidence of forgery, may indicate the social status of the patron who commissioned the relief at court. What is certain is that the upper surface of the relief has an old cut that has been finished.

2. Architectural Elements

The relief features an image of a standing man beneath a horseshoe arch, which rests on two half-columns (Fig. 1).

3. Facial Features and Standing Posture

The depiction of the man, like many ex-

amples of Sasanian art, shows his head in profile, eyes facing forward, upper body in a three-quarter view, and lower body facing front. The man's posture, looking from left to right, suggests respect towards a high-ranking figure. His left hand is likely resting on the hilt of a dagger or perhaps on his belt, while his right index finger is probably raised towards the high-ranking figure. His hair is depicted in four braided strands flowing out from behind his cap. His beard is woven in five horizontal rows, and his mustache resembles well-known examples found in Sasanian reliefs (see

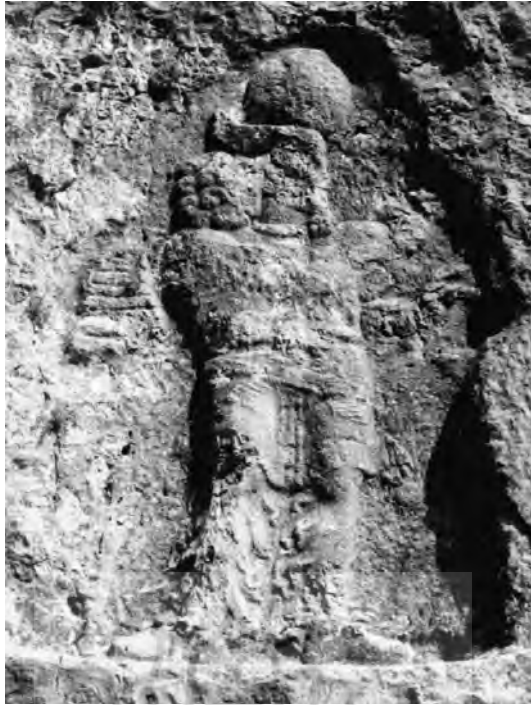


Fig. 7. The Relief of Bahram II at Guyom, Fars (Haerinck & Overlaet, 2009: Pl. 8); The Relief of Bahram II at Barm-i Delak (Haerinck & Overlaet, 2009: Pl. 15)

Fig. 2). The details of his clothing, shoes, and standing posture bear significant resemblance to the figure on the right in the Barm-i Delak relief.

4. Clothing and Trousers

The man is wearing tight-fitting garment and loose pleated trousers. Since there is little evidence of creasing in the upper part of his clothing, it appears he is wearing leather attire. The lower parts of his clothing seem to be made of thin, delicate fabric. His belt is not clearly defined, but his sash is depicted as a thin leather strap, with fabrics or cords hanging from it over the hem of his garment. His outfit is designed for horseback riding. His shoes are simple and adorned with ribbons, indicating that he is a courtly figure (Fig. 3).

5. Hat and Headband

The man wears a tall, round hat that has a protrusion at the back-covering part of his hair. Pearlring (or perhaps stitching with large stitches) is visible around its circumference, and there are no markings on the hat. The existence of brimless hats among ancient Iranians was undoubtedly related to warfare (Von Gall, 1999: 32). The depicted man has a headband tied around his forehead, securing the hat on his head. The headband is knotted at the back and is woven from thick rope (one over the other), differing from other known headbands in tower reliefs.

6. Jewelry

An earring is visible in his ear, and he wears a pearl necklace (or collar) around his neck. The man's clothing and headgear suggest that he is likely a court figure. His long hair is braid-



Fig. 8. The Cross of the Christian Church of Saint Thomas (Holm, 1909: 172); Wooden Mold from Panjakent (Mode, 2016: fig. 3)



Fig. 9.1. Ossuary of Mulla Kurgan (Near Samarkand, Uzbekistan), ca. 7th Century (<https://sogdians.si.edu/durmen-tepe-ossuary/>)

ed, with several strands flowing out from the back of his hat. A necklace with large pearls is depicted around his neck.

