



HUNG-E AZHDAR.
RESEARCH OF THE IRANIAN-ITALIAN
JOINT EXPEDITION IN KHUZESTAN (2008-2011)

EDITED BY VITO MESSINA





ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPORTS I



CENTRO SCAVI DI TORINO

RICHT-ICAR



IRANIAN-ITALIAN JOINT EXPEDITION IN KHUZESTAN

FONDAZIONE CRT



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FOREWORD AND AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THIS report makes available the results of the research conducted between 2008 and 2011 by the *Iranian-Italian Joint Expedition in Khuzestan* in the valley of Hung-e Azhdar (or Hung-e Nauruzi), about 17 km north of the modern city of Izeh. The project's aim was to acquire new data, and shed new light, on the Parthian rock carving there located, one of the most famous and disputed panels of ancient Iran for the incoherent scene it depicts and remote place in which is located. The exact meaning and chronology of the represented figures have been particularly debated, to the extent that dates spanning from the 2nd century BC to the 2nd century AD were alternatively proposed for the sculpting – or re-sculpting – of the scene. The different interpretations advanced by scholars in the last decades completely change the framework of the panel's commission and sculpturing, which are of basic importance for the understanding of the events characterizing the history of the region in which it was carved: ancient Elymais.

Despite the fruitful studies so far conducted, the questions regarding the making of the carved scene, at one or different times, and thus its correct interpretation remained unanswered. On this premise, an interdisciplinary approach appeared the best attempt to resume research, and the laser-scanner acquisition and digital photogrammetry of the sculpted surface were planned and conducted by our expedition for obtaining additional information on the carving technique, state of consumption and iconographic details of the panel, together with the archaeological survey of the valley and excavation in selected areas, for better understanding the context of this apparently isolated panel. The data acquired were processed for obtaining and analysing a high definition 3D documentation, in particular 3D digital models and orthophotos of the panel, which allowed us to put forward new hypotheses on its making and historical meaning. Survey and excavation revealed that the panel was carved in a context of votive offering in a reputed religious place. We are particularly glad that the results of our research are published on the Journal *Parthica*, and grateful to the Editorial Board and Publisher. The state of the question, methodology, results of the survey and excavation, and archaeological study are addressed in the following pages in different articles, which share the same bibliography at the end of the volume.

Our research is off-the-shelf. Raw data of the 3D model of the Hung-e Azhdar carving can be downloaded at <http://www.centroscavitorino.it>, and the software created for the data treatment and analysis previewed at <http://www.adhoc3d.com/it/adhoc>.

The expedition operated within a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by Hassan Fazeli Nashli for the Iranian Center for Archaeological Research (ICAR) of the Research Organization of Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization (RICT) and Vito Messina for the Centro Ricerche Archeologiche e Scavi di Torino per il Medio Oriente e l'Asia, or Centro Scavi di Torino (CST). Other institutions involved in the project, as partners of the CST, were the Dipartimento di Ingegneria del Territorio, dell'Ambiente e delle Geotecnologie, Polytechnic of Torino (DITAG), today Dipartimento di Architettura e Design (DAD), the Dipartimento di Scienze Antropologiche, Archeologiche e Storico-Territoriali, University of Torino (SAAST), today Dipartimento di Studi Storici (DSS), and the Dipartimento di Scienze dei Materiali, University of Milano Bicocca (DSM). The expedition was supported in Izeh by the Ayapir Cultural Heritage NGO.

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Co-directors were Jafar Mehr Kian (RICT-ICAR) and Vito Messina (CST-SAAST-DSS). Members of the 2008-2011 campaigns were Mehdi Faraji (RICT-ICAR, archaeologist), Yalda Sourani (RICT-ICAR, architect), Mojtaba Shokrollahi (photographer), Neamatollah Salashoor (archaeologist), Ali Reza Ismaili (technician), Loghman Karimi (guard) and Ebrahim Ahmedian (driver), for the Iranian side; Claudio Fossati (SAAST-DSS, architect), Paolo Ardissoni (DITAG-DAD, archaeologist), and Cristina Bonfanti (DITAG-DAD, architect and topographer), for the Italian side. Supervisor of the project was Prof. Antonio Invernizzi (CST-SAAST). The metric documentation was realized on the



field by Paolo Ardissonne and Cristina Bonfanti under the supervision of Prof. Fulvio Rinaudo (ДИТАГ-ДАД). Hand drawings of the 1st campaign survey and of the Parthian panel (on the front cover) were made by Claudio Fossati.

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We are particularly grateful to Antonio Invernizzi (former President of the CST and Director of the SAAST), who actually made the first steps of this project, and Rémy Boucharlat (former Director of the IFRI), who helped and encouraged us truly. This work is dedicated to them.

J.M.K. · V.M.



HUNG-E AZHDAR. HISTORY OF RESEARCH AND PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION

JAFAR MEHR KIAN · VITO MESSINA

HUNG-E AZHDAR (also known as Hung-e Nauruzi) is the place of one of the several rock carvings noticed over the last two centuries on the Bakhtiari plateau (south-west Iran), in the highlands of modern day Khuzestan. These carvings cover an extended period of time, running from the Elamite to the Parthian period, and attracted the interest of early travellers and modern scholars for the scenes they depict and natural landscapes in which they were sculpted.

In a region where mountain's cliffs provided the natural background for the sculpturing of panels having religious or celebrative purposes, these works gained particular relevance for the themes they display, but even the fact that, in spite of the apparently remote places in which they are often located, they are likely what remains of ancient sites barely recognizable today. This seems to derive by the plain observation of distinctive areas in which a number of carvings are assembled, like the plain of Izeh, the modern town that overlaps ancient Mal-e Mir – where rock reliefs of different periods, including that of Hung-e Azhdar, mark the outskirts of the major centre –, but appears to be especially true when sites of religious nature are taken into consideration, for in these contexts rock carvings are clearly the emerging parts of open-air sanctuaries, now lost, in some way connected with the mountains. Such are the cases of the sites of Shikaft-e Salman, where neo-Elamite carvings depict royal worshippers close to the entrance of a cave, Kul-e Farah, where carvings dated to the same period display sacrifices made by royal figures followed by long processions on the boulders and cliffs of a ravine, and Tang-e Sarvak, where Parthian carvings portraying gods, royal figures or worshippers onto different stones or boulders seem to mark a religious path along the south slope of a suggestive valley.

At Hung-e Azhdar, a valley extending about 17 km north of Izeh (11 km as the crow flies), the context is less clear, for no traces of ancient complexes can be immediately recognized, but an enormous boulder bearing a small and very eroded relief (probably of the old-Elamite period) and a large sculpted panel of the Parthian period. The latter, depicting a scene of homage or investiture based on the presence of royal personages – one on horseback, the other standing –, is perhaps the most famous and disputed Parthian rock carving known so far, for the figures in the scene are characterized by incoherent iconography and style, and seem to have been sculpted in a hidden position to escape the immediate look of those who enter – and entered – the valley, as if the panel was made to pass rather unobserved.

Nevertheless, though often isolated and apparently hidden, ancient rock carvings must have retained their importance during the centuries, being the evidence of a tradition that lasted for millennia, and their existence persisted in the memory of the local inhabitants down to present day, despite their remote location, for they have been among the first places visited by European travellers in modern times. Indeed they continue to be one of the most famous features of the region where they are located, having become universally known, in relevant literature, as the rock carvings of ancient Elymais.

THE ROCK CARVINGS OF ELYMAIS

Ancient Elymais has always been considered a region of great importance in the wider context of the history of the ancient Near East, in particular for the role it played in the relations involving the civilizations of Mesopotamia and Iran. Because of its position, between the land of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates and the Iranian plateau, it always represented a crossroad of civilizations, and its routes, leading from Babylonia to central Iran and Fars, progressively furthered trades as well as

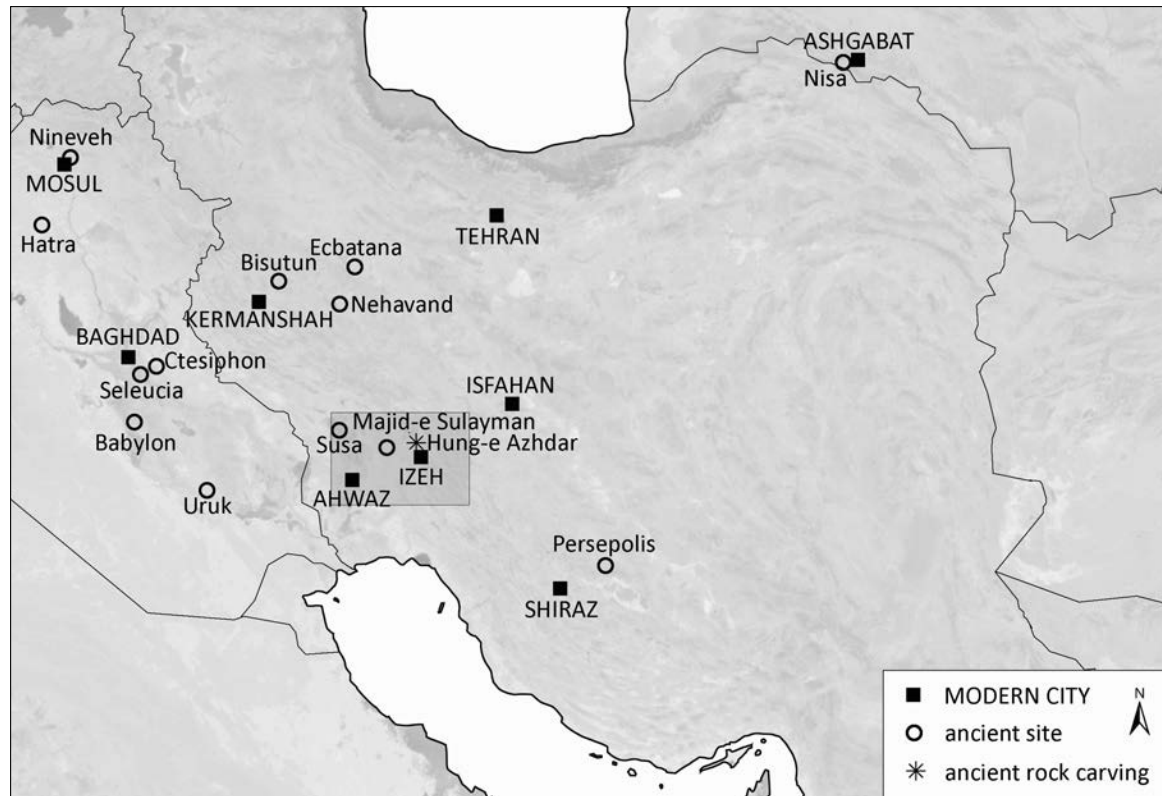


FIG. 1. Iran and Mesopotamia in the Hellenistic and Parthian periods. The inset is detailed on FIG. 2.

political and cultural interconnections (FIG. 1). The most relevant feature of the region is perhaps the dualism existing between its lowlands, virtually the extension of the Mesopotamian plain – an area also called ‘Susiana’ –, and highlands, the homeland of the Bakhtiari nomad tribes, which favoured, and still favour, the access to the Iranian plateau through a piedmont progressively rising up to an elevation of 800-1000 m above the sea level (asl).

