

*Abolala Soudavar*

## Looking through *The Two Eyes of the Earth*: A Reassessment of Sasanian Rock Reliefs

*Matthew Canepa's recent study of the cultural and political interactions between Rome and Sasanian Iran, has provided an opportunity to reassess Sasanian rock reliefs in light of the claims and counter claims between these two empires. Since victory over Romans meant a victory over an-Erān, and generated the most potent of all farrs, i.e. the Aryan farr, many rock reliefs were conceived to show its reflection on the king. What is most interesting, though, is the array of nuances that are incorporated in them to account for the differences that were particular to each situation.*

Over the last two centuries, the ancient history of Iran has attracted many a classicist who, once exposed to the intricate world of Iranians, has felt an irreversible attachment to it. The latest addition into the fold is Matthew Canepa, whose study of the Roman and Byzantine empires brought him inevitably into contact with the Sasanian empire. I was meant to review his latest publication: *The Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual of Kingship Between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (Berkeley 2010), but so inspiring was his book that I immediately began to reconsider some of the Sasanian rock reliefs, with a fresh outlook and through the perspective of interactions with the Romans. I shall therefore try to weave my own interpretations into a brief description of his book, in conjunction with remarks on a few related articles that appeared shortly after the publication of Canepa's book.

### *General Setting*

As Canepa succinctly puts it, his book is about two world empires vexed by "the constant existence of another universal king" in its vicinity (p. 21), each too big to be conquered by the other, and therefore forced to coexist side by side. Although they raid each other's territory, peace treaties are never far behind, and in the meantime, through ambassadorial exchanges, gifts and various monuments and rituals, each tries to impress the other with propagandistic claims of grandeur and legitimacy. To demonstrate the intricacies of their relationship, Canepa has cumulated an enormous amount of information, as a quick glance over the extensive bibliography (64 pages) may show. It seems that nowadays academia requires a hefty list of references even though fewer but more relevant ones may suffice. And therein lies a problem that

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is no fault in Canepa, but may be attributed to unfortunate timing. For it is his bad luck that in the past quarter century, studies of ancient Iran have been afflicted with a series of unwarranted theories that have wrought havoc into the field. Some, such as the theory that Darius I (r. 550–486 BC) was a liar and forged his genealogy, have no direct bearing on his topic. Nevertheless, in pursuit of thoroughness, Canepa feels compelled to approve of it (p. 251, n. 44), unaware of François Vallat's recent decisive refutation of this far-fetched and unrealistic theory.<sup>1</sup>

*The Ubiquitous Sasanian Slogan of cibr az yazatān*

Of more dire consequence, however, is the negative impact of his understanding of the Sasanian slogan “*cibr az yazatān*,” the explanation for which is provided in a lengthy footnote (p. 281, n. 11). The historic evolution on the meaning of *cibr* in this slogan is quite revealing, since except for a few furtive remarks, the prevailing trend up to 2003 was to translate *cibr* as “seed” or “origin,” and Prods Oktor Skjaervo's 2002 contribution to the reference volume *Sylloge Nummorum Sasanidorum* was no exception.<sup>2</sup> As a result, Sasanian kings were purported to claim divine status, a claim that is contrary to every facet of Persian culture, be it historical text, poetry or narrative discourse. In 2003, in my *Aura of the Kings* (Costa Mesa, 2003), I strongly argued against this perception. Canepa refers to it but seems unimpressed since he only evokes it as relevant to the later Islamic period. Others were initially unimpressed as well. But fortunately, Antonio Panaino's 2004 article has initiated a partial shift, from seed and origin to “image” for the translation of *cibr*.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the claim of divine origin for Sasanian kings is gradually being abandoned,<sup>4</sup> even though some scholars such as Touraj Daryaee—who, as an Iranian, should have had a natural disposition for perceiving the incongruity of such a position—obstinately cling to the wrong translation of past.<sup>5</sup>

Initially, Canepa falls into the same trap when (pp. 16–17) he refers to the “divine nature” of the king and “semi-divine status” of his family, but further on (p. 101), adopts a more nuanced translation (“who is in form of the gods”) for the Sasanian slogan. Nevertheless, he uses neither to explain the composition of Sasanian rock reliefs. The very essence of his thesis, however—that both Sasanian and Roman propaganda integrated the visual with the verbal to gain potency—should have revealed to him that the ubiquitous “*cibr az yazatān*” slogan had to play a pivotal role in the composition of Sasanian reliefs. If *farr* is to be seen as a “live force,” as he suggests on page 281 (n. 11), then it made sense to seek an interconnection between *cibr* and *farr*.

<sup>1</sup>F. Vallat, “Darius, l'héritier légitime, et les premiers achéménides,” in *Elam and Persia*, ed. J. Alvarez-Mons and M. B. Garrison (Winona Lake, 2010).

<sup>2</sup>P. O. Skjaervo, “Paleography,” in *Sylloge Nummorum Sasanidorum 1* (Ardashir I, Shapur I), ed. M. Alram and R. Gyselen (Vienna, 2002), 46–69.

<sup>3</sup>A. Panaino, “Astral Characters of Kingship in the Sasanian and the Byzantine Worlds,” in *La Persia e Bisanzio, Atti dei Convegni Lincei 2001* (Roma, 2004), 555–85.

<sup>4</sup>X. Tremblay, “Iranian Historical Linguistics in the Twentieth Century” [Part 2], *Friends and Alumni of Indo-European Studies Bulletin, University of California at Los Angeles*, XIII, no. 1 (Fall 2008): 36.

<sup>5</sup>T. Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia, The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London, 2009), 4–6.

As I have recently explained, *cibr* is the manifestation of *farr/xwarenah*, and through its brilliance and radiance it provides a visual gage for the projection of *farr*.<sup>6</sup> As such, it is the essential source of authority and majesty for the king. Therefore, when the king claims to have obtained his *cibr* from the gods, he is essentially claiming to derive his “live force” from the gods. Additionally, in consideration of a secondary meaning of *cibr* as “image,” Sasanian reliefs usually juxtaposes the king with gods in a reflective position, in order to convey the idea that he mirrors them in their majesty and power.<sup>7</sup> It is unfortunate though that the meanings derived from foreign sources have taken precedence over explanations that local historians offered after the Arab invasions. The celebrated thirteenth-century geographer Yāqut al-Hamavi, for instance, explains that the meaning of *Ardashir-khwarrah* is “the light of Ardashir.”<sup>8</sup>

The sole purpose of Sasanian kingly reliefs is to project the king’s *farr/cibr* in the most eloquent way possible. Every element therein is to strengthen this perception. And if a foreign symbol is borrowed, it is done for the purpose of conveying more *farr*. Thus, where Canepa perceives the winged child of the Bishāpur reliefs as a “token of celestial approbation” (p. 75) or “a motif taken from the Roman imperial repertoire and executed by Shāpur I’s Roman craftsmen” (pp. 199–200), he fails to understand the centrality of this symbol in the unique message that Shāpur I was trying to convey (Figure 1). For, Shāpur’s (r. 242–72) victories over consecutive Roman emperors had provided him with the unprecedented opportunity to claim the highest degree of *farr*, i.e. the Aryan *farr*, which was needed to vanquish the people of an-Erān, i.e. the non-Iranian people.<sup>9</sup> The Aryan *farr*, which Jamshid had lost and was kept underwater by the aquatic deity Apam Napāt, had to be released by the latter. And in claiming to be the emperor of Erān and an-Erān, it was imperative for Shāpur to show the active participation of Apam Napāt. Thus in a word play on the name Apam Napāt (the Grandson of Waters) a winged Eros was chosen to portray this deity.