7. Disproportion

It is evident that the proportion of the man's head and upper body in the newly discovered relief is larger than that of

the lower body. This issue, in addition to being influenced by the limited frame, indicates the artist's naivety. Examples of this error in Sasanian art can be seen in the disproportion between the head and body in several Sasanian reliefs, such as the head relief from Mashhad (Ghirshman, 1971: 173) and the crown relief of



Fig. 9.2. Ossuary of Ishtikhan, Samarkand (Sogdian Ossuaries (Согдийские Оссуарии), Culture and Art of Ancient Uzbekistan. Exhibition Catalogue, 1991)

Narseh from Anāhita in the Naqsh-i Rostam (Ghirshman, 1971: 176). It seems that Sasanian artists tried to create a coherent composition in the overall work by establishing structural lines based on geometric ratios and how they influenced the design of elements and their relationships (Haghshenas, 2011: 60).

One of the most important characteristics of this work is the posture of respect displayed, which is evident in many Sasanian reliefs. The raising of the right hand and pointing of the index finger towards the king can be seen in the reliefs of Kartir paying respect to Ardashir Papan in the Naqsh-i Rajab; paying respect to Narseh in the crown relief of Naqsh-i Rostam; respect for Shapur I in the relief of Naqsh-i Rajab (Fig. 4); respect for Shapur II in the relief of Tang-i Chogan; respect for Shapur I in the relief of Tang-i Chogan (Fig. 5); and respect for Bahram

II in the relief at Naqsh-i Rostam, among others. This posture in the Sasanian period was typically used for the respect shown by courtiers, soldiers, and priests towards the king or fire.

Discussion: Comparison and Usage

Single-figure rock carvings, especially from the Parthian period, are seen in various locations, such as the Parthian relief at Amadie in Iraqi Kurdistan (Bahrani, *et al.*, 2019), the Parthian archer from Fars, the relief of Vologases at Bisotun, and the relief of Mirqoli in Iraqi Kurdistan (See: Khounani & Mohammadifar, 2018; Brown, *et al.*, 2022). This art is also seen on Roman Mithraic altars (Fig. 6). The same method of creating reliefs continued into the Sasanian period, becoming particularly more prevalent during the reign of Bahram II, as evidenced in the royal reliefs at Goyum and Barm Delak,

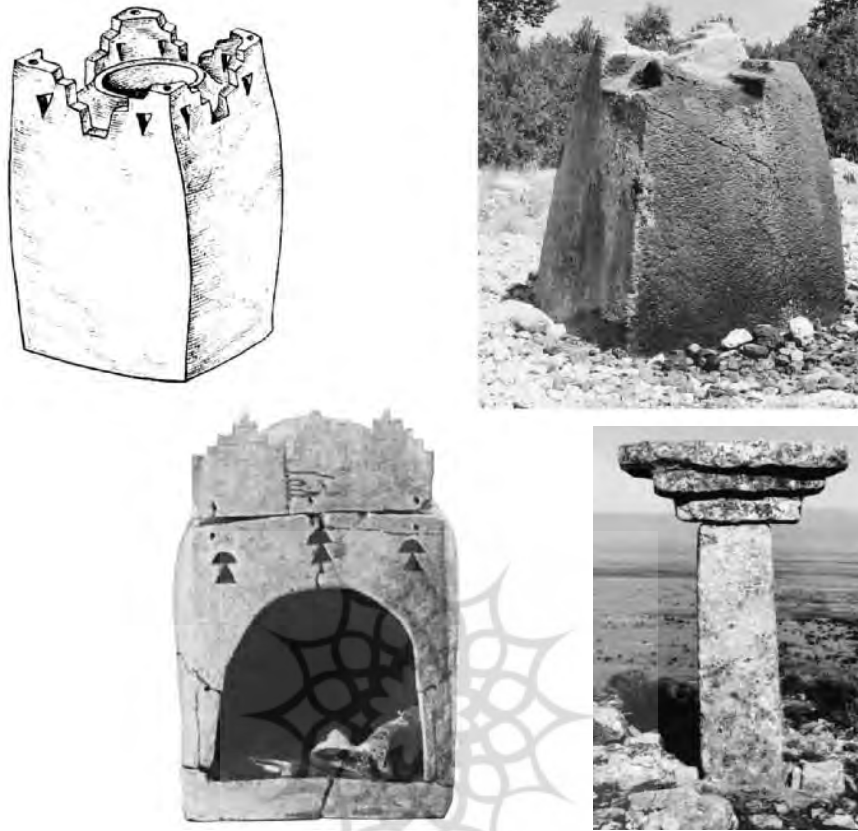


Fig. 10. The Ossuary of Qanat Bagh; The Ossuary of Bagh-i Badreh; The Ossuary from Central Asia (Haerinck & Overlaet, 2008: 230)

as well as in the reliefs of high-ranking court figures, such as the relief of Parishu (Avarzmani, 2011).