Its name is the Greek form of the more ancient name ‘Elam’, appeared in the late 3rd millennium BC in Sumerian and Akkadian sources. This name refers to a succession of groups or political entities of ancient south-west Iran, and may be an Akkadian rendering of a Sumerian term defining to the ‘high lands’ of the Zagros Mountains.¹ Elam appears to have emerged as a state in the second half of the 3rd millennium BC, having been integrated into a system of international relationships, based on inter-dynastic marriages, in the second half of the 2nd millennium. The rise of Assyria in the first centuries of the 1st millennium and a series of inopportune alliances exerted bad influence on Elam’s political fortune, and the accession of the Achaemenids, from the half of the 6th to the end of the 4th century BC, quite limited the ambitions of the local rulers.² The Seleucid dynasty, ascended to the throne of Asia after the conquest of Alexander, at the very end of the 4th century BC, seemingly failed to bring about the complete absorption and assimilation of the region,³ and only under the rule of the Parthians over Asia, from the half of the 2nd century BC to the beginning of the 3rd century AD, Elymais re-emerged in historical records clearly.⁴

The relations between the local rulers or governors and central powers have always been troubled, as far as we know, for, during the centuries, the local dynasties repeatedly claimed their independence from the imperial authority of the Achaemenids, Seleucids and Parthians. It is in this con-

¹ CARTER, STOLPER 1984, 3; POTTS 1999, 1-3, tab. 10.2.

² For an outlook on the history of Elam/Elymais, see POTTS 1999 and selected bibliography.

³ DABROWA 2004, 107-115.

⁴ IDEM 1998, 417-424.





text that, especially from the 2nd-1st century BC to the beginning of the 3rd century AD, the Elymaean dynasty of the Kamnaskirids could assert its supremacy over the region intermittently, but also face several attempts of conquest or re-conquest, even if little autonomy seems to have characterized the government of the late satraps of the region at the end of the Parthian period.⁵ By the accession of the Sasanians, it is even more difficult to distinguish Elymaean cultural and political independent entities clearly, for the last 'kings of Ahwaz', likely what we can consider as the last Elymaean monarchs, were completely defeated by Ardashir I after AD 218,⁶ even if there is no interruption in the stratigraphy of important sites like Susa, and others, like Gundeshapur and Ivan-e Karkeh, particularly developed down to the Islamic period.

Even if only partially known, the history of Elam/Elymais appears to have been strictly interrelated with that of other regions of ancient Iran, in a context of reciprocal influences, but its relations with Mesopotamia cannot be neglected, for they appear to have followed interconnected paths of development, having experimented fruitful contacts in different periods.⁷

In modern geographic terms, ancient Elymais corresponds to the nowadays province of Khuzestan and parts of the Fars, Kohgiluyeh va Boyer-Ahmad, Kerman, Luristan and Kurdistan provinces, even if the highlands and lowlands of Khuzestan can be considered as the core of this ancient political and cultural entity.⁸

Whereas important sites in the lowlands, like particularly Susa, have been widely investigated during the last centuries, and many surveys conducted between the rivers Karun and Karkeh,⁹ the highlands are still almost unknown from the archaeological point of view. Surveys in the Izeh plain and the valley of Dasht-e Gol¹⁰ increased our knowledge only to a limited extent, revealing the presence of a number of sites of different size, spanning from the late 4th millennium BC to the Parthian period, while excavations at Majid-e Sulaiman and Bard-e Neshandeh brought to light impressive shrines of the Seleucid-Parthian period,¹¹ and excavations at Tell Malyan, a site in the mountains extending into Fars, identified as the ancient city of Anshan,¹² allowed to define a sequence of stratified material from the 3rd millennium to the neo-Elamite period, and provided a collection of middle-Elamite clay tablets.¹³ Major centers remain unexplored however, not only for in some cases they lay below modern cities – like Mal-e Mir –, but also because their exact location on the ground is still unknown, even when their existence is proved by literary evidence, like, for instance, the Seleucid foundation of Seleucia in Elymais (or on the Edyphon).¹⁴

In this context, the information that has been acquired by the analysis of rock carvings is even more precious, when considering that the highlands of Elam/Elymais have been the location of carved panels at least since the beginnings of the 2nd millennium BC. Many of these ancient carvings display scenes of religious nature, often characterized by processions, and provide a deep insight into the art of the Elamite period from the 20th to the 7th century BC.

It is worthy of note that the known samples are all located in the outskirts of Izeh/Mal-e Mir (FIG. 2).

⁵ The dynasty appears to have originated from a certain Kamnaskires (I), who struck coins with the epitheton 'Nikephoros' at Susa soon after the half of the 2nd century BC (MØRHOLM 1965, 151; LE RIDER 1978, 35; HOUGHTON 1983, 101). According to HENNING 1952, 164-165, the name, written 'kbnškyr' in Aramaic, seems derived from the Achaemenid Elamite title 'kap-nu-iš-ki-ra', meaning 'treasurer', which could have been originally applied to the satraps of Susiana for they were the keepers of the royal treasurers stored in the city. After a gap (?) of about a century, further coins were struck in Elymais by other Kamnaskires down to the beginning of the 3rd century AD.

⁶ WIDENGREN 1971, 737-738; SCHIPPMANN 1990, 15.

⁷ These relations have been often interpreted in a context of 'alternation and duality' (AMIET 1979a, 195-204; IDEM 1979b, 2-22), but the link existing even with the material culture of Mesopotamia has always been emphasized, and, in spite of

the scanty information acquired, it has been observed that, at least in some periods since the 4th millennium BC, the lowlands of south-west Iran can be considered as a virtual extension of the Mesopotamian culture (WRIGHT, JOHNSON 1975, 267-289; POTTS 1993, 382).

⁸ POTTS 1999, 15-16.

⁹ On the French excavations at Susa, an abundant literature exists; final reports are published in the Series *Mémoires de la Délégation Archéologique Française en Iran (Mémoires de la Délégation en Perse)* and the Journal «Cahiers de la Délégation Archéologique Française en Iran». The most important surveys were conducted by D. McCown in 1948, but published by ALIZADEH 1985b, and WENKE 1975-76.

¹⁰ WRIGHT 1979.

¹¹ GHIRSHMAN 1976.

¹² CARTER, STOLPER 1984, 42.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 108.

¹⁴ E.g. Strabo (xvi.1.8) and Pliny (*Nat. Hist.*, vi.27.136).



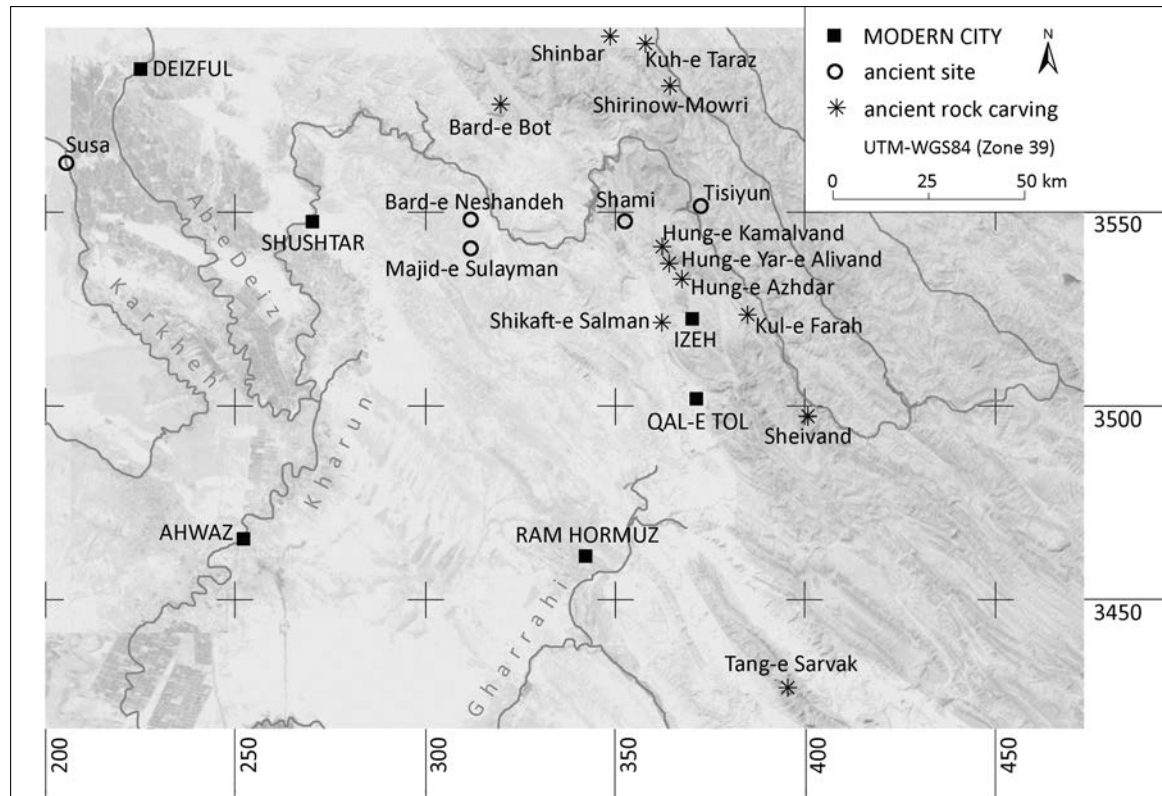


FIG. 2. Ancient Elymais. Map of sites and places of known rock carvings.