As Canepa notes, this symbolism had an antecedent in the Hellenistic Nike presenting a victory wreath to Parthian rulers. By substituting a winged Eros in lieu of Nike it became even more meaningful in the Iranian context, especially since the image of Apam Napāt as Eros had already taken hold in Bactria in the first century AD.<sup>10</sup> In the case of Bishāpur reliefs, however, it was also necessary to change the Hellenistic wreath into a *farr* symbol. The *farr* symbol that this Eros-looking Apam Napāt is conveying to Shāpur is a ribbon, or headband, termed *dast-ār* (*dast*-bringer), based

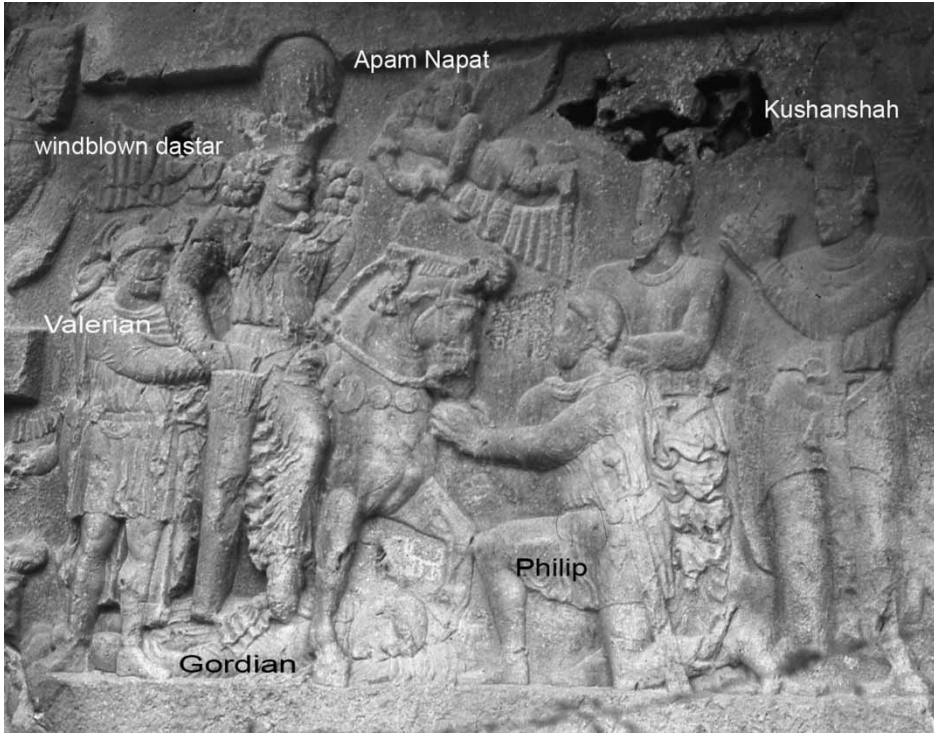
<sup>6</sup>A. Soudavar, “The Vocabulary and Syntax of Iconography in Sasanian Iran,” *Iranica Antiqua*, 44 (2009): 442–50.

<sup>7</sup>A. Soudavar, *The Aura of Kings, Legitimacy and Divine Sanction in Iranian Kingship* (Costa Mesa, 2003), 41–47; Soudavar, “The Vocabulary,” 449–50.

<sup>8</sup>Yāqut al-Hamawi, *Mo'jam-ol-Boldān* (Beirut 1995, 2nd print), 146; اردشیر خوره، هو اسم مرکب معناه بهاء؛ اردشیر

<sup>9</sup>A. Soudavar, “The Significance of Av. *čithra*, OPers. *čiča*, MPers *cibr*, and NPers. *čehr*, for the Iranian Cosmogony of Light,” *Iranica Antiqua*, 41 (2006): 175.

<sup>10</sup>Soudavar, “The Vocabulary,” 426–27.

Figure 1. Apam Napāt handing a *dastār* to Shāpur I. Bishāpur II

on a word play on *dast* (hand) that also meant victory in the sense of gaining the upper hand over the enemy. In fact, the whole composition seems to incorporate a variety of themes derived from *dast* since at the very center of the composition Shāpur grips the wrist of Valerian, termed in Persian as *dast-gir* (which still means today “to catch and subdue someone”). More importantly, because the word *dast* was written in Pahlavi in the exact same way as the ideogram GDE representing *farr*, the *dast-ār* symbolized—through punning—victory and *farr*. As such, it became synonymous with *farr* and simply referred to as *xwarrah*.<sup>11</sup>

Victories generate *farr*; but a victory over non-Iranians not only brings more *farr* to the victorious king but also reinforces the *farr* of the Aryans as a whole. The remnants of this old mythical tribal concept can be seen in the *Zāmyād Yasht* (*Yt* 19), which like so many other *yashts* has been sanitized to conform to Zoroastrian precepts but, nevertheless, reveals some of the original elements of the myth.

In *Yt* 18, the Aryan *farr*’s association with Apam Napāt has been severed, but Tishtrya (Sirius) and the Strong Wind are mentioned as its companions. Tishtrya is an

<sup>11</sup>Soudavar, “The Significance of Av. *ēthra*,” 174.

acolyte of Apam Napāt and obtains his brightness from him (*Yt* 8:4), it therefore connects the force of the Aryan *farr* to Apam Napāt. In the Bishāpur reliefs, since Apam Napāt intervenes in person, Tishtrya's presence is not necessary. But the ripples in the flowing *dastār* behind Shāpur's head invoke a passing wind. In Naqsh-e Rostam, though, where the composition is devoid of reference to Apam Napāt, the presence of the Strong Wind is emphasized through the depiction of an exaggerated wind-blown ribbon filling the space behind Shāpur.<sup>12</sup> And, as we shall see further below, Tishtrya is a divinity that regularly appears—in person or through a symbol—in Sasanian iconography.

Shāpur's emphasis on his *farr* originating with Apam Napāt is also evident on the bonnet he sports in his coinage (see Figure 4). It is struck with a two-legged *ankh* sign, as a caricature symbol of Apam Napāt, and surmounted by a falcon head representing the bird *vareyna*, as the carrier of the *farr* (Soudavar 2010b).<sup>13</sup> The *farr* that Apam Napāt has bestowed on him has therefore not departed and is constantly with him.

A further window into the overall composition of the Bishāpur III has been recently opened by Bruno Overlaet who focuses on a large stone carried by Roman soldiers on the second register of this rock relief (Figure 2). Although Canepa briefly refers to it in a footnote (p. 267, n. 67), it must have come too late for him to fully incorporate it in his study. Overlaet identifies the stone as the Emesa baethyl, which is then explained as an important Roman cult symbol that may have been conceded to Shāpur by the usurper emperor Uranius Antoninus circa 254.<sup>14</sup>

Homogeneity and commonality of purpose is an important principle in the composition of propagandistic reliefs. Thus if we have at the center of Bishāpur III a composition that emphasizes victory over Roman emperors (as in Bishāpur II), and if within the side registers we have a cultic trophy such as the Emesa stone, then the whole composition must be read as a *tableau de chasse* or a table of victories and conquests. And indeed, as others have alluded to, in between the registers we have references to Shāpur's other conquests, including over the Kushān empire, a symbol of which appears therein as an Asian elephant.<sup>15</sup> And to the right of the central

<sup>12</sup>See, for instance, *Splendeur des sassanides* (Brussels, 1993), 81.

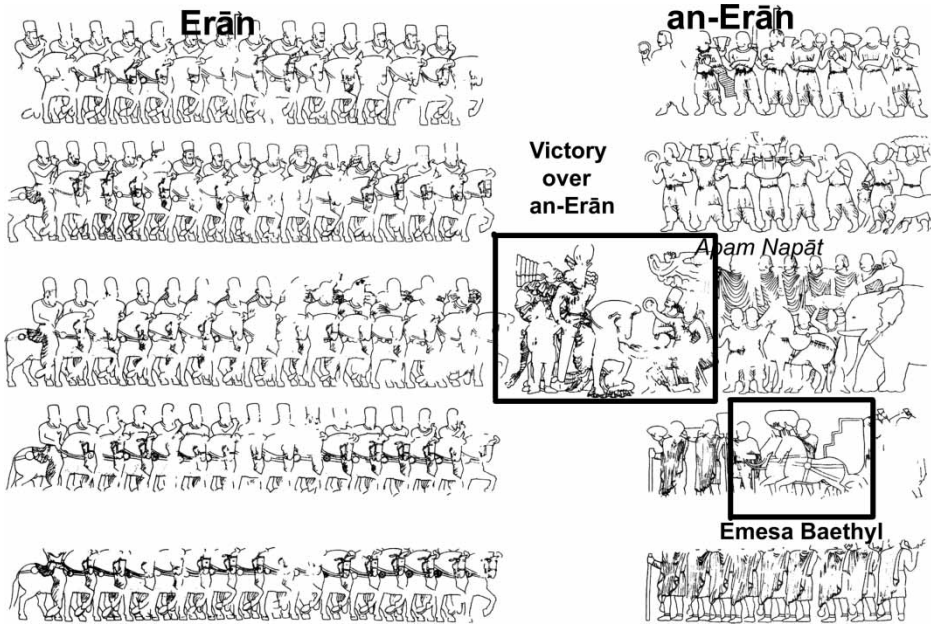
<sup>13</sup>Soudavar, "The Vocabulary," 427; A. Soudavar, "Farr(ah)/xvarənah, Iconography of," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (online edition, 2010).