Although this artistic style of single-figure reliefs has a history in the Sasanian period, the newly discovered relief exhibits stylistic differences compared to other known Sasanian motifs:

1. The depiction of the man in this relief is slightly different and smaller in size compared to the known Sasanian reliefs, and the proportions of the body are not well maintained in some areas, as seen in the relief of Shapur I's victory at Darabgerd (Von Gall, 1999: 162).

2. Unlike the known examples from the Sasanian period, which are created within rectangular frames, this relief is situated beneath a pointed arch.

3. One of the important features of this relief is that only one person is depicted in the frame, while he is in a posture of respect towards another high-ranking individual. This posture of respect can be clearly observed in several Sasanian reliefs, such as those at Goyum or Barm-i Delak (Fig. 7), which are also attributed to the 3rd century CE.

The creation of motifs within a pointed arch during the Sasanian period was

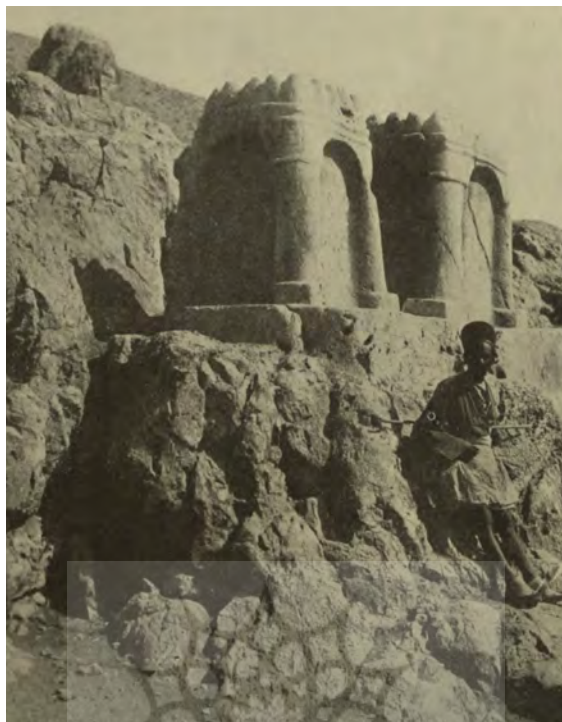


Fig. 11. Photo of the Twin Rock-cut Structures at Naqsh-i Rostam (Jackson, 1906: 305)

significant for nobles and religious elements. Examples of this style can be seen for specific individuals and altars or crosses in the Sasanian period, such as the cross of the Christian church of Saint Thomas and the wooden mold from Panjaket (Fig. 8), as well as the Ossuaries of Malakorgan or Ishti-Khan in Samarkand (Fig. 9).

If we accept that this relief was likely part of a larger collection, then there should be more fragments of the motif. If the newly discovered relief does not belong to a relief carved into the mountain, one must ask: what then does the newly discovered relief in England belong to?

This relief shows a man in a posture of respect within a separate frame beneath a pointed arch. To whom is this respect directed, as that individual is

not present in the frame? Upon learning of the discovery, many researchers were surprised that such a relief had not been introduced before, and one of the main questions raised was where this relief had been hidden from view until now. Therefore, it is necessary to shift our thinking away from the notion that this relief has been located in a mountain until now, and consider that this work was not visible and was discovered through accidental excavations. With this in mind, the question arises: how could the relief have been buried underground?