The most ancient carvings appear to be those at Shah Savar and Hung-e Azhdar. At Shah Savar, about 10 km south-west of Izeh, a carving on a cliff, divided in two registers and dated to the 20th-18th century BC, displays on the upper register the procession of six figures in profile, advancing toward a sitting king or god, and probably bore, on the lower, an inscription now disappeared;¹⁵ at Hung-e Azhdar, on the more visible side of the same boulder that also bears the famous Parthian relief, is still perceptible a small and almost completely eroded relief in two registers (p. 66, FIG. 3, showing the same scene of Shah Savar on the upper register, but with seven (?) figures in profile, the lower having been carved to bear an inscription likewise disappeared; this can be dated to the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC.¹⁶

The most impressive reliefs are probably those at Kul-e Farah, immediately east of Izeh,¹⁷ where scenes generally dated to the neo-Elamite period, but possibly older in some cases, are sculpted on the boulders and cliffs of a ravine in the offshoots of the Bakhtiari Mountains. Of great historical importance is a panel carved on the north cliffs of the ravine, displaying the figure of the Elamite king Hanni (7th century BC) and two dignitaries, all identified by cuneiform inscriptions, sacrificing bovids at the presence of a priest and musicians, but also interesting are the long procession of more than sixty worshippers following a sovereign of far larger dimensions, which runs on four registers developing on two faces of a free-standing boulder, and the offering made by an enthroned king, followed by priests and dignitaries, at the centre of two processions of figures, on three registers, moving toward him, which, in its composition, clearly foresees the

¹⁵ LAYARD, 1846, 78; JÉQUIER, 1901, 142; VANDEN BERGHE, 1963a, 37-38; IDEM 1983, 27 (dated to 20th-18th century BC).

¹⁶ LAYARD, 1846, 78; JÉQUIER, 1901, 142; VANDEN BERGHE, 1963a, 38. The latter (IDEM 1983, 27, 103) suggests a date in the 20th-18th century by comparison with the contemporaneous

cylinder seals, and reads the scene as the homage of some worshippers to an enthroned god.

¹⁷ LAYARD, 1846, 75; JÉQUIER, 1901, 135-136; HINZ, 1962, 106-111; VANDEN BERGHE, 1963a, 25-32; IDEM, 1983, 112-113 (all dated to 8th-7th century BC); POTTS, 1999, 253-255.



Achaemenid audience scene. Other blocks of stone also bearing reliefs having the same subjects or related to scenes of worshipping, for a total of six, attest that the ravine was considered as a kind of open-air sanctuary in a mountainous context not far from the ancient centre of Mal-e Mir. The link of this cult-place with the mountain's cliffs is indeed very clear when visiting the area, for some of the reliefs appear to have been sculpted as if the figures they display proceed toward the cliffs themselves.¹⁸

King Hanni appears to have been even the actor of the main religious scene sculpted at the entrance of a cave at Shikaft-e Salman, at the west fringes of Izeh, as further inscriptions commissioned by him allow us to ascertain.¹⁹ Here the king's family, composed by himself, his wife and son, is portrayed in the attitude of worshippers, having the arms bent and hands clasped at the chest. Three further reliefs also show worshippers, and at least one of them portrays one of the Hanni's high dignitaries. Again a suggestive natural landscape, characterized by the presence of a cave and spring, is the background for religious subjects, and this context, together with that of Kul-e Farah, allows us to postulate that all these reliefs could have been sculpted to be dedicated by sovereigns or high-rank persons in reputed religious places, namely open-air sanctuaries.

The majority of rock carvings known in Elymais must be dated to the Parthian period however, when a school of rock carvers appears to have been at work in the region (FIG. 2): Hung-e Azhdar, Hung-e Yar-e Alivand, Hung-e Kamalvand, Shinbar (also known as Tang-e Botan), Kuh-e Taraz, Bard-e Bot (or Kuh-e Tina) and Tang-e Sarvak (the latter in the modern province of Kohgiluyeh va Boyer Ahamad) are just some of the sites where Parthian rock reliefs have been recognized, and to these must be also added the more recent discoveries at Shaivand and Shrinow-Mowri, thus reaching a total of 14 monuments, still *in situ*, known to us today.²⁰

The relief at Hung-e Azhdar, perhaps the most impressive, and surely the most complex of them, is extensively treated below. Not far from it, in the same area, two other carvings are located at Hung-e Yar-e Alivand and Hung-e Kamalvand.

At Hung-e Yar-e Alivand, less than 3 km north of Hung-e Azhdar, a small panel carved on a low vertical cliff displays two standing men in a frontal position, paratactically placed side-by-side and dressed in the characteristic Parthian belted tunics and trousers, almost completely eroded and interpreted as a sovereign paying homage to a god or an investiture scene of the 2nd century AD.²¹

At Hung-e Kamalvand, a gorge extending about 1 km further to the north, and giving access from the plain of Izeh to the Bakhtiari Mountains, a panel of the same size is carved on a remote cliff.²² It shows a man, on the right, wearing a belted tunic and trousers, pouring liquid (probably water) from a small vessel (a jug?) held in his right hand, and standing in front of a diademed horseman holding a spear and proceeding to right, toward him. An Elymaean inscription on the upper part of the scene refers to a certain «Phrates the priest, son of Kabnuskir».²³ It is generally assumed that this carving depicts an investiture of the 2nd century AD, and the inscription refers to the horseman, claiming to his royal descent, while the standing figure remains unidentified; the possibility that the inscription refers to the standing man cannot be completely ruled out, however, and, if the scene

¹⁸ In the dedicatory inscription of Hanni several gods of the Elamite pantheon are invoked, like Tepti, Tirutur, Napir, Shimut and Huban.

¹⁹ LAYARD, 1846, 78-79; JÉQUIER, 1901, 139-140; STEIN, 1940, 129-130; VANDEN BERGHE, 1963a, 34-37; IDEM, 1983, 27, 111-112 (all dated to 8th-7th century BC); HINZ, 1966, 43-47; DE WAELE, 1972, 17-32; IDEM, 1981, 45-61; AMIET, 1992, 81, 86 dates the reliefs to the period of Shutruk Nakunte I or the Nebuchadnezzar I's conquest of Elam, and implies that the inscriptions of Hanni were carved and superimposed to the reliefs in a subsequent moment.

²⁰ The most recent list of the monuments still *in situ* in the provinces of Khuzestan and Kohgiluyeh and Boyer Ahamad

has been published by MEHR KIAN, 2000, 67, who discovered 6 new rock reliefs between the Susa and Izeh plains: some of them are still unpublished (MEHR KIAN, 1996, 54-61; IDEM, 1997, 67-72; IDEM, 2001, 293-298).

²¹ HINZ, 1963, 170-171; VANDEN BERGHE, 1983, 16, 48; HARMATTA, 1982-1984, 167-171; VANDEN BERGHE, SCHIPPMANN, 1985, 40-42; KAWAMI, 1987, 126-127, 214; MATHIESEN, 1992, 123-124 (and selected bibliography).

²² HINZ, 1963, 171-173; VANDEN BERGHE, 1983, 16, 48-49, 121; HARMATTA, 1982-1984, 171-180; VANDEN BERGHE, SCHIPPMANN, 1985, 43-44; KAWAMI, 1987, 72-73, 128, 177-178; MATHIESEN, 1992, 121-122.

²³ HINZ 1963, 171.





represents an investiture, it should be placed in a religious context when considering the reference to a priest made in the inscription itself and the action of pouring liquid made by the standing man.²⁴

This scene parallels one of the four Parthian reliefs known outside Elymais: it is carved at Sar-e Pol-e Zohab (in Iranian Kursidtan), in the same religious (?) place where also the very famous triumph – or investiture – of king Anubanini was sculpted, together with other three reliefs having the same subject, at the end of the 3rd-beginning of the 2nd millennium BC. The Parthian carving, far smaller in size and placed just below that of Anubanini, displays the same horseman and standing figure of Hung-e Kamalvand, though showing some variations, for the standing man presents or receive a ring, symbol of kingship, while the diademed horseman does not seem to hold a spear.²⁵ Even the style of execution is similar, and analogous Elymaean inscriptions run in the upper part of the scene, although they did not allow scholars to identify the represented figures indisputably.²⁶ This led to propose different chronologies for the carved scene, from the 1st century BC to the 3rd century AD, but the analogies it reveals with the relief at Kamalvand induce to prefer the same period for the two.

It is again interesting to note – to return to Elymais – that many of the known carvings appear assembled in small groups. To the group including Hung-e Azhdar, Hung-e Yar-e Alivand and Hung-e Kamalvand, which, like the carvings dated to the neo-Elamite period, are not far from Izeh/Mal-e Mir, seems to correspond, more than 60 km north of the city, a further group of three carvings, located at Shinbar, Kuh-e Taraz and Shirinow Mowri.

At Shinbar,²⁷ a valley not far from the river Abi Bazoft, two panels have been recognized. One, at the valley entrance, shows a standing man wearing belted tunic and trousers, raising his right hand and turning the palm in a gesture of devotion; the other, inside the valley and close to the ruins of a supposedly ancient building,²⁸ displays twelve figures. This is, by far, the most interesting of them: indeed, despite the fact that the figures it depicts are paratactically aligned on the same background, differences in the sculpturing depth and size of the figures, and the different paleography of the five Elymaean-Aramaic inscriptions running aside the figures themselves attest that these can be divided into five groups, made at different times. As can be seen by the carving's composition, and is also declared by inscriptions, these groups – three composed by two figures and two by three figures – repeat the same scene five times: the sacrifice made on a small altar by high-rank person(s) or priest(s), in belted tunic and rousers, to a standing naked god, sometimes resting on a club, and interpreted as Hercules-Verethragna. It is clear that, starting from the first group of two figures, the others were progressively added in subsequent moments: this led to propose different chronologies for the groups, but, given the strong similarities in their style, it seems probable that all were sculpted in the 2nd, if not beginning of the 3rd, century AD.