<sup>14</sup>B. Overlaet, "A Roman Emperor at Bishapur and Darabgird, Uranius Antoninus and the Black Stone of Emesa," *Iranica Antiqua*, 44 (2009): 463–72.

<sup>15</sup>Overlaet, "A Roman Emperor." Overlaet, however, prefers to see a narrative sequence in which besides the dead emperor under Shāpur's horse—identified as Gordianus—the other two are representations of the same person, namely Uranius Antoninus. I believe that this proposition can be countered with a number of arguments: 1. a close look at the Roman emperors—in Bishāpur II for instance—shows that the one standing is short and corpulent with a round face and a pronounced moustache (perhaps over a beard), while the knelling one is tall and has an elongated face with a full beard; 2. in order to construe the scene as essentially related to the Emesa episode, he justifies the appearance of an Asian elephant as due to the artist using set animal prototypes (p. 489). However, as we shall see further below, the Sasanian artists made use of precise animals and fauna to refer to geographical entities; 3. Since Overlaet avows not to understand the role of the "putto" in the composition (p. 487), he cannot have a full understanding of the concepts involved, especially in terms of victory over the an-Erān; the less than complete



Figure 2. Shāpur I's victory board in Bishāpur III



Source: G. Hermann, *The Sasanian Rock Relief at Bishapur: Part I-Bishapur III*, *Iranische Denkmäler* 10, fig. 4.

scene there are two standing princes, one of whom wears a tall conical hat with flaps and a short Kushān arching skirt over pants as on the Vashishka coin (r. 250–68) (Figure 3). He must represent the Kushān-Shāh. Since he is presented in the central grouping and right below Apam Napāt, it seems that Kushān, or perhaps the Kushānshāhs, were not considered as part of Erān.

As Canepa notes (p. 38), it is true that “the Sasanians did not inherit an indigenous convention to represent” victory over the Romans; but that is not what they needed. Their propaganda objective was not to depict or narrate a victory but to highlight the resulting increase in the king’s glory. Bishāpur II and III are in fact admirable examples of how references to various victories were combined to achieve this objective.

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surrender of Uranius Antoninius cannot be put in the same scale as the victory over Gordianus, because of the difference in the *farr* that each generates; 4. Finally, in pursuit of maximizing the projection of the king’s glory, multiplicity was an important element and it made sense to cumulate vanquished emperors and trophies into one composition rather than depict in detail an episode of minor importance. If the Emesa stone was to be considered as a major symbol of Roman cults, it would have taken center stage and not relegated to the sidelines.

Figure 3. Vashishka



*Source:* Private collection.

Figure 4. Shāpur I



*Source:* Saeedi collection.

Figure 5. Vima Kadphises



*Source:* zeno.ru.

*Urban Site vs. the Wilderness*

Whereas the Sasanians inherited and engaged a tradition of Near Eastern memorial intervention in the natural environment, the Romans continued to cultivate spaces and activities of urban environments to celebrate the emperor.

Canepa's above observation (p. 99) is one that merits more elaboration, for it sheds light on the very ideology governing their respective propaganda efforts. Whereas Roman power sprang from a democratic tradition in which the clamor in arenas was indicative of the emperor's popularity, and the mob in the streets could eventually unseat one, Roman victory monuments addressed the urban population, and were thus erected in urban centers. By contrast, the addressee of Sasanian rock reliefs was not the people but the gods themselves. Since the Sasanians claimed to have obtained their *cibr/farr* from the gods, they would erect monuments to acknowledge, and proclaim, that they were indeed the recipient of the gods' favors. The king expresses gratitude to the gods and therefore places his monument close to the gods' dwellings. Since Apam Napāt is portrayed as the main purveyor of *farr* to Shāpur, the king's victory reliefs are naturally placed by a waterway. It was indirect propaganda but highly effective in the Iranian context, for eventually it would reach the masses by word of mouth, especially since the relief was visible through the important artery that passed through the Bishāpur valley.

The lack of understanding for this fundamental concept has led many art historians to treat Sasanian reliefs as a family scene, the latest being Ursula Weber's proposition that Narseh's (r. 293–302) relief at Naqsh-e Rostam depicts his family gathering together after their release from Roman captivity.<sup>16</sup> The Sasanians, however, were not in the habit of leaving photo souvenirs in the wilderness; and the appearance of wife, brother, child or wet nurse has no propaganda value per se, neither as a message to the gods nor to the general population.

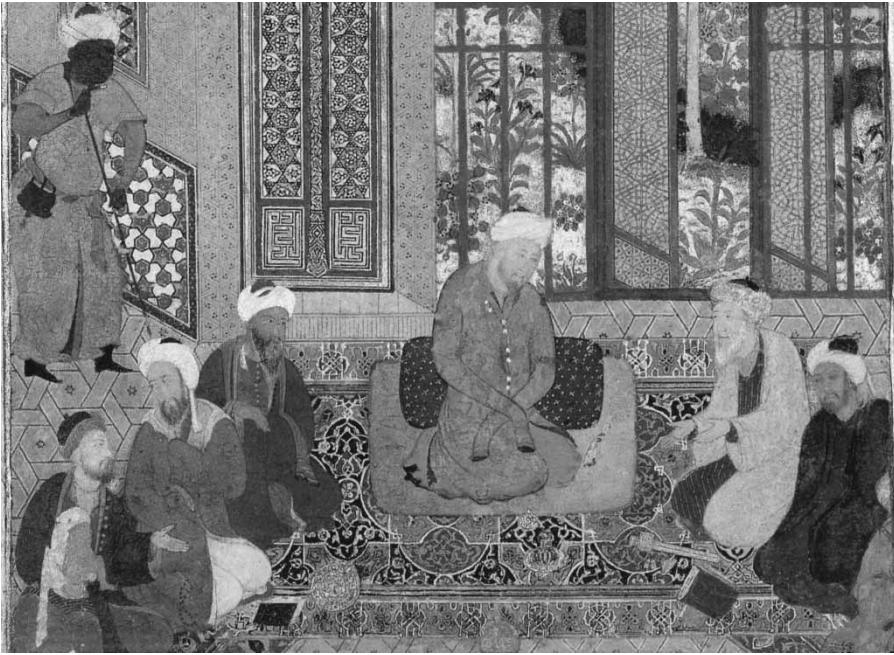
The "family gathering" theory has recently found unwarranted comfort in a proposition of the late Shahpur Shabazi affirming that a long sleeve is a sign of subordination. Thus, Ursula Weber and Barbara Kaim both rely on Shahbazi to justify that the female before Narseh in Naqsh-e Rostam can only be a "subordinate" and not Anāhitā.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately Shahbazi's proposition was not rooted in reality, since it ignores the fact that, to this date, the people of the eastern Iranian world wear jackets with long sleeves in lieu of gloves (usually two for men, and one long left sleeve for women); it simply allows them, in winter time, to slip their hands into the warmth of the inner sleeve. It is depicted, for instance, on a coin (Figure 3) of the Kushān king, Vima Kadphises (r. 90–100), as well as on a fifteenth-century miniature from Herat in which the king is discussing the future of his newborn son with

<sup>16</sup>U. Weber, "Zu den felsbildnissen des königs Narseh," *Res Orientales*, XIX (2009): 312–16.