Considering the shape of the work and the creation of the pointed arch on it, one of the most important stone structures of the Sasanian period featuring an arch-shaped motif is known as a stone altar, the most significant of which



Fig. 12. The Fire Altar of Abnun, Fars (Lerner, 2007: 118)



Fig. 13. Capital (Fire Altar?) of the Taqi Bostan in Kermanshah (Moradi, n.d.)

are the twin stone altars at Naqsh-i Rostam. Other examples include a collection from the Sasanian period in the Qanat of Bagh-I Badre and smaller ceramic samples (see Fig. 10). These structures are generally recognized as Zoroastrian fire temples of the Sasanian era. However, Dietrich Huff convincingly showed that they are Ossuaries. He discovered pieces of a dome-shaped cover in the (?) Pengan fire temple, which once contained hu-

man remains. Additionally, other instances, including ceramic vessels with similar iconography and in the form of a building or tomb, can be seen in Central Asia (Haerinck & Overlaet, 2008: 214).

Two stone structures in the archaeological site of Naqsh-i Rostam in Fars (see Fig. 11) have been referred to as “fire altars” by a small number of earlier researchers and attributed to the Achaemenid period. However, today a larger number of scholars, with some reservations, believe these stone structures are Sasanian and are Ossuaries (Huff, 1995). While the fire temples at Pasargadae are likely more Achaemenid structures, the carved structures at Naqsh-i Rostam have been attributed by Curzon and Godard to before the Achaemenid period, while Galing and Schmidt consider them Achaemenid; even Schmidt, with some hesitation, attributes them to the reign of Darius the Great, while Erdman and Ghirshman date them to the Sasanian period. In

an article on fire temples, Erdman noted that their shape is very similar to the “four arches” of the Sasanian period; thus, most scholars believe these stone structures were fire temples. Among the reasons presented is their similarity to examples found in several other locations (such as Pasargadae, the Qaleh-Sangi in Sirjan, the mountain of Shahrak-i istakhr, etc.), where in all cases one is smaller than the other (Shahpour Shahbazi, 2014: 146).



Fig. 14. Ossuary at Naqsh-i Rostam (Jackson, 1906: 305)

At the end of the steep slope in the southwest of Mount Naqsh-i Rostam, a path leads north toward the Shulistan region from several meters away from the relief of Ardashir Papakan. About 150 meters from it, on the mountain slope, there are two integrated structures carved from the mountain stone in the shape of incomplete pyramids. These two structures appear to be models of the fire temples of that time and bear a strong resemblance to the “four arches”.

The southern structure has a nearly rectangular base (1.7×1.5 meters and a height of 1.75 meters). The northern structure has a nearly square base (1.3×1.35 meters and a height of 1.55 meters) and they are located 80 centimeters apart. Their tops are smaller than their bases, with a cavity measuring 40×40 centimeters at the top of each; one is slightly larger than the other, but the characteristics and decorations of both are the same. Each side of the structure features pointed arches on the four supports of the altars, with the supports placed on square cushions. Surrounding the facade of the structure are two



Fig. 15. The Fire Altar at Tang-i Karam (Stronach, 1966)

prominent decorative bands, and four conical parapets have been created at the edge of the roof. These two structures are situated on a carved platform that has three steps on its southern side (Erdmann, 1949).

In the examples from Naqsh-i Rostam, the pointed arch is depicted on a simple column. Although these altars at Naqsh-i Rostam lack any reliefs, a fire altar with a relief of Shapur I was discovered at the Imamzadeh Ibrahim in Nas-



Fig. 16. Dakhmak in Daramal (Molaei Kordshuli, 2020, Fig. 3. Quoted from: Tavakkol, et al., 2019: 600)

rabad near Barm-i Delak in Shiraz, which has an inscription dedicated by Abnūn (a court figure). In the Abnūn fire altar, the pointed arch is placed on columns with floral capitals (Fig. 12). Such stone fire altars, which sometimes feature pointed arches on all four sides, are also known in Fars province in a place called “Shahrak”. The stone remains known as the capitals of Taq-i Bostan also bear similarities to them (Fig. 13).

The inscriptions on the tomb of the Peacock at Istakhr in Fars not only prove that what is referred to as fire altars were ossuaries, but they also clarify the correct usage of the so-called “rock fire altars”, such as the twin structures at Naqsh-i Rostam. Both types of structures have the same dimensions, featuring a cavity with a protrusion around the opening, which is deeper at the bottom than at the opening itself.