At Kuh-e Taraz,²⁹ less than 5 km further to the east, a carving on a cliff, very badly preserved, probably shows one seated – or enthroned – and two standing frontal men, which could be interpreted in the context of an investiture or devotion scene of the 2nd century AD. This interpretation is based on a similar scene, replicated on a cliff about 5 km to the south, at Shirinow Mowri, on the mountainous path that passes through Zardeh: the enthroned figure holds here a spear and it is unclear whether is a god or king, while two standing and frontal men in belted tunic seem to pay homage to him.³⁰ Despite the fact that the carving has been repeatedly damaged, the figures allow the

²⁴ According to KAWAMI 1987, 72-73, who also considers the religious milieu, this relief may depict a member of the Kamnaskirid dynasty who retained some power, perhaps religious, rather than political, in the region.

²⁵ KAWAMI, 1987, 45-48, 162-167; MATHIESEN, 1992, 176.

²⁶ The names of Artabanus, Gozarzes (I or II) or Vologases (II or III) have been read in the last decades by different scholars (see MATHIESEN 1992, 176, notes 7-14 for discussion). In the end, some of them must admit that none of these names can be read with confidence.

²⁷ VANDEN BERGHE, 1983, 50, 121-122; VANDEN BERGHE, SCHIPPMMANN, 1985, 50-51; KAWAMI, 1987, 73-74; MATHIESEN, 1992, 125-130 (and selected bibliography).

²⁸ This has been interpreted as a temple on the basis of unconvincing reasons (BIVAR, SHAKED 1964, 280).

²⁹ VANDEN BERGHE, 1983, 16, 50; VANDEN BERGHE, SCHIPPMMANN, 1985, 57-58; KAWAMI, 1987, 205; MATHIESEN, 1992, 124-125.

³⁰ MEHR KIAN 2001, 294.





observer to see the analogies existing between their style and that of other carvings, in particular that at Hung-e Yar-e Alivand.

At Shaivand, north of the Mongasht Mountain, about 30 km east of Qal-e Tol, a small panel is carved on an isolated boulder close to a terrace that overlooks the south bank of the river Karun.³¹ Here, not far from the ruins of ancient buildings of unclear purpose, a sacrifice is performed by a bearded priest (?), who seems to burn a substance on a censer, holding a cup in his left hand, and being aided by an assistant of smaller dimension, at the presence of a dignitary (?) and three other personages, less important for they are likewise smaller in size. The dignitary (?) holds a cup and ritual (?) object, lying on a chariot (?) pulled by two humpbacked bulls and led by a charioteer. All the figures are in frontal position and paratactically aligned, wearing belted tunics, and their style, even more linear than that of other known samples, induces to propose a chronology in the very late Parthian period for their execution.



FIG. 3. The rock carving on block II (or A) at Tang-e Sarvak. North side (photo V. Messina).

At Bard-e Bot,³² about 25 km west of Shinbar, an apparently isolated boulder was carved to show a man lying on a *kline* (or 'takt') and holding a ring in his right hand and a cup (?) in his left, and a smaller figure behind him, holding an object recalling a cornucopia. The scene has been dated to different times, but the analogies it shows with one of the reliefs at Tang-e Sarvak, which are more than 160 km far to the south, allow us to exclude that it antedates the 2nd century AD.

The most interesting complex of carvings so far discovered is indeed in the Sarvak valley (Tang-e Sarvak), not far from the modern city of Behbehan, in an area where, according to some scholars, even the still unidentified city of Seleucia on the Edyphon could have been founded.³³ The valley offers a very suggestive landscape, and along its south slope four free-standing stone blocks or boulders have been recognized that bear eleven or thirteen³⁴ carvings of various subject and size, made at different times.³⁵ These, identified in relevant literature as block I, II, III and IV (or A, B, C and D), seem to mark a religious path leading from the valley entrance to the bottom, where a number of rock-cut tombs, named 'astudan' and generally dated to the Sasanian period, can be seen: what remains of an ancient paved route is also visible when entering the valley. On block I (or B), the first encountered from the entrance, the sacrifice of a certain prince Orodes (?),³⁶ accompanied by a priest, to a naked figure (the god Hercules-Verethragna?), and two standing frontal personages are carved. On block II (or A), halfway from the entrance to the bottom, six or seven panels were progressively carved so as to cover almost all the block's surface. The most important of them shows the investiture of king Orodes,³⁷ lying on a *kline* or 'takt' before a small figure holding a cornucopia, at the presence of two enthroned gods (FIG. 3). Three standing men were added in a rectangular panel below the investiture. King Orodes also performs a sacrifice beside an altar on a panel carved further to the right, while on the block's rear face an audience scene with an enthroned

³¹ MEHR KIAN 1997, 67-72; IDEM 2001, 293-294.

³² VANDEN BERGHE, 1983, 122; VANDEN BERGHE, SCHIPPMANN, 1985, 55; KAWAMI, 1987, 204; MATHIESEN, 1992, 122-123.

³³ See in particular HANSMAN 1978a, 154-161.

³⁴ This depends upon the fact that some figures are interpreted as part of the same scene by some scholars, thus reaching a total of eleven carvings (e.g. VANDEN BERGHE, 1983, 106), or of different scenes by others, thus reaching a total of thirteen (e.g. MATHIESEN 1992, 130-131).

³⁵ HENNING, 1952, 151-178; SEYRIG, 1970, 113-116; DE WAELE, 1975, 59-79; VANDEN BERGHE, 1983, 50-52, 123-125;

VANDEN BERGHE, SCHIPPMANN, 1985, 59-79; KAWAMI, 1987, 88-110; MATHIESEN, 1986, 153-176; IDEM, 1992, 130-149 (and selected bibliography); HAERINCK, 2003, 221-228; VON GALL, 2000, 319-359.

³⁶ An Elymaean inscription running close to this figure seems to express the name Vorod (HENNING 1952, 159), which is very common at Tang-e Sarvak and could be a dynastic name (or title).

³⁷ Vorod son of Beldusa is here identified, together with a certain Abarbasi, by one of the longer Elymaean rock inscriptions known so far (*ibidem*, 169).





FIG. 4. The rock of Bisutun in a drawing of Joseph Guillaume Grelot of 1673 (INVERNIZZI 2005, pl. LIV).

likely when comparing some of the known contexts, namely those of Shinbar (where the same sacrifice has been many times replicated during the years) and Tang-e Sarvak (where carvings actually seem meaningless out of their suggestive landscape), to the more ancient sites concisely described above, Kul-e Farah and Shikaft-e Salman: indeed analogies can be seen in the repetitive making of sacrifice scenes and existence of several carvings in the same place, for this implies that some locations were considered more important than others, and thus preferred.

This hypothesis seems also corroborated by the occurrence of further Parthian reliefs in the same places where also more ancient panels were sculpted, thus creating a visual and conceptual link with illustrious antecedents: such is the case of Sar-e Pol-e Zohab, already mentioned, and also Bisutun (not far from Kermanshah), were, below the famous reliefs of Darius I, two panels showing the investiture of Mithradates II (?) and equestrian combat of Gotarzes II (?) – both alas indistinguishable today – were sculpted (FIG. 4), and, not far from them, a worshipping sovereign of the 1st-2nd century AD carved on a free-standing boulder.⁴²

³⁸ Six further inscriptions are associated to these carvings, almost always mentioning king Vorod (*ibidem*).

³⁹ See the discussion resumed by MATHIESEN 1992, 145-159 and relevant references.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 133.

⁴¹ See for instance HENNING 1952, 176, who identify at Tang-e Sarvak a sanctuary of Bel; GUÉPIN 1965, 20; SCHLUMBERGER 1970, 155; SCHIPPMMANN 1971, 217; DE WAELE 1975, 75. Otherwise, STEIN 1940, 113, rather identified a summer retreat for the rulers.

king, a paratactic procession (possibly part of the previous), the fighting of a man with a lion, and hunt of a bear have been progressively carved, sometimes partially overlapping the older reliefs.³⁸ On block III (or D), in front of block II, the left half of a ruined panel showing an equestrian combat is still preserved. On block IV (or C), the innermost of the four, two standing men raising their right hand, and a reclining personage, perhaps unfinished, can be seen on the block's north and east sides. The problem of the relative and absolute chronology of the carvings is still debated,³⁹ but a period ranging from the first half of the 2nd to the beginning of the 3rd century AD appears very probable for the making of all the reliefs in a context defined by some scholars as the 'late Parthian *koine*'.⁴⁰

Whatever the case, the valley is deemed as a religious complex in large part of the relevant literature, often referring to it – hazardously, one may think – as the place where Elymaean kings could have been even crowned and buried.⁴¹

Further to the explicit reference to religious subjects made by the scenes of some panels – worshippers and sacrifices, in particular, for gods are rarely represented – the possibility that these carvings were often located in natural sanctuaries, or at least places having attained particular significance, has been especially considered by scholars, and it appears even more

⁴² The relief of Mithradates II (?) was almost completely obliterated by the carving of a Persian inscription of Sheykh 'Ali Khan Zanganeh in 1684-85, but the represented scene is known in its general layout because it was sketched, together with the relief of Darius I, by Joseph Guillaume Grelot, who accompanied the Venetian nobleman Ambrogio Bembo, few years before, in 1673: it shows the homage of four dignitaries in profile, wearing a long tunic, proceeding to the right for paying homage to a sovereign likewise in pro-

In many cases, rock carvings appear thus to have been sculpted on mountainous cliffs or boulders as if they were made to be dedicated in sacred natural places that cannot be easily perceived today, as ascertained for their neo-Elamite predecessors. This could be inferred when we compare them to a further type of carvings, as a rule smaller in size: namely those occurring on detached blocks of stone, shaped as stelae, which display sacrifices or worshippers, and were indisputably made to be dedicated in temples or sanctuaries, as the many samples discovered, *in situ*, on the cult terraces of Bard-e Neshandeh and Majid-e Sulayman clearly show.⁴³

In Elymais, several loose carved stelae are known, like those recovered, out of their original context, at Bid Zard, Tisiyun and Hung-e Azhdar, and others remained unpublished. At Bid Zard, a village on the road to Qal-e Tol, about 15 km south of Hung-e Azhdar, a sculpted block of stone fortuitously found in a riverbed,