<sup>17</sup>Weber, "Zu den felsbildnissen des königs Narseh," 310; B. Kaim, "Investiture or Mithra, Towards a New Interpretation of So Called Investiture Scenes in Parthian and Sasanian Art," *Iranica Antiqua*, 44 (2009): 407.



Figure 6. King conversing with astronomers on the birth of his son



Source: AH collection, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery.

astronomers (Figure 6).<sup>18</sup> Clearly, neither of these two sovereigns consider themselves as “subordinates.” It is to the credit of Sasanian designers and engravers that even on silver plates they correctly convey the nature of the long sleeve, since we can see on Figure 7 that when the left hand—of Anāhitā—is out and must hold something, the corresponding sleeve is heavily pleated while the other is not. Thus, one needs more than a long sleeve to justify the presence of a queen in a rock relief.

In the rare case of Bahrām II’s coinage where his wife’s effigy appears in tandem with Bahrām’s, one must seek a meaning in terms of added glory for the king. As she was named Shāpurdokhtag (i.e. daughter of Shāpur), I hypothetically assumed that she was a younger daughter of Shāpur I who, by marrying her own nephew, had consolidated the *farr* inheritance of her father in the latter.<sup>19</sup> Whether this supposition is true or not, coins such as in Figure 9, in which Bahrām and his wife face

<sup>18</sup>For a complete discussion on this painting see A. Soudavar, *Art of the Persian Courts* (New York, 1992), 98–100. For a similar scene depicting the Alexander in a 1494 Herat with setting, see for instance, I. Stchoukine, *Les peintures des manuscrits timourides* (Paris, 1954), pl. LXXXV.

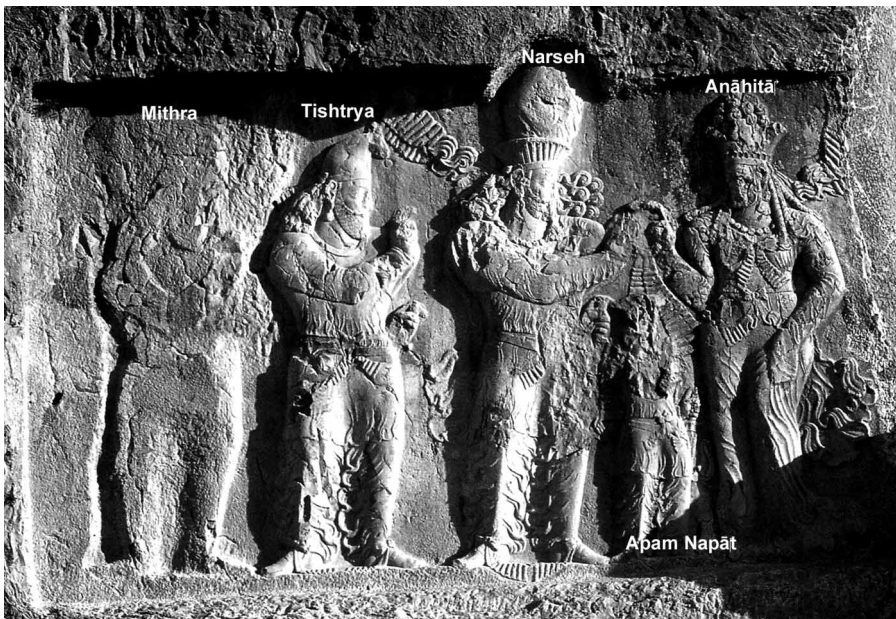
<sup>19</sup>Soudavar, *Aura*, 74. Precisely because there are a number of Shāpurdokhtags mentioned in SKZ, one can clearly envisage a later daughter of Shāpur I, who became very influential in his later years, as in the case of Pari Khān Khānum, daughter of the Safavid Shāh Tahmāsb (r. 1514–76).

Figure 7. Anahāhitā giving a headband. Silver plate (det.)



*Source:* Walters Art Museum.

Figure 8. God's approval and support of Narseh in Naqsh-e Rostam





Source: Sacedi collection.

Anāhitā, who is presenting them with a beribboned ring, clearly indicate that both were endowed with *farr*. The projection of glory was essential to Sasanian iconographical compositions, even though the source of it may not be readily recognizable to us today.

But such is the romantic appeal of a family photo souvenir that it comes back time and time again without due concern for methodology. Thus, the bust that appears before Ardashir I (r. 226–40) or Bahrām II (r. 276–93) or Jāmāsp (r. 496–98) in their coinage is regularly recognized as a crown prince, without proper consideration for all the contradictions that such a proposition entails: that the bust sometimes has pronounced female breasts, or a full-fledged stepped crown, or is offering a beribboned ring to the king, or the supposed crown princes of Ardashir I and Bahrām II look the same, or the bust on the obverse and the female deity on the reverse look alike; and more importantly, that the identity of this person cannot be switched from deity to mortal at will.<sup>20</sup>

### *Calling the Gods to the Rescue*

Canepa's description (p. 81) of the roman emperor Gallienus' (r. 260–68) reaction to the defeat of his father, Valerianus (r. 253–60), is noteworthy because the same reaction manifests itself on the Iranian side. Unwilling to attack the Sasanians, Gallienus reverted instead to propaganda that invoked the support of numerous gods, including Jupiter, Hercules, Mars, Juno, Apollo, Neptune and Sol, for his victories on his northern frontiers. Similarly, Sasanian kings who for lack a decisive victory over a foreign enemy could not claim an increased *farr*, advertised the support of gods after minor

<sup>20</sup>Soudavar, *Aura*, 68–71; Soudavar, "The Vocabulary," 419–21. The latest identification of the bust comes again from Ursula Weber, where deities on Bahrām II's relief are also identified as princes; U. Weber, "Wahrām III, König der Könige von Erān und Anērān," *Iranica Antiqua*, 45 (2010): 382–83.



victories. A prime example is Narseh's so-called investiture scene at Naqsh-e Rostam (Figure 8).

Based on the Paikuli inscriptions, in which Narseh attributes his success in dethroning his nephew to "Ohrmazd and all the gods and Anāhid, the Lady,"<sup>21</sup> I had previously suggested that his relief was a tribute to the aforementioned deities, and that the figures therein must represent Anāhitā, Ahurā Mazdā, Apam Napāt and Mithra.<sup>22</sup> Except for Ahura Mazdā, I believe that the rest of my identifications are correct, especially since they all are depicted in such a way that they mirror the king in their posture and their floating *dastārs*. The composition was obviously meant to visualize the "*cibr az yazatān*" slogan and show that the king reflected numerous deities in their power and glory. Even though it was a mistake to identify the figure behind the king as Ahura Mazdā, he is nevertheless a deity, as all others are.

We have already seen the importance of Apam Napāt in Shāpur I's reliefs. The presence of this deity in Sasanian iconography goes back to Firuzābād where he appears as a caricature symbol on Ardashir I's horse;<sup>23</sup> the same caricature subsequently adorns the reverse of many Sasanian coins. On the other hand, the naked child appears on many silver jugs, next to the effigy of Anāhitā; as the Lady of the Waters, she symbolically holds the hand of the deity whose name means the Grandson of the Waters (Figure 10).<sup>24</sup> It makes a lot more sense to interpret all these childish-looking caricatures and personas, including the one in Narseh's relief, as Apam Napāt rather than jumping from putto to Eros to crown prince and vice versa.

As for the figures with bonnets surmounted by animal heads, I now believe that they are chosen in the function of the animal that is most representative of a deity. Thus the one behind Narseh who wears a bonnet with a horse's head must represent Tishtrya, who, in one of his avatars, descended to earth as a stallion (*Yt* 8:18) and is regularly symbolized by a winged horse.<sup>25</sup> By the same token, the lion, which has strong associations with Mithra, represents the latter deity. According to the *Bondahesh*, the sunflower is associated with Mithra. Thus, the appearance of this flower in conjunction with a lion's head on the Naqsh-e Rajab relief of Ardashir confirms our hypothesis (Figure 11).<sup>26</sup> And finally, the appearance of the sunflower on a bronze bonnet that is quilted with sun motifs reaffirms the Mithraic affiliation of these two symbols (Figure 12).