On the other hand, regarding the usage of the twin structures at Naqsh-i Rostam, which are often recognized as fire altars, it should be noted that such

a belief is not entirely accurate, as the sacred fire should burn in a dark space (Justi, 1897). According to ritual instructions, the sun should not shine on the sacred fire, as it would diminish its extraordinary power (Garrison, 1999). Additionally, for religious reasons, two sacred fires should never burn side by side (Dhabhar, 1932).

Examples of fire temples and fire altars from the Sasanian period are well-known (Hozhabri, 2013). A fire altar refers to a complex that includes a fire temple and other associated structures, which typically formed a religious center in each region, with fire temples surrounding it. Today, since the deity Mithra in Zoroastrianism is considered one of the judges overseeing human actions, fire temples are also referred to as “Dar-i Mehr” or “Dar Mehr” (Boyce, 1975a: 9; Oushidari, 1992).

Qazwini clearly recognized the difference between a fire temple and a fire altar when he wrote about Karkouyeh: “... there are two domes... and beneath those



Fig. 17. The Ceramic Ossuary of Durmen Tepe, Samarkand (<https://sogdians.si.edu/durmen-tepe-ossuary/>)

two domes is a fire temple of the Magi... and the fire of that fire temple never goes out... and this larger fire temple is the fire altar among the Magi" (Qazwini, 1992: 321).

An important point highlighted in Qazwini's writing is that the sacred fire should not be exposed to light; thus, how can fire altars from the Sasanian period be known to exist in open spaces? If they are not fire altars, what then is the function of these stone structures? It seems the twin structures at Naqsh-i Rostam

bear a strong resemblance to tombs for skeletal remains, or ossuaries. For example, there are many shelf-like ossuaries or small rooms that are built in pairs and differ slightly in size. The twin structures at Naqsh-i Rostam clearly follow the architectural style of the Sasanian period, with columns, arches, and dome covers being characteristic features observed in such ossuaries.

Although the covers of the twin ossuaries at Naqsh-i Rostam (Fig. 14) have been destroyed, examples can be found



Fig. 18. Inscribed Ossuary of Istakhr: Ossuary Cavity; Relief and Inscription of the Ossuary (Photo: Siavash Arya)

in the ossuaries of Tang-i Karam (see Fig. 15), Pengan, and the Qanat of Bagh (Huff, 2004: 609). Additionally, the fire must be at least three steps away from the corpse, and if its rays reach the body, it is a sin for those deemed worthy of death (*Shāyest nē Shāyest*, 2/40).

In the Avesta, the burial of the dead is opposed; however, this does not prevent the burial of skeletal remains in ossuaries (Darmesteter, 2007: 195; Christiansen, 1978: 137). According to the Vendidad (Vendidad 7, paragraph 7), the bodies of virtuous individuals carry the greatest impurity of death. This is because the cessation of goodness causes the concentration and empowerment of evil forces. Therefore, after death, the corpse was handled with

great caution. They would take it to the tomb in a ceremony to expose it to sunlight, allowing birds and beasts to consume the decaying flesh. The dead body should not come into contact with the earth, water, or plants. After being exposed to the sun for a while, the bones were collected and buried or thrown into a pit in the center of the tomb. The primary goal of the funeral rites was the rapid decomposition of the contaminating flesh and the release of the soul to ascend to the heavens (Boyce, 2006: 71).

After the body decomposed, the bones were kept in a special container, away from dogs, foxes, wolves, and rainwater, or they were placed among stones, plaster, or clay (Vendidad, 6/49-51; for



Fig. 19. Sasanian Seal (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/322513>)

further information see: Boyce, 1975b). An earlier and simpler example similar to the twin structures at Naqsh-i Rostam can be found in the Dakhmak of Daramal (Molaei Kordshuli, 2020, quoted from: Tavakkol, *et al.*, 2019: 600) (Fig. 16).