FIG. 5. Hung-e Azhdar. Carved stone or stela of the Parthian period (KAWAMI 1987, pl. 16).

and probably carried there by water from another place, shows two standing men, of far different size, paratactically aligned, like at Hung-e Yar-e Alivand:⁴⁴ the most important, and bigger, of them holds a cup in his left hand and rises his right for showing the palm, wearing a belted tunic, trousers and cloak, the smaller figure, to the right side of the former, stretches his right arm across the chest for holding an object (?), wearing similar dresses. The scene could represent a sacrifice made by the smaller figure to the bigger, possibly a god, and is dated to the 2nd century AD. At Tisiyun, about 20 km north of Hung-e Azhdar, an elliptical carved stone or stela shows a frontal man (a warrior?) in belted tunic and trousers holding a branch (?) in his left hand and a torch or weapon (?) in his right, to be dated to the same period.⁴⁵ At Hung-e Azhdar, a fragmentary carved stone, found at the feet of the Parthian relief and now lost (FIG. 5), displayed a standing worshipper in belted tunic and trousers.⁴⁶

Recent discoveries even point to the fact that carved scenes or figures could have decorated also architectural elements, like the sculpted lintel fortuitously found in 1988 at Murd-e Tang-e Zir, not far from Shaivand, clearly attests.⁴⁷ On this lintel, which was evidently out of its archaeological context, four frontal men (three bearded and one beardless) lie one aside the other, each holding a cup. Their style is remarkably different from that of all the other carvings, to the extent that the lintel can be dated to the Parthian period hazardously, having been made probably at a later time.

The commission and making of these carvings appear hence to have been related to a complex context, as the many studies devoted to this matter often pointed out: these produced scientific results of the highest standard, and resulted in the classification of the reliefs on the basis of the subjects they represent and their style.⁴⁸ Several aspects regarding the chronology of some represen-

file. The relief of Gotarzes II (?) must have been completely eroded already at that time, for only a flying Nike (?) was recognized by Grelot and sketched aside the relief of Mithradates. See VANDEN BERGHE 1983, 45, 118-120; KAWAMI 1987, nos. 2-3; MATHIESEN 1992, 172-176; INVERNIZZI (ed.) 2005, 363-366, and all related references and bibliography. A reclining Hercules, sculpted in very high relief – and in some parts almost in the round –, is dated to the Seleucid period.

⁴³ GHIRSHMAN 1976, *passim*.

⁴⁴ VANDEN BERGHE 1963, 168; KAWAMI 1987, no. 50; MATHIESEN 1992, 150. It is disputed whether the figures are all standing, for according to Vanden Berghe (*ibidem*), the larger in size is seated if not enthroned.

⁴⁵ KAWAMI 1987, no. 29; MATHIESEN 1992, 150-151.

⁴⁶ DE WAELE 1975, 61-62; KAWAMI 1987, no. 13, pl. 16; MATHIESEN 1992, 121.

⁴⁷ MEHR KIAN 2001, 294-295.

⁴⁸ VANDEN BERGHE 1963a, 34-47; IDEM 1983, 27, 111-112; HINZ 1966, 43-47; DE WAELE 1972, 17-32; AMIET 1992, 81-86; POTTS 1999: 253-255.

tations, their evolution and carving techniques, still need to be clarified, however, for the available documentation is limited to photographs or drawings which, also when of superior quality, do not allow for a more in-depth examination.

The evident iconographic and stylistic similarities existing between almost all the Parthian carvings of Elymais have led to consider them within a regional background, as specific products that satisfied the requirements of local elites, while the rigid frontality of almost all the figures did suggest a chronology for their execution spanning from the end of the 1st century BC to the beginning of the 3rd century AD, though a restricted period from the 1st to the 2nd century AD is generally preferred.⁴⁹

Their exact meaning, mutual relations and, particularly, context deserve further analysis, for almost nothing is known in detail on the – only in appearance (?) – remote places in which they are located: no systematic research was conducted on this matter, while topographic and archaeological surveys of the carvings' sites are lacking. The fact that no clear evidence of ancient ruins appears to those who visit the places of the carvings does not imply that, as a rule, these were isolated or made in the middle of nowhere, indeed, for the visibility of a mountainous site is far lower than that of a site in the plain – which could emerge for meters from the ground as a 'tell' or 'tepe' or reveal the abundant presence of potsherds on the surface –, and this can be sometimes recognized only further to careful survey and excavation.

In the end, if the interpretation of some rock carvings as dedicatory panels also seems to explain the meaning of the places in which they were sculpted – and are still visible today – it must be stressed that this cannot be applied *a priori* to all the known samples on the basis of the information we have, and some contexts demand to be investigated more thoroughly. This appears particularly true when considering also the opinion of some scholars, who, despite the common view, rather suggest that the presence of unequivocal religious themes in some of the carvings – and in particular gods – is questionable.⁵⁰

In any case, there are little doubts that the Parthian rock reliefs of Elymais can be considered as a group, for almost all of them are characterized by a certain degree of similarity of subjects and style. This is visually evident when comparing some samples, like those at Bard-e Bot and Tang-e Sarvak (II), or Hung-e Kavalvand and Sar-e Pol-e Zohab, for instance, but also at Kuh-e Taraz and Shirinow Mowri, for these evidently replicate the same prototypes regardless of their proximity. Even their carving technique is similar, for they are characterized by figures made in low relief and outlined in a linear style, with a well-defined contour. In many samples, analogies can be seen in some details, like the dress or gesture, but is in their frontality, linearity and paratactic composition that their most common features must be traced.⁵¹

The composition of most of the scenes is even remarkable especially in the preference for aligning the figures as if in a procession, for this seems to connect the Parthian reliefs to those of the Elamite period, though the former are frontal and the latter in profile, while the choice of some themes, like investitures, equestrian combats and hunts, with a special relevance given to horsemen, and baroque description of some details in the most elaborated figures, clearly foresees Sasanian concepts and models.

In brief, the carvings of Elymais are of great significance for three main reasons:

1. they constitute the most outstanding assemblage of carvings in Parthian Iran, for, outside Elymais, only four other Parthian reliefs are known to us in the whole of Iran, one at Sar-e Pol-e Zohab, and three at Bisutun (in Iranian Kurdistan);⁵²

⁴⁹ See the most recent discussion on the chronology of the rock reliefs of Elymais in MATHIESEN, 1992, 119-169.

⁵⁰ See in particular VANDEN BERGHE, SCHIPP MANN 1985, 103-104.

⁵¹ At the turn of the common era, frontality becomes a distinguishing feature of the art of several regions of the Parthian empire, also outside Elymais. Figures in a frontal position spread from Syria to Mesopotamia, at the same time as other iconographical patterns, such as the dress of the figures

and their adornments. These analogies are clear to the extent that, according to many scholars, these common patterns permit the characterization of this artistic production as purely Parthian.

⁵² A further rock carving, doubtfully dated to the Parthian period and today almost completely eroded, is known at Bavian, in north Iraq. It was re-sculpted on the place of a more ancient Assyrian panel and, as far as can be seen, displays a rider holding a very long spear (DEBEVOISE 1942, 94-95, fig. 5).

2. even if they share with other *corpora* of sculptures general features that allow us to define them as purely Parthian, some characteristics set them apart from the sculptural works found in other regions of the Parthian empire;
3. they can be deemed as the most important link we are able to recognize between the art of the Elamite-Achaemenid period and that of the Sasanians.

However, if the 'Iranian' character of these carvings is evident in the way figures are represented, the choice of iconographic themes (like religious scenes, homage of dignitaries or investitures), and some figurative details (like the clothing and adornments),⁵³ it must be also stressed that the relief at Hung-e Azhdar is somewhat incoherent, and the iconography and style of some Elymaean rock carvings even point to the influence of ancient Mesopotamian prototypes on the local tradition, and interaction with the Greek art, after the latter penetrated throughout Asia further to the conquest of Alexander.

In this perspective, which emphasizes the uniformity of these carvings, the case of the Hung-e Azhdar relief always represented an exception, for the principles of frontality, linearity and paratactic alignment, already defined, ruled the sculpturing of the scene only to a limited extent, being evident in some figures and absent in others, and this contradiction was noticed since the first explorations of the carvings of Elymais had begun.



FIG. 6. Amedeo Preziosi, Portrait of Sir Austin Henry Layard in Bakhtiari costume, watercolour 1843 (London, British Museum).

EARLY TRAVELLERS IN ELYMAIS AND AT HUNG-E AZHDAR

The sites of rock carvings were among the first important places visited by early travellers since the 19th century, even if we lack for Elymais the abundance of accounts describing other regions of the ancient Near East, like the plain of Persepolis or Mesopotamia and its biblical sites. One of the most important reasons for this was the uneasy access to the highlands and unsafe conditions of the journey, due to the mistrust, and sometimes hostility, of the local tribes.⁵⁴

A. H. Layard was the first European explorer who visited ancient rock carvings in the highlands of Khuzestan in modern times, between 1840 and 1842 (FIG. 6).⁵⁵ As is well-known, he was involved for a period in the revolt led by the Bakhtiari khan of Qal-e Tol, Mohammad Taqi Khan, against the central government, but was able to travel in the places of ancient ruins that were already mentioned by H. C. Rawlinson few years before, even if, despite the fact that Rawlinson was the first who drew the attention of the *Geographical Society* on the areas of Qal-e Tol and Mal-e Mir,⁵⁶ as reported by Layard himself since his first journey in the region, many scholars think that he never visited the plain of Izeh,⁵⁷ getting indirect information on the ancient sites there located from the khans of the Bakhtiari tribes.

⁵³ The characteristics shared by these reliefs have been thoroughly discussed by VANDEN BERGHE, SCHIPPMANN 1985, 95-117, who recognized in all of them – but one – frontality, spiritualism, hieratism, linearity and verism.

⁵⁴ It was, for instance, many times reported that the inhabitants of Mal-e Mir did not allow A. Houtum-Schindler to copy the cuneiform inscriptions he saw in 1877 (VANDEN BERGHE 1963, 23).

⁵⁵ Layard travelled in Khuzestan in 1840 and 1841-1842 (LAYARD 1842, 102; IDEM 1846, *passim*).