Bahrām II's relief in Naqsh-e Rostam provides an added clue for our understanding of the above (Figure 13). There, the figure behind the one wearing the bonnet with a horse's head, symbol of Tishtrya, is wearing one with a lion's head, symbol of Mithra. Therefore, the unfinished head on Narseh's relief must represent Mithra as well (Figure 8). Opposite Bahrām, and in front of this group of deities, we have a

<sup>21</sup>H. Humbach and P. O. Skjaervo, *The Sasanian Inscription of Paikuli*, III (Wiesbaden, 1983), 35, 53.

<sup>22</sup>Soudavar, *Aura*, 73–77.

<sup>23</sup>Soudavar, "The Vocabulary," 427.

<sup>24</sup>Soudavar, *Aura*, 74.

<sup>25</sup>Soudavar, "The Vocabulary," 428.

<sup>26</sup>Soudavar, *Aura*, 73–73.

Figure 10. Anāhitā holding Apam Napāt



Source: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery.

woman wearing a tiara with earflaps that often appears on the bust that we have identified as Anāhitā on coins. We have thus a uniform theme, and uniform mode of expression, in both reliefs: gods are aligned before the king and greet him with a sign of excellence, in order to show their approbation and support of the king.<sup>27</sup>

Anāhitā, though, can appear with a variety of headgear. As the main deity in Narseh's relief, she wears a crenellated crown in order to better reflect the king. In a less prominent position, she wears her tiara with earflaps (as in Figure 13).<sup>28</sup> But when she needs to wear a bonnet, as on some coin issues of Bahrām II (Figure 9), she wears one surmounted by her representative animal, namely the beaver from whose skins she makes her garments (*Yt* 5:129).

Based on numismatic evidence, Weber (following Alram) recognizes two distinct types of crowns for Narseh, with the one in Naqsh-e Rostam belonging to the second, and later, period. Because a peace treaty was signed sometime after 299

<sup>27</sup>Soudavar, "The Vocabulary," 423–24).

<sup>28</sup>See also her effigy on Bahrām II's bowl in Teflis (Soudavar, *Aura*, 74–75), which unfortunately has been once again labeled as the queen; Weber, "Wahrām III," 386.



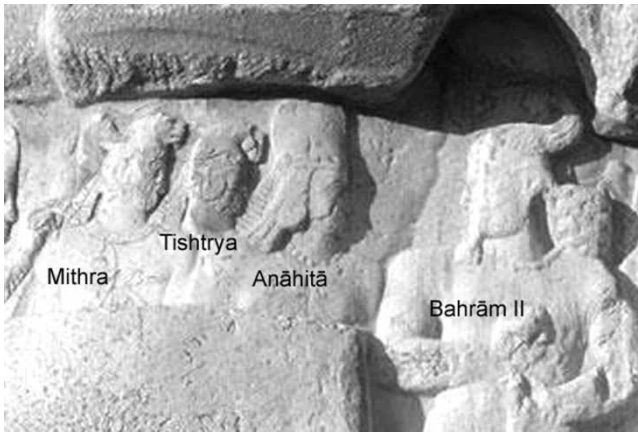
Figure 11. Mithra and Anāhitā. Naqsh-e Rājab



Figure 12. Mithraic bonnet (MFA Boston)



Figure 13. Deities facing Bahrām II. Naqsh-e Rostam



Source: photo K. Koucha.

AD, and the king's captured wife and household were eventually returned, Weber pegs the typological shift in Narseh's crown to this occasion, based on the assumption that a change in circumstances for the reigns of Peroz (r. 457–84), Kavād I (r. 488–531) and Khosrow II (r. 591–628) had also resulted in a change of their respective crowns.<sup>29</sup> That may not apply here, because in the preceding cases kingship was restored after an interlude. Narseh's reign, though, was not interrupted after his defeat. And, as argued before, the interpretation of the scene as a family gathering showing the king with his wife, son and other relatives, is wrong. If Narseh boasts the support of four gods, it is certainly not for the return of his family, because that was a reminder of defeat. Chances are then that this relief was initiated after his early victories over Galerius (Caesar 293–305, Augustus 305–11) circa 296, i.e., before Narseh's defeat in the third battle. The unfinished head of the last figure may be due to the fact that Narseh's celebration came to an abrupt end at the third battle.

### *The yāreh or So-called Ring of Investiture*

Both Kaim and Weber focus on the ring exchanged between Narseh and the opposite female figure (Figure 8), and emphasize the fact that it should not be equated with a coronation scene. Weber also echoes Vanden Berghe's insightful remark that these so-called scenes of investiture were meant to project the *farr*.<sup>30</sup> Kaim proposes further-

<sup>29</sup>Following Alam, Weber correctly argues that while the coinage of Narseh is devoid of dates, the type that had a crown with a fluted contour continued to be struck under Narseh's successor and was therefore the later type; Weber, "Zu den felsbildnissen des königs Narseh," 308.

<sup>30</sup>Vanden Berghe's remark reads as follows: "Nous avons, en plus, voulu mettre l'accent sur le fait que ces scènes dites d'investiture, n'illustrent ni le couronnement, ni l'intronisation du roi, mais bien plus la

more that the ring symbolized a covenant between different parties, which should be named *mithra*, since Mithra was originally the god of covenants, and that is what his name actually meant.<sup>31</sup> I personally doubt that a ring that appears in the hands of so many different deities could be called *mithra*. On the other hand, Vanden Berghe's remark is equally true for ancient as well as Sasanian times. Whether on the circa 2000 BC relief of King Anubanini at Sar-e pol-e Zahab,<sup>32</sup> or on Shāpur II's (r. 309–79) victory relief at Tāq-e Bostān I (Figure 14), we can see that rings are exchanged on the occasion of victories. In addition, as Overlaet notes, the ring appears not only in the hands of deities but also in those of ordinary people, as on the registers of Bishāpur III.<sup>33</sup> In search of a Persian name for it, I had previously found that the word *yāreh* designated a ring that was often mentioned in connection with emblems of kingship.<sup>34</sup> By its very name, and perhaps by its circular shape, the *yāreh* portends help and support, a definition that is not far from what Kaim has proposed. It parallels the term *vashnā* that Darius I had used (DPd§2) to indicate the support of Ahura Mazda; a term that was also used by his elder companion Otanes in support of his king.<sup>35</sup> The *yāreh* seems to represent the same notion, as it appears in the hands of both mortals and deities. It symbolizes support and allegiance, and an appropriate companion to emblems of *farr* that deities would convey. As such, it often appears as a beribboned ring, which conveys both support and *farr* by a deity.

#### *Shāpur II's Tāq-e Bostān's Relief*

The explanation for this important relief (Figure 14) has suffered from many misconceptions, at the root of which was the assumption that Ahura Mazda must wear a stepped crown, although he does not wear one next door in the cave of Khosrow II (Figure 15a). As a result, the central figure was proclaimed to represent Ardashir II (r. 379–83). And to compound the error, Shahbazi presented a convoluted theory by which two mortals, namely the brothers Ardashir II and Shāpur II, were exchanging the beribboned *yāreh*. I have criticized both misconceptions at length and see no need to repeat the argument here.<sup>36</sup> But one must deplore the fact that a simple misconception on crowns can derail the perception from a time-tested image of “kings supported by gods,” to a very mundane interaction among brothers. Why not recognize this relief as glorifying Shāpur II and not his brother, when everybody agrees that the corps

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transmission du ‘Khvarnah’ c’est-à-dire l’octroi au roi déjà couronné, de la gloire divine, du pouvoir suprême et de la postérité tout au cours de son règne,” as quoted in Weber, “Zu den felsbildnissen des königs Narseh,” 308.