In the ancient Khwarezm region, abundant archaeological evidence has been discovered regarding burial rituals and beliefs. Among the most significant cultural materials are the anthropomorphic clay ossuaries of Khwarezm, which have been found in the Koy-Krylgan Fortress, one of the main cultural centers of ancient Khwarezm. Rapoport, considering these ossuaries as representations of Siyavash, states that it seems the dead were honored in the form of Siyavash in Khwarezm (Rapoport, 1971: 83). The depictions on the Khwarezmian ossuaries, based on Chinese written sources related to the Sogdian cult of Adonis, were based on the belief that the “god-



Fig. 20. The Plaster Window Uncovered from the Palace of Abu Nasr, Fars; (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/322929>)

dess Nana” participated in burials and specifically in the annual mourning for the god of the dead (Azarpey, 2018: 146-148). A greater number of these ossuar-



Fig. 21. Comparison Between Two Reliefs, Newly Discovered Rock Relief (Photo: Shahin Aryamanesh); Part of Narseh Relief at Naqsh-i Rostam, Fars (Herrmann & Howell, 1977: fig. 2)

ies have been found in Samarkand (see Fig. 17).

Another type of ossuary, featuring the same arched design but with Pahlavi inscriptions, can be seen in the city of Istakhr. Although the façade design is simpler and lacks decoration compared to the example discovered in London, it shows similarities (Fig. 18). In these examples, the ossuary cavity is created above the rock, and the arch and inscription are depicted on the rock face. If the newly discovered example belongs to this type of ossuary, instead of an inscription, a carved figure of a man is present in the arched design.

It is possible that the piece held in the Metropolitan Museum under the

title Window is a cover for an ossuary, considering its shape and dimensions, which would have been used in the cavity's façade. The length, width, and thickness of this lattice window are 15.9×82.6×103.5 cm, and it is made of gypsum (see Fig. 20).

The figure depicted in the newly discovered relief is very similar to the last standing man on the right side of Bahram II in the relief of Bahram II at Naqsh-i Rostam, and there are also some (though fewer) similarities between this figure in the newly discovered relief and the second person standing in the lower left row behind the king's horse in the relief of Darabgerd. Finally, the Metropolitan Museum has a Sasanian seal depicting a no-



Fig. 22. Old Cut (Above the Artwork); New cut (Below the Artwork)

bleman standing with a flower in hand, which bears similarities to the carved figure found in England (Fig. 19).

Summary

By examining the newly discovered Sasanian relief in England, it has been determined that:

Authenticity: Based on photo analysis, the newly discovered relief appears to be authentic (Simpson, 2023, Apr, 3). Due to its strong resemblance to one of the figures depicted in the relief of Narseh in Naqsh-e Rostam, it is unlikely to be from later than 293-302 AD. (see Fig. 21).

Subject: The relief depicts a man who is presumably a high-ranking courtier (prince) showing respect to a greater figure.

Architectural Context: The relief seems to have been cut from an architectural volume, likely a rock structure.

Cubical Features: The cubical nature is evidenced by the flattened top of the stone piece (the surface above the relief shows signs of age unlike the new cuts) (Fig. 22); and the ancient fractures on both sides of the relief next to the columns indicate that it was originally part of a cubical structure rather than being embedded in a mountain.

Provenance: It is highly likely that this relief belongs to the province of Fars (Simpson, 2023, Apr, 3), particularly from

the southern regions of Fars in the Jerreh area.

Structural Association: What is certain is that the relief discovered in England was likely part of a stone structure (such as an ossuary or, according to some researchers, an altar) that was cut from one of its sides.

Comparative Examples: If we accept that these types of structures are ossuaries, numerous examples can be introduced in Fars, some of which, like the ossuary of Ghale Gorgi (Wolf Castle) (Molaei Kordeshuli, 2020), Dakhmak in Daramal (Tavakkol *et al.*, 2019), and several others, are simpler compared to more elaborately constructed stone structures like the twin structures at Naqsh-e Rostam (Rostami & Aryamanesh, 2020).

Alternative Hypothesis: Another possibility is that this relief was created similarly to the ossuaries in Istakhr or a small arch known as a Mihrab in the “Ij” mountains of Estahbanat.