⁵⁶ RAWLINSON 1839, 84.

⁵⁷ The first mention of ancient ruins and rock reliefs was made by H. C. Rawlinson in 1836. See VANDEN BERGHE 1963a, 22-23, notes 3, 1, and selected bibliography; see also MEHR KIAN 2000, 67.



Unlike Rawlinson, Layard visited the rock carvings in the outskirts of Mal-e Mir and at Shinbar, showing even at a young age his outstanding sensibility for these pieces of art, and copied many of the cuneiform inscriptions he saw aside them, for instance at Shikaft-e Salman, where the rock carvings, already mentioned by Rawlinson, appeared to be very ancient to him.⁵⁸

Soon thereafter also C. A. de Bode visited the area in 1841, leaving to us an account of some carvings (see below) and having been followed by a number of other travellers who, moving between Isfahan and Shushtar, passed by Mal-e Mir and noticed the existence of rock carvings.⁵⁹

Worthy of note was the reconnaissance made in the plain of Izeh by G. Jéquier, member of the French expedition at Susa directed by J. de Morgan, at the very end of the 19th century, for he was able, for the first time, to describe and produce heliographies of many carvings, allowing V. Scheil to conduct the first study ever made on the inscriptions that accompanied the panels.⁶⁰

The first overlook of the carvings of Elymais and other regions was made by N. C. Debevoise in 1942,⁶¹ further to the study and publication of other rock reliefs of Iran made by E. Herzfeld on the basis of the observations he made during different travels since 1897,⁶² which initiated modern research on this matter, and the report written on carvings and ruined sanctuaries of south-west Iran by A. Stein after one of his last journeys in Inner Asia in 1936.⁶³ Debevoise inaugurated a series of fruitful essays and studies, made by Authors of various backgrounds, which come down to the present time and are repeatedly quoted in these pages.

The Hung-e Azhdar Parhian relief, one of the panels mentioned most frequently, was considered a work of the Sasanian period by early travellers as a rule, and it is remarkable to note, as already mentioned, that the iconographic incoherence characterizing the depicted scene clearly appeared to those who gave a description of it, since the beginnings of modern explorations, as even Layard remarked:

To the N. of the plain, towards its western extremity, in a gorge called Hong, I discovered a Sasanian sculpture. It is much inferior in execution to those of the Shikafti-Salman, or Kul-Fara'un, and consists of five figures a little under the human size. Four appear to represent Persians of the Sasanian epoch; the fifth is evidently a Roman or a Greek. The principal figure is in the centre, and is larger than the others. It probably represents a Sasanian monarch. His bushy wig, or hair, at once determines the age of the sculpture. A tunic descends to the knees and broad trowsers fall in folds to the ankles. To the left are three attendants, similarly attired, their hands folded across their breasts. To the right is a warrior on horseback. The dress of this figure and the trappings of the horse are evidently Greco-Roman. The head-dress consists of a scull-cap or; small helmet – it resembles that worn by footmen in the middle ages, and probably was, like them, constructed of iron – from behind which floats a pennant or ribbon. The proportions of the horse are superior to those of the figures, and the design and execution of it appear at the same time to be better. The head is well preserved, and the ornamented bridle and bit are easily traceable. This horseman is advancing towards the centre figure, but appears rather as an equal than a subject or captive. It may therefore be doubted whether it represents the emperor Valerian. Behind the horseman there appears to have been a sixth figure, but it is almost effaced. Indeed the whole tablet is so much mutilated that I had much difficulty in making a rough sketch of it. This sculpture is on a detached mass of rock.⁶⁴

It appears that, during his journey in the plain of Mal-e Mir in 1841, de Bode, who noticed other panels, like those at Shikaft-e Salman, and reported for the first time the existence of rock carvings at Tang-e Sarvak, did not pay a visit to Hung-e Azhdar as Layard did, for he never mentions this carving in his account,⁶⁵ while, on the contrary, the latter is described in the accounts of G. N. Curzon⁶⁶ and, in particular, G. Jéquier, the first who provided a sketch of the relief by using the technique of heliography after his visit on October 14, 1898 (FIG. 7),⁶⁷ even if some details of the scene appear to have been misread in his description:

⁵⁸ LAYARD 1842, 104.

⁵⁹ G. Haussknecht in 1868, A. Houtum-Schindler in 1877, H. L. Wells in 1881, F. Houssay in 1885, H. B. Lynch in 1887, G. N. Curzon in 1890, and R. Burn in 1894 deserve particular mention (VANDEN BERGHE 1963, 23).

⁶⁰ JÉQUIER 1901; SCHEIL 1901.

⁶² SARRE, HERZFELD 1910; HERZFELD 1920.

⁶³ STEIN 1940.

⁶⁵ DE BODE 1843, 100-103.

⁶⁷ JÉQUIER 1901, 143, fig. 3.

⁶¹ DEBEVOISE 1942.

⁶² SARRE, HERZFELD 1910; HERZFELD 1920.

⁶⁴ LAYARD 1846, 79-80.

⁶⁶ CURZON 1892, 311.





FIG. 7. The Parthian carving of Hung-e Azhdar after a sketch of G. Jéquier, 1898 (JÉQUIER 1901, 143, fig. 3).

Tout près de là, dans un ravin qui porte le nom de Hong, un gros rocher porte sur une de ses faces, celle qui regarde la montagne, une sculpture sassanide de grandes dimensions, mais d'une exécution barbare, et en plus de cela, dans un état de dégradation très avancé. Au milieu, un roi est debout, de face, armé d'une épée, la tête couverte d'une sorte de mitre évasée au sommet; derrière, un grand cercle forme comme une auréole. Le vêtement tombe jusqu'aux genoux, laissant voir un pantalon large à grands plis. L'absence complète de tout détail ne permet pas de dire d'une manière certaine quel est le roi représenté ici. Celui des souverains sassanides dont il se rapprocherait le plus, par le costume, est Sapor I^{er}. Les trois personnages de droite portent un costume semblable à celui du roi. Quant au cavalier qui occupe la partie gauche du bas-relief, il est d'une exécution plus mauvaise et plus enfantine encore que le reste; derrière lui on aperçoit encore les traces d'un autre personnage à demi caché par la queue du cheval, et en haut, près de la tête du roi, on distingue très vaguement une figure qui paraît être celle d'un être ailé.⁶⁸

A. Stein visited Hung-e Azhdar at the end of 1936, in the same period in which he was working on the field together with B. Karimi at Kal-e Chendar, in the valley of Shami, after he was made aware of the accidental discovery in that place of one of the most important and famous bronze statues so far discovered in Iran, a nobleman in Parthian dress that was shown to him at Izeh and is now in the Iran Bastan Museum, Tehran.⁶⁹ The account made by Stein is rather short for, as he also writes, the work was many times described, and only the analogies he could recognize with some of the carvings at Tang-e Sarvak are emphasized in his text:

On striking the foot of the range overlooking the basin from the north, I visited the small hamlet of Hung-e Naurozi and the rock sculpture carved on a detached rock at the mouth of a small valley above it. As it has been described by Sir Henry Layard and others, it will suffice here to state that the style in which the mounted royal personage on the left and the four standing figures facing it are shown in the relief panel distinctly resembles that of the representation of the king and his court in the main rock carving at Tang-i Sarvak.⁷⁰

It is remarkable that, as far as we know, Stein was the first who took pictures of the panel. These were not published in his book, however, for he preferred illustrations of Kul-e Farah, Shikaft-e Salman and Tang-e Sarvak,⁷¹ but can be seen in the archives of the British Library, London, where a part of the Stein's documents regarding his journey in Khuzestan are kept.⁷² A shelved album of

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, 137.

⁶⁹ STEIN 1940, figs. 46-47.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, figs. 42, 44, 45.

⁷² Some documents are likewise kept in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and National Archives, London.

pictures displays two photographs of the Parthian relief (nos. 157 and 158, the latter mirrored), and the captions typewritten below them allow us to see that Stein could have visited Hung-e Azhdar on January 22, 1936.

The opinion of Stein regarding the fact that all the figures represented in the panel at Hung-e Azhdar resembled those at Tang-e Sarvak – thus implying that they are undifferentiated – was widely disputed by later scholars, for the difference in iconography and style existing between one of the figures of Hung-e Azhdar and all the other figures on the carvings of Elymais became a *topos* in the subsequent literature, down to present days.

THE HUNG-E AZHDAR PARTHIAN RELIEF. PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION

Among the rock carvings of ancient Elymais, one panel has been – and still continue to be – particularly under discussion because of its totally unusual features, its commission and making having been variously dated from the second half of the 2nd century BC to the end of the 2nd century AD.

This well-known relief, depicting a scene of homage or investiture in which a horseman, followed by his attendant, proceeds towards four standing men, is carved into the surface of an enormous boulder at the entrance of the Hung-e Azhdar valley; this boulder has been sculpted, in different moments, on two sides: on the side facing the valley, is still barely perceptible the small and almost completely eroded old-Elamite relief mentioned above, on the side facing the mountain, which is hidden to the glance of those who enter the valley and don't make a turn around the boulder itself, is sculpted the panel dated to the Parthian period, which, though also eroded and damaged, is far better preserved (FIG. 8).

It shows a bearded horseman, followed by an attendant on foot, proceeding to right, toward four standing men.⁷³ The horseman and his attendant are shown in profile, while the standing men are in a complete frontal position (FIGS. 9 and 10). The horseman grasps the bridle with his left hand, holds an object in his right, and wears a long diadem and cloak, while the bearded attendant is partly hidden behind the horse's tail.⁷⁴ The four standing men seem to pay homage to the horseman – or, at least, receive him – and wear belted tunics and baggy trousers with curved folds. The man in the centre of the relief appears to be the most important of the standing men, being taller than the others and crowned with a long diadem; his right arm is outstretched for holding an unclear object, his left hand rests on the hilt of a long sword. The man on his left side, immediately to the right for an observer, raises his right arm holding an object similar to that of the central figure, while his left hand likewise rests on a sword's hilt. The other two men have folded arms, and daggers seem attached to their belts. Two small birds with outspread wings, often interpreted as eagles (?), fly toward the horseman and the central figure, holding a wreath or, more likely, a ring: the bird flying toward the horseman holds this object with its claws, that flying toward the central figure holds it in its beak.