<sup>31</sup>B. Kaim, “Investiture or Mithra, Towards a New Interpretation of So Called Investiture Scenes in Parthian and Sasanian Art,” *Iranica Antiqua*, 44 (2009): 403–15.

<sup>32</sup>See for instance “Sarpol-i Zohāb,” *Iranische Denkmäler*, 7/II (Berlin 1976), pl. 5.

<sup>33</sup>Overlaet, “Roman,” 493.

<sup>34</sup>See Persian translation of my *Aura of the Kings* (A. Soudavar, *Farreh-ye izadi dar āyin pādshāhi-ye Iran-e bāstan*, (Houston, 2005), 4; see also Dehkhodā dictionary: <http://www.loghatnaameh.com>.

<sup>35</sup>Soudavar, “The Formation of Achaemenid Imperial Ideology and its Impact on the Avesta,” in *The World of Achaemenid Persia—History, Art and Society in Iran and the Ancient Near East*, ed. J. Curtis and St. J. Simpson (London, 2010), 126.

<sup>36</sup>Soudavar, *Aura*, 49–52; Soudavar, “Farr(ah)/x’arənah.”

Figure 14. Shāpur II celebrating his victory over Julian, and receiving a beribboned *yāreb* from Ahura Mazdā, seconded by Mithra standing over a lotus, symbol of Apam Napāt. Tāq-e Bostān I

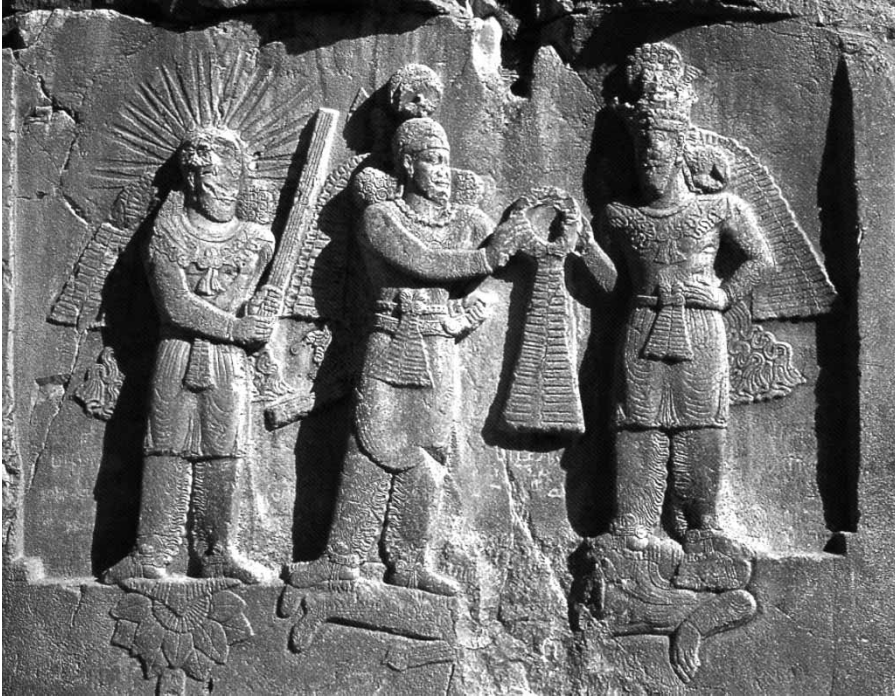


Figure 15a,b. Upper and lower parts of the inner sanctum of Tāq-e Bostān III

(a)



(b)





underneath is the roman emperor Julian II (r. 361–63) who died in battle with Shāpur? Why insist on the romantic projection of nineteenth-century western royal family gatherings onto Middle Eastern antiquity? Why not take into consideration the adjacent cave where Shāpur III portrays himself next to his grandfather Shāpur II, and understand the fact that he placed it there precisely to claim inheritance from the great aura of Shāpur II, obtained through victory over Romans, and not from his great uncle who had none?

Canepa (p. 109), misled by Shahbazi's arguments, sees primarily Tāq-e Bostān I as legitimating the right of Ardashir II to rule, and fails to grasp the full implications of its imagery within the context of the propaganda wars between the Romans and the Sasanians. A recent article by Dominique Hollard, though, focuses on the Roman propaganda that prompted a response from the Sasanian side.<sup>37</sup> To fully understand Hollard's contribution, one must first see Tāq-e Bostān I as departing from the norms set by Shāpur II's forefather in Bishāpur. In both places, the objective was to use the victory over the Romans to claim the most important specie of *farr*, the Aryan one, which came in conjunction with a victory over an-Erān. The question then is, why did Shāpur II not rely on Apam Napāt for the conveyance of *farr*, but instead projected Mithra as the ultimate purveyor of *farr*? The lotus under his feet symbolizes of course Apam Napāt, who as the guardian of the Aryan *farr* underwater had to release it first. Nevertheless, Mithra's presence is visually dominant. The reason for this shift in emphasis is thus given by Hollard: it was a reaction to the intense propaganda undertaken by Julian before the battle. Indeed, as the Roman emperor who established the supremacy of Mithra as Helios in the Roman pantheon, who would write treatises honoring Mithra on the occasion of his birthday on 25 December, who would sacrifice bovines to him and confess to having taken an oath not to divulge its mysteries, and who would depict the bust of this solar divinity on the gate of his military camp, Julian must have tailored his war propaganda toward the Sasanian military by claiming that Mithra was on his side; and since Shāpur's brother Hormizdas (Hormoz) commanded part of the Roman cavalry, and Julian had plans to place him on the Persian throne, the Roman propaganda must have shaken the very legitimacy of Shāpur's right to rule.<sup>38</sup> Thus, in depicting Mithra after Ahura Mazdā, Shāpur was emphasizing that the supreme deity that his enemy venerated was a mere second in the Persian pantheon, and one who had favored him over his opponent. Hence, Julian lying defeated at his feet.

Hollard's otherwise thorough analysis unfortunately stumbles at the end on the everlasting label of Ardashir II for this relief, when he names him as the central figure, and the crowned figure on his right as Ahura Mazdā. To his credit, he does not accept the composition as an interaction between mortals, but succumbs to the western view that gods must figure most prominently, even though the conventions of Sasanian iconography point to the opposite: the tallest person was always the king.<sup>39</sup> The Ardashir II label is even more regrettable when we consider that Hollard's

<sup>37</sup>D. Hollard, "Julien et Mithrā sur le relief de Tāq-e Bostān," *Res Orientales* XIX (2010): 147–63.

<sup>38</sup>Hollard, "Julien."



arguments call attention to a propaganda that was primarily aimed at Shāpur and not his brother. But the moral of the story is that even in response to this Roman propaganda, the composition has an entirely Persian structure, and addresses the king's recognition directly towards the gods. Any message to the Romans was only to be inferred indirectly. Moreover, by placing the relief near a pond the main addressee among the gods was still Apam Napāt and not Mithra.

*From India to the Nile: A Lasting Rhetorical Slogan*

In a lengthy footnote (p. 259, n. 22), Canepa points out the perils associated with the study of Sasanian rock reliefs, and the controversies that have surfaced in various cases. The above-mentioned misconceptions notwithstanding, one of the major impediments to a correct assessment of the iconography is common sense. Katsumi Tanabe,<sup>40</sup> for instance, attributes the great grotto of Tāq-e Bostān III to the reign of Ardashir III (628–30), based among others on a three-pearl pendant hanging from his neck (in his coins), which can also be seen on the monarch hunting from a boat on the side-panel of the grotto. By this argument all the seals with animals bearing such pendants<sup>41</sup> and the textiles such as Figure 23, with pheasants wearing the same pendant, must also be attributed to his reign, which they are not. But, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, the three pearls, as well as the three dots or droplets, symbolized Tyshtria, who was a purveyor of *farr*, and were used all along in Sasanian iconography.<sup>42</sup> More importantly, as a matter of common sense one clearly senses that the necessary time for planning and designing such an enterprise, followed by digging a rather large cave into hard rock and then carving the various decorative elements, must far exceed the less than two-year reign of Ardashir III. Furthermore, such a gigantic project usually comes in the wake of a major success, and a period of stability that is conducive to celebration and self-aggrandizement rather than a period of contested reigns, when rivals of general Shahrbarāz put the young Ardashir III on the throne.<sup>43</sup> By these considerations alone, the prime and only candidate appears to be Khosrow II.