Figure Comparison: The figure in the newly discovered relief, if not the last person on the right side of Bahram II and his courtiers in the relief at Naqsh-e Rostam (Fig. 23) (Skupniewicz, 2022), bears a strong resemblance to him; however, the family emblem seen on the hat of the figure in the Naqsh-e Rostam relief is absent in the newly discovered example. There are also some (though fewer) similarities between this figure in the newly discov-

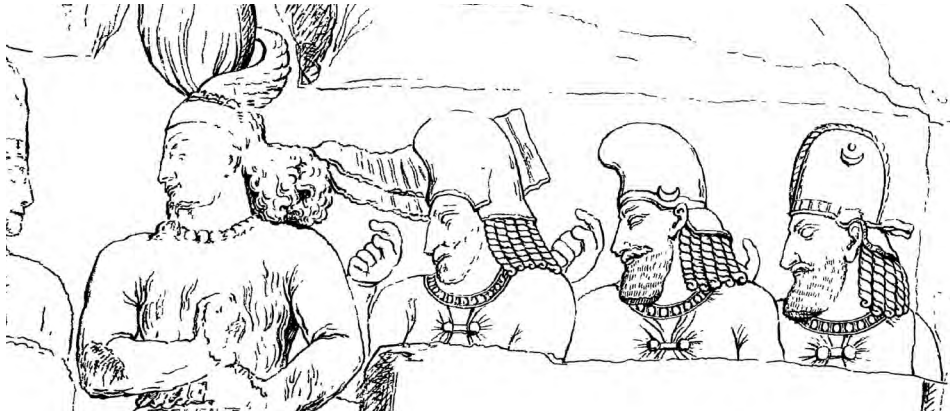


Fig. 23. Part of Relief of Bahram II at Naqsh-i Rostam (Ker Porter, 1821: Pl. 21)

ered relief and the second person standing in the lower left row behind the king's horse in the relief of Darabgerd. This perspective is also evident in the burial traditions of early Christians in Al-Maqsha and Shakhura in Bahrain (Fig. 24), where a high-ranking religious figure is depicted under a crescent arch supported by two columns (Potts, 2008). Therefore, it may be hypothesized that the man showing respect in the newly discovered relief was influenced by Christian art, which in turn was shaped by Roman ideas, bearing in mind that Sasanian art has also drawn influences from Roman art (McDermott, 1954).

Examples in Sasanian Art: There are examples in Sasanian art where the proportions of the body in reliefs are not adhered to, such as the figures in the relief of Darabgerd, which appear to have been created by less skilled artists (Von Gall, 1999: 162).

Conclusion

The newly discovered relief at Stansted Airport in London is from the Sasanian period, likely dating to the third

century AD, and possibly carved during the time of Bahram II in a location in southern Fars. This relief depicts a man in a respectful posture under a crescent arch supported by two columns, differing stylistically from other known Sasanian reliefs. Its strong resemblance to well-known examples from the Sasanian period suggests that it could likely be associated with a depiction on an altar or ossuary. Several ossuaries and altars from the Sasanian period, such as the twin structures at Naqsh-i Rostam (which also appear to be ossuaries) or the ossuaries discovered at Bishapur, are carved from stone into a cubical volume, with a crescent arch sculpted on their sides. It seems probable that the newly discovered relief also belonged to one side of an altar or ossuary, depicting a high-ranking man showing respect to the sacred fire or the remains of someone, similar to other examples, within a cavity carved into the upper surface of the stone volume.

Given the similarities between the carved figure discovered in England and the nobleman on the left of the king in the relief of Bahram II in Naqsh-i Ros-



Fig. 24. Funerary Reliefs of Early Christians in Bahrain (Potts, 2008)

tam, as well as the man standing behind the king's horse in the relief of Darabgerd, and the striking resemblance to a child depicted in the relief of Narseh in Naqsh-e Rostam, it appears that this newly discovered figure is likely less a courtier from the time of Shapur I and more likely a high-ranking individual from the time of Bahram II to the period of Narseh. This relief may have been created alongside the figures of other individuals on the altar or ossuary; if so, we unfortunately have no information about the fate of the other pieces due to the po-

tential cutting of other sides of the stone structure. However, if this relief was created like the ossuaries in Istakhr on a rock face, it would only have this view, which has been cut by smugglers. Based on the style of the relief, it seems that the commissioner was of a lower rank in the court, and the work lacks the delicacy of royal reliefs.

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