In this scene, special relevance is given to two figures, the horseman and the central standing men, for they are both diademed and invested with royal emblems – the rings – by the flying birds. Their iconographies are widely different, however, for, while the standing men are depicted in a frontal position and typical Parthian dress, being paratactically aligned, the horseman and his attendant are the only figures represented in profile, the horseman even wearing dresses revealing Hellenistic reminiscences and being, for these reasons, also different from all the other Elymaean carvings so far recognized.

Some details are now barely distinguishable because of the surface erosion and natural deterioration of the stone, which is cracked and pocked with small holes, and even intentional damages caused by the human presence, as the obliteration of the face of some figures clearly reveals: the differences briefly mentioned above can be clearly seen, however, and provoked a long-lasting debate.

⁷³ VANDEN BERGHE 1963b, 155-168; IDEM 1983, 120-121; VON GALL 1969-70, 301-302; SCHLUMBERGER 1970, 40-41; DE WAELE 1975, 60; DOWNEY 1977, 285; HARMATTA 1981, 200-219; VANDEN BERGHE, SCHIPPANN 1985, 32-38; MATHIESEN

1985, 191-196; IDEM 1992, 119-121; KAWAMI 1987, 209-213; INV-ERNIZZI, 1998 219-259.

⁷⁴ The body of the attendant seems unfinished, or is the surface in fact very damaged in this point.



FIG. 8. Hung-e Azhdar. The sculpted boulder and Parthian panel from the south (VANDEN BERGHE, SCHIPPMANN 1985, pl. I).

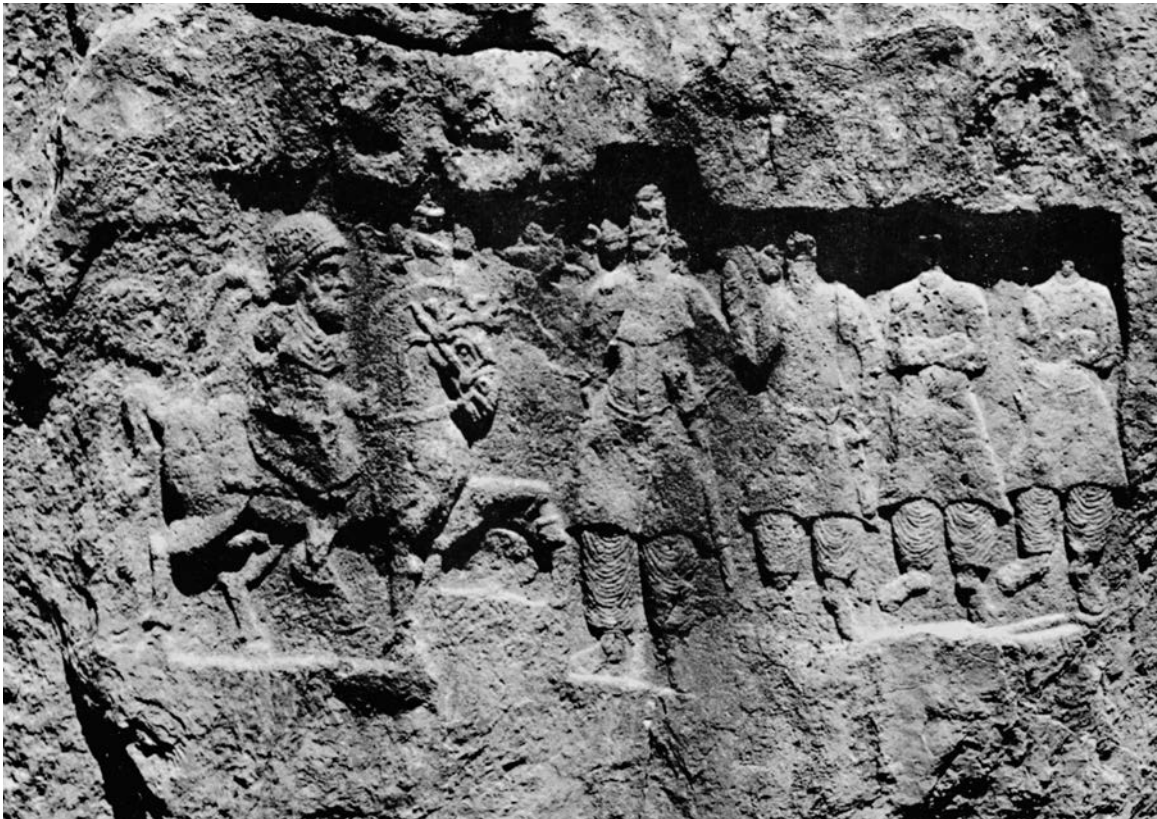


FIG. 9. Hung-e Azhdar. The Parthian panel from the south (VANDEN BERGHE 1963b, pl. LIII).





FIG. 10. Hung-e Azhdar. The Parthian panel after a drawing of L. Vanden Berghe, 1983 (VANDEN BERGHE 1983, 47, fig. 4).

Dozens of pages have been masterly written on this work since the concise description made by N. C. Debevoise, on the basis of the Jéquier's sketch, was published in 1942,⁷⁵ and the comparison between the many descriptions given by further scholars over the years is particularly helpful when approaching the panel, for they not only illustrate the scene, but also allow us to verify that, though the main subject is quite unanimously outlined, some details have been interpreted in slightly different ways because of the uneasy reading of some parts of the sculpted surface. This is largely due to the fact that the surface is badly preserved in several points, but also to our ignorance of many iconographic conventions that ruled the composition and making of the panel itself.

In any case, there can be little doubts that the stylistic and iconographic contradictions in the way the figures are represented (frontal or in profile), and their dress described, become the main topic of the studies progressively devoted to the relief, for these led to debate whether the panel was executed at one or different times.

It is not by chance that, in his first description of the relief, L. Vanden Berghe, perhaps the most famous scholar who studied the scene, particularly emphasized the purely Parthian milieu of the four standing figures in contrast to the horseman, and rightly pointed out that, despite their appearance as a coherent group, they don't show the same attitude exactly, for the central man and the man on his left side perform the same gesture, outstretching their right arm for holding an object and having the left hand resting on the hilt of a sword, while the other two have folded arms:

Le centre est occupé (...) par un personnage de grande taille, la tête et le corps sont représentés de face, les pieds légèrement de profil. À la gauche du personnage en apparaissent trois autres, de plus petite taille, mais présentant eux aussi la tête et le corps de face, les pieds légèrement de profil.

Les quatre personnages portent tous une longue tunique, fort simple, probablement à manches longues et à encolure arrondie, descendant jusque sous les genoux et se terminant en trois pointes. Une ceinture la retient à la taille.

⁷⁵ DEBEVOISE 1942, 103: «Another relief at a place called Hung-e Naurozi or Hong near Malamir may also be Parthian, but the single sketch thus far published is too uncertain evidence on which to form an opinion. It is evidently of the early

third century. Apparently there is no inscription. The published sketch reminds one of the reliefs showing Valerian before Shapur at Naqsh-e Rostam, for which it might be the prototype if it is not actually Sasanian».





Le haut de la tunique du grand personnage est décoré de galons de perles ou de pierres précieuses. Les tuniques des trois autres personnages ne portent, semble-t-il, aucun ornement. Sous la tunique apparaît le long pantalon parthe, très ample et dont les larges cannelures horizontales soulignent les plis de l'étoffe.

Les têtes, très mutilées, ne permettent plus de déterminer les détails du visage, tels yeux, nez, moustaches et barbes. Seule a subsisté, chez le personnage central, une partie de la chevelure, qui consiste en bouclettes en tire-bouchon, retombant en deux touffes de part et d'autre du cou; les trois autres personnages devaient avoir une coiffure différente.

Les quatre personnages sont armés comme c'était l'usage chez les Parthes. Le sujet central a, fixé à la ceinture, au côté gauche, une épée à longue lame enserrée dans un fourreau. Outre l'épée, il porte sur la hanche droite, un poignard. Les trois autres compagnons ont un poignard fixé au côté droit; en plus, le premier semble porter, – détails néanmoins incertains –, un arc sur l'épaule gauche, et un carquois derrière l'épaule droite.

Les attitudes des diverses figures ne sont pas identiques: le personnage central étendait le bras droit vers le chevalier, tandis que l'autre main reposait sur la poignée de l'épée. Le premier des trois autres personnages avait le bras droit replié vers le haut, la paume de la main en avant, les doigts allongés symbolisant le geste de l'hommage, le bras gauche est relevé à la taille. Le second et le troisième ont les bras croisés sur la poitrine.

La partie gauche du relief a été réservée à un cavalier suivi d'un page. La tête du cavalier est figurée de profil, le buste de trois-quarts. Son abondante chevelure se trouve enserrée dans un bandeau, noué derrière la tête et dont les pans retombent sur le cou. Sur la tunique est enfilé un manteau. Le cheval était richement orné et la selle, faite d'étoffe ou peut-être de cuir, devait être maintenue par un poitrail et une avaloire. De la main gauche le cavalier tient la bride, la droite est malheureusement mutilée. Trois des pattes du coursier sont au sol, la quatrième est levée à l'horizontale, indiquant ainsi la course.

Derrière le cavalier est presque caché par lui se profile un page qui tient un chasse-mouches.

Au-dessus de la tête de l'animal, et tourné vers le visage du cavalier, est représenté un aigle, portant une couronne dans ses serres et une palme dans le bec. Un autre aigle, aux ailes éployées, et tenant dans le bec une couronne, se trouve près de la tête du personnage central.⁷⁶

After twenty years, Vanden Berghe revised his first description and published a second (brief) and third (more detailed) version, the latter together with K. Schippmann. Here, the very low relief characterizing the standing men is explicitly remarked, so as the fact that the man in the centre and that to his left side, already noticed for the same gesture, also share similar air dresses. In this last version, the disproportion existing in the anatomy of the rider and horse is also evidenced, and is even interesting to see how some details described in the first version, like the presence of a fly-whisk, were misread, because of the surface consumption, and corrected.⁷⁷

The description given by Vande Berghe and Schippmann remained of basic importance, for the observations they made allowed other scholars to add remarks or propose different interpretations of some details, as was done in quite recent years by H. E. Mathiesen:

In the centre is a standing male figure, rendered larger than the others. He is flanked by, on the left, a rider with a page in attendance and, on the right, three standing men. The rider and page are shown in profile, while the central man and the three others are presented frontally.