From today's perspective, Khosrow II's victories over Byzantium were a disaster, because not only were all his conquests wiped out within a decade or so, but his costly campaigns had ultimately exhausted the Sasanian empire and paved the way for a relatively minor army of Arab Bedouins to conquer Iran. However, from the per-

<sup>39</sup>Soudavar, "The Vocabulary," 418–19.

<sup>40</sup>K. Tanabe, "The Identification of the King of kings in the Upper Register of the Larger Grotto, Taq-i Bustan—Ardashir III Restated," in *Ērān ud Anērān*, ed. Compareti, Raffetta, Scarcia, Webfestschrift Marshak, 2003, Traxoxiana Web Series.

<sup>41</sup>See for instance R. Gyselen, "Note sur les 'anneaux à trois pendentifs' dans la glyptique sassanide," *Studia Iranica*, 19, no. 2 (1990): 205–08.

<sup>42</sup>Soudavar, "The Vocabulary," 428–31; Soudavar, "Farr(ah)/xvarənah."

<sup>43</sup>A similar mistake was made by the late Prof. Oleg Grabbar when he attributed the making of the magnificent *Il-Khānid Shāhnāmeḥ* (nicknamed *Abu-Sāidnāmeḥ*) to the less than six-month reign of Arpā Kaon (1335–36), whose rule was contested from the start, and who spent the first half of his reign fending off the attacks of his cousins of the Golden Horde, and the second fighting his rivals. Such a project needed years for completion; A. Soudavar, "The Saga of Abu-Sāid Bahādor Khān, The Abu-sa'idnāmeḥ," in *At the Court of the Il-Khāns, 1290–1340*, ed. J. Raby and T. Fitzherbert (Oxford 1996), 171.

spective of the years 618–20, the conquest of Byzantium territories all the way to Egypt, in conjunction with a successful campaign against the Turks on the eastern frontiers, vouched for an unparalleled achievement that could even eclipse the victories of his illustrious forefathers, Shāpur I and Shāpur II. It therefore stands to reason that Khosrow II did embark on such a commemorative project, and I shall try to prove that the Tāq-e Bostān cave-monument was carved precisely for this purpose.

In the inner sanctum of the cave, and on its upper register, Khosrow is flanked by a traditional pair of divinities, one of which (Ahura Mazda) has given him a beribboned *yāreb* while the other (Anāhitā) is about to give him another one (Figure 15a). On the lower register is a majestic knight (Figure 15b) with a caparisoned horse holding a lance that echoes Ardashir I's battle image at Firuzābād, especially since the saddle belts of his horse have the same caricature symbol of Apam Napāt.<sup>44</sup> It obviously puts a military accent on the setting, heralding the victories and conquests of the king above. The panels on the two sides were therefore meant to explain these achievements. And indeed they do it in plain iconographic language.

On the left panel (facing the cave) there is a boar hunt that has a narrative sequence, since the king first appears without a nimbus and ready to hunt, but is subsequently haloed after a successful hunt (Figure 16). The narrative sequence is from left to right and on a horizontal line. To the left of that horizontal line are Indian elephants and to the right are marshes that allude to the Nile. In the most subtle way, it is showing that the hunting ground of the king now extends “from India to the Nile.” The choices of the elements are precise and follow a tradition that Frantz Grenet has described in his interpretation of the newly discovered relief of Rag-e Bibi in Afghanistan. For Grenet, the rhinoceros as the hunted animal, and the mango tree as background fauna, alluded to Sasanian territorial expansion over the Hindukush and into India.<sup>45</sup> It clearly projected that the king's hunting grounds went beyond the Khyber Pass and into the Indian lowland. Tāq-e Bostan III uses the same concept to show the extent of Khosrow II's conquests. While the Asian elephant alluded to India, the extensive marshes reflected the banks of the Nile where boars used to roam freely.<sup>46</sup>

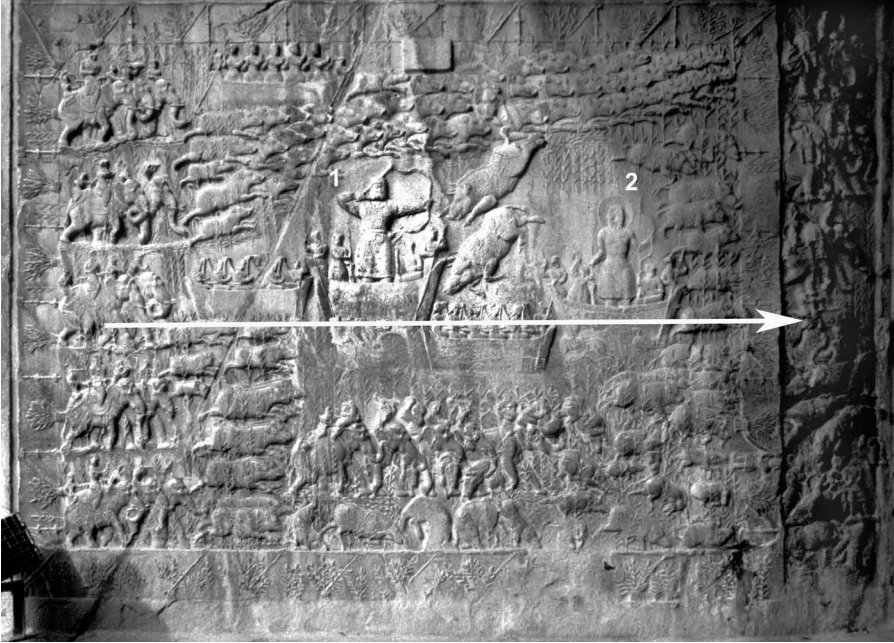
Similarly, the subject of the right panel (Figure 17) is the king's hunting ground but is divided into three parts. It has a central panel which seems to represent Erān, and two side registers that seem to depict an-Erān. The king is hunting onager and deer in the central one, while the right register is filled with elephants, and camels appear on the top of the left register, in an escalating procession over mountainous terrain. The narrative sequence of the hunt follows a vertical line, on which the king is portrayed three times. It prompts the viewer to “read” the two side registers in a vertical direction. In other words, the panel shows the territorial limits along the north–south direction, which starts in the mountainous regions of Transoxiana where the Turks

<sup>44</sup>Information provided by R. Gyselen who has a photo of the undamaged part of the statue underneath the horse's belly.

<sup>45</sup>F. Grenet, “Découverte d'un relief sassanide dans le nord de l'Afghanistan,” in *Académie des inscriptions et belles lettres* (Comptes Rendus, 2005), 129–31.

<sup>46</sup>K. Bard, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt* (London, 1999), 918.

Figure 16. Khosrow's hunting ground, "From India to the Nile." Left panel of Tāq-e Bostān III



had established a Khaganate, on the upper left, and goes again to India, as the southernmost region of the empire, to the right and down.