The bearded rider is clad in a tunic and cloak, and bears a diadem; the bearded page, who seems never to have been finished, and who is partly hidden behind the horse, apparently wears only a tunic. His feet are both turned in the same direction. The head of the rider is too large for his body, his chest is foreshortened, but this feature is not properly rendered, and on the connection of the shoulders to the chest does not seem quite natural.

The man in the centre and his three companions are each dressed in a belted tunic reaching to the knees and ending in double arcs. They also wear baggy trousers – or are they in fact over-trousers (?) – with folds rendered in regular curves – U-folds. The central figure also wears a cape. He seems to have a full beard and mustache, and his hair is arranged in two large round bunches with spiral curls at his ears. Presumably he is wearing a tall, diademed headdress rounded at the top. Apparently, the man immediately behind him, i.e. to his left, has his hair arranged in a similar manner, and his hair is bound with a ribbon, while the two men in the right part of the relief have their hair arranged in a 'halo' shape.

⁷⁶ VANDEN BERGHE 1963, 157-159.

⁷⁷ VANDEN BERGHE, SCHIPPMMANN 1985, 34-35.





Each of the four standing men seems to have a dagger at his right hip, and the central figure is also armed with a long sword, as the man behind him also seems to be. The latter apparently has a rolled-up cloak at his left shoulder (perhaps arranged as the insignia of a priest). These two men lift the right hand, while the left hand rests on the sword hilt. The two men in the right part of the relief have arms folded and may be holding an object in the left hand.

Near the head of the rider, an eagle has been cut with wreath and palm front, while another eagle turned towards the central man bears only a wreath.⁷⁸

Sometimes, the unconvincing – and unascertained – detection of details that passed unnoticed by the majority of the observers allowed interpretations often considered hazardous,⁷⁹ while others, more confidently, rather preferred to outline the artistic milieu and ideology of the scene, and described the panel concisely, as was done by A. Invernizzi, who published the more recent essay on the Hung-e Azhdar relief quoted in these pages:

The scene carved on the side of a rock boulder at Hung-e Azhdar (Hung-e Nauruzi) in the Izeh valley, in Elymais, is certainly one of the most significant rock reliefs of Parthian Iran. It depicts, on the left, a horseman in right profile and classical dress, wearing a diadem knotted at the nape, followed by a figure on foot preceded by an eagle flying towards him with a ring in its claws. In the centre, a figure in Iranian dress stands in a perfectly frontal pose, holding his left hand on his sword hilt and raising an attribute with his right. A second eagle flies towards him carrying a ring in its beak, while the long ribbons of a diadem flutter from his head to the left. In the right-hand section, three other figures in Iranian garments stand beyond the central personage and evidently form part of his retinue. The first of the three has the same attitude as his lord, the remaining two have their arms folded.⁸⁰

In consideration of the similarity existing between the standing men at Hung-e Azhdar and the figures sculpted on all the other known carvings (likewise frontal, linear and paratactically aligned), the fact that the horseman is in profile and portrayed in the manner of a Hellenistic (or early Parthian) sovereign, with short hair dress, a fluttering diadem tied at the nape, and a cloak fastened under his neck, has been repeatedly stressed in literature, and different answers proposed for the presence of so different iconographies.

In the first instance, the attention was drawn on the identification of the represented figures, and, by comparison with coin portraits, the horseman has been interpreted by Vanden Berghe and other scholars, who shared his opinion, as the Parthian king Mithradates I (141-138 BC), honoured by an Elymaean sovereign and his retinue,⁸¹ even if others⁸² also stressed that the horseman could be alternatively identified as an archetypal ancestral figure of an Elymaean king or as the Seleucid ruler Demetrius II (first reign 146-138 BC; second reign 129-125 BC). In any case, the horseman is generally considered, on the basis of his iconography and style, a production of the second half of the 2nd century BC.⁸³

This is in contrast with the figures in the right half of the relief, executed in a frontal position and lined up in the paratactic manner that is generally considered characteristic of a much later period (end of the 1st-beginning of the 2nd century AD),⁸⁴ and led to debate whether the two groups of figures were carved in different times, perhaps after centuries, or rather during the same period by sculptors of different schools: the sculptor of the horseman and of his attendant being still influenced, in the AD centuries, by the Hellenistic tradition, the sculptor of the standing and frontal men being fully 'Iranian'.

Whatever the case, if the re-sculpting of the right part of the relief is inferred, then the addition of the four standing figures to the horseman must have been executed together with the carving of

⁷⁸ MATHIESEN 1992, 119.

⁷⁹ For instance, HARMATTA 1981, 200-210, reads the inscription: «Mithradāt the king of kings» below the foreleg of the horse. Whether this inscription actually existed – and this possibility is more than disputable, indeed – it is completely disappeared.

⁸⁰ INVERNIZZI 1998, 219.

⁸¹ VANDEN BERGHE 1963b, 155-168; IDEM 1983, 120-121; SCHLUMBERGER 1970, 40-41 (or even Mithradates II?); VANDEN BERGHE, SCHIPPMANN 1985, 36; MATHIESEN 1992, 120.

⁸² INVERNIZZI 1998, 234-241.

⁸³ For the Hellenistic-early Parthian chronology of the horseman see VON GALL 1969-70, 308; SCHLUMBERGER 1970, 40; DE WAELE 1975, note 2; VANDEN BERGHE 1983, 120; MATHIESEN 1992, 120.

⁸⁴ On the basis of stylistic criteria, KAWAMI 1987, 124 is convinced that the relief is to be dated to the late 2nd or beginning of the 3rd century AD. INVERNIZZI 1998, 258 prefers a wider range, between the 1st and the 3rd century AD.





the two flying birds: the presence of the standing figures and birds are indeed strictly interconnected, for the birds, investing the horseman and central man with royal emblems, give sense to the scene as it appears to us in its final version. Moreover, the similarities they share with the other figures on the carvings of Elymais seem to point to the same period for their execution: it follows that, if the panel was sculpted at one time, the horseman must be also dated to the late Parthian period.

On the basis of these considerations, several alternatives were proposed after Vanden Berghe. According to H. E. Mathiesen, the right part of the relief, where the standing men are reproduced, is a 3rd century AD addition to a relief started by Mithradates I, the rider, but left unfinished,⁸⁵ while E. F. Schmidt thinks that the rider and standing figures have been carved at different times during the Sasanian period.⁸⁶ By contrast, E. De Waele suggests that the different style of the figures is due to two different schools of sculptors that could have been contemporary,⁸⁷ and, likewise, D. Schlumberger considers the differences in the two halves of the relief as the expression of the eclecticism of the Graeco-Iranian art, even if he prefers to date the horseman to the reign of Mithradates II, albeit the Seleucid milieu of the horse's iconography:

Le relief de Hung-i Nauruzi offre plus d'intérêt. Deux groupes de personnages s'y voient: à gauche un cavalier et un page, tous deux de profil; à droite quatre personnages alignés, tous de face. Certains détails iconographiques sont grecs; tels le cavalier diadémé, le cheval cornu (particularité séleucide) et, dans le champ, des aigles porteurs de palmes et de couronnes; d'autres sont orientaux, tels le chasse-mouches du page, et le costume des personnages de droite. Mais la composition en est étrangère aussi bien à la tradition grecque qu'à la tradition achéménide. L'artiste achéménide a eût su lier les deux parties du tableau, en le présentant comme la rencontre de deux groupes de personnages, tous de profil, comme le veut une règle sans exception. L'artiste grec eût su éviter la monotonie des attitudes et des drapés. La façon dont les deux groupes de figures sont simplement juxtaposées, la façon aussi dont les personnages de droite sollicitent, par leur attitude frontale, l'attention du spectateur, et paraissent se désintéresser de l'action où ils se trouvent engagés, ces traits révèlent les temps nouveaux. Or L. Vanden Berghe, à qui revient le mérite d'avoir découvert et publié ce relief, a cru pouvoir l'attribuer à Mithridate I^{er} (171-138), et l'analogie de la tête de ce roi sur ses monnaies avec celle du cavalier rend cette hypothèse très plausible. Si même il ne fallait dater le monument que du règne de Mithridate II (123-87), ce qui n'est pas exclu, il n'en conservait pas moins comme le relief de Bisutun une légère antériorité sur le grand groupe de monuments bien datés, et d'importance capitale, que nous abandonnons maintenant: celui des monuments commagéniens.⁸⁸

The differences noticed in the two halves of the panel, largely justified by stylistic and iconographic contradictions, appear even more accentuated when considering also, though cursorily, the sculpturing technique: indeed the carving seems different in the two halves of the scene, for the horseman and horse appear sculpted in a relief higher than that of the standing men, and their anatomy more accurately rendered; the standing men are unquestionably more linear and flat, rather recalling the figures on the carvings at Tang-e Sarvak or Hung-e Kamalvand.

This is not a conclusive argument for considering the re-sculpting of the right part of the relief as ascertained, however.

T. S. Kawami, who left us one of the most detailed descriptions of the Hung-e Azhdar carving, admits that the assumption of a panel carved at different times appears reasonable, when looking at the differences in style, technique and imagery of its two sides, but also stresses that this is mainly based on stylistic criteria and there is no physical evidence to support this hypothesis irrefutably. In her opinion, all major forms in the panel are sculpted almost at the same depth, and it is only a natural swelling in the rock that makes the horseman appearing in higher relief. This led her to consider the entire relief as executed at one time, for the stylistic differences have no chronological significance:

The relief, carved in an irregular panel 6.30 m long and about 2 m high, shows an equestrian figure with an attendant on foot facing four standing figures. The surface of the stone is rough and pocked with many small holes some portions are cracked and broken, and numerous areas of the relief are less than clear. In other

⁸⁵ MATHIESEN 1992, 120. But see also DOWNEY 1977, 285.

⁸⁶ SCHMIDT 1970, 140.

⁸⁷ DE WAELE 1975, note 2.

⁸⁸ SCHLUMBERGER 1970, 40-41.