While the left panel celebrates the victories on the western front, the right panel reflects the victory of Khosrow II's general, Smbat Bagratuni, over the Central Asian Turks, circa 616.<sup>47</sup> Sebeos describes Khosrow's reaction to the news of this victory:

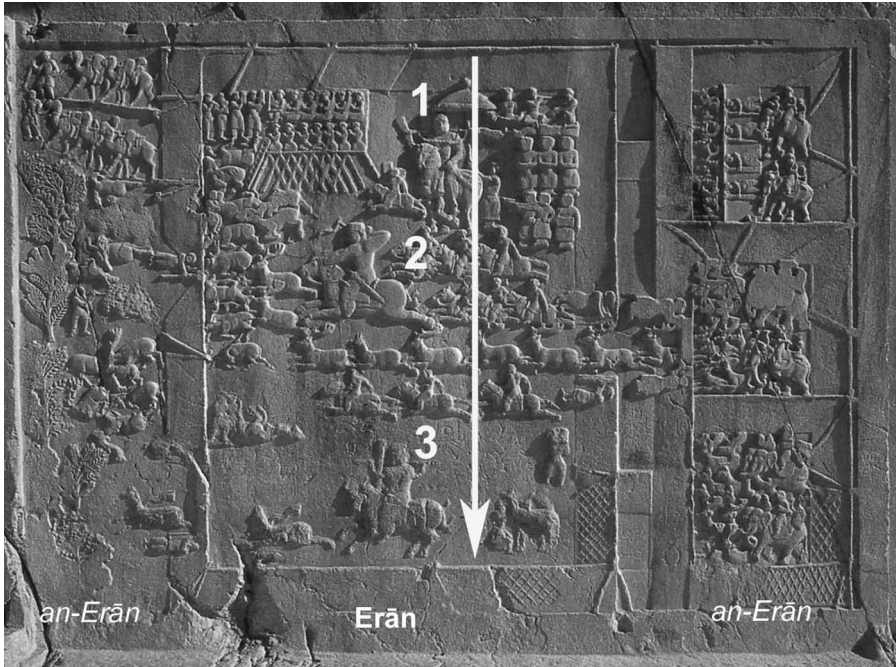
He ordered that a huge elephant be adorned and brought to the chamber. He commanded that [Smbat's son] Varaztirots' (who was called Javitean Xosrov by the king), be seated atop [the elephant]. And he ordered treasures scattered on the crowd. He wrote [to Smbat] a *hrovartak* [expressing] great satisfaction and summoned him to court with great honor and pomp. [Smbat] died in the 28th year of [Xosrov's] reign [618–19].<sup>48</sup>

Thus, the elephants aligned on the side register may also invoke the celebrations when Khosrow so honored his general's son.

<sup>47</sup>J. Howard-Johnston, "Kosrov II," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (Online version, 2010).

<sup>48</sup><http://rbedrosian.com/seb8.htm>.

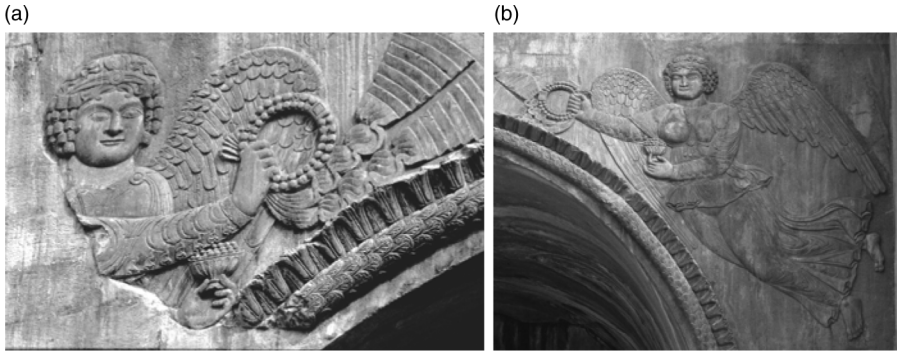
Figure 17. Khosrow has increased the Aryan farr in Erān, through his victories



In terms of priority, the finished status of the left panel and the unfinished borders of the right one vouch for the fact that the conquest of the Nile was probably deemed more important, and was started first. By the time the project reached the contours of the right panel, Heraclius' (610–41) counter-offensive had possibly started, and put an end to the project. The abrupt ending here parallels that of Narseh's relief. Khosrow and Narseh had both cried "victory" too soon, and their respective celebration projects were stopped short of completion. Tāq-e Bostān III, though, has one peculiarity that is found neither in Narseh's relief, nor in any other Sasanian one: the winged females, depicted with a short blouse and short hair on the outer façade of the edifice, are actually *foreign* entities (Figures 18a,b). They represent Nike and Fortuna holding a beribboned *yāreb*. There was no attempt to make them appear like an Iranian goddess, with Iranian clothing. While Anāhitā, as the protector of the House of Sasan, is depicted in the inner sanctum and next to the king, Nike and Fortuna are portrayed as supplicants in waiting on the outside (Figures 18a,b). For his two-fold victories in east and west, Khosrow was receiving two beribboned *yārebs* from Iranian deities, and two others from Nike and Fortuna. Similar to the case of Mithra in the adjacent relief of Shāpur II, Tāq-e Bostān III is suggesting that the angel protectors of the Romans and Greeks had switched allegiance and were now supporting the Iranian king.



Figure 18a,b. Fortuna and Nike at the threshold of Khosrow's victory monument. Tāq-e Bostān III



Source: photo M. Khonsari.

Like all other Sasanian reliefs, the ultimate goal of this composition was to project accrued glory for the king. But while divinities express support, and bestow symbols of *farr* in the inner sanctum as well as on the outside, the side panels project a different story: the king himself is taking credit for the generation of *farr*. On the left panel, his acquisition of the nimbus as symbol of *farr* is tied to a successful hunt symbolizing territorial conquests that extended all the way to the Nile. On the right panel, he claims to have reinvigorated the Aryan *farr* itself, because the image of multiple rams, with ribbons (*dastārs*) tied around their necks, running in the king's hunting ground, projected the increase of *farr* within Erān. The same motif appeared on one of Khosrow II's signets and was termed as *khwarrah va ghorm*. The latter designated the running ram, similar to the one that was perceived as a symbol of *farr* chasing Ardashir I in the *Shāhnāme* and in the *Kārnāmag*; and the ribbon or *dastār* tied around its neck made it doubly auspicious, especially since the latter had become synonymous with *farr*.<sup>49</sup>

Unlike the western concept of sacredness, the most important characteristic of *farr* was its variability. Whether it was attached to ordinary people, or kings, or deities, or to Erān itself, it could increase as well as decrease. The projection of increased *farr* in Erān meant a stronger Aryan *farr*, which then reflected on the king and added to his prestige. As a result, we have a significant nimbus behind the king who is portrayed as a victorious knight (Figure 15b).

The double increase in *farr*, of the king as well as of Erān, must have been part of the official propaganda across the empire, since we see its impact on the seals of two provincial administrators in charge of tax registries, or *āmārgars*. They both insert the names of the cities under their jurisdiction into slogans that reflect the official propa-

<sup>49</sup>Mas`udi Abol-Hasan `Ali b. Hosayn-e, *Les prairies d'or*, trans. C. Pellat (Paris, 1962), I: 24, corrected in Soudavar, "The Significance of Av. *čithra*," 174.



ganda of the day. The inscription on these seals were first read by Ryka Gyselen, but subsequently revised by myself.<sup>50</sup> The first seal is that of the *āmārgar* of Qal' e-ye Yazdgird (i.e. the Yazdgird citadel in northwest Iran). Khosrow had recaptured it and rebuilt its citadel, and the *āmārgar* is claiming that Khosrow's *farr* was consequently increased. Its legend reads:



*Farreh afzud Khosro ki shahrvinārd Yazdgird, āmārgar*  
Khosrow's *farr* was increased when he rebuilt the citadel of Yazdgird, *āmārgar*.

The second seal originally mentioned three districts but one was scratched out. The remaining two districts had changed hands several times but were essentially Byzantine territories captured once again under Khosrow II. The scratching of the third district may either be due to a redistribution of the districts by which the third one was allocated to another Sasanian official, or it may have been caused by a Byzantine recapture. Either way, the *āmārgar* praises Khosrow for having increased the Aryan/Erān *farr* by capturing an-Erān territories. It now reads:



*Farreh Erān afzon kard Khosrow ki niwisenid [ ? ] ud Aruastān ud Arzon, āmārgar*  
Khosrow caused the Iranian *farr* to increase when he proclaimed (victory) over [ ? ] and Aruastan and Arzon, *āmārgar*.

Remarkably, the legends of the two seals reflect the double message of the panels of Tāq-e Bostān III, according to which Khosrow's victories had caused the Aryan *farr*, as well as his own *farr*, to increase.

The intensity of Khosrow's self-aggrandizing propaganda prior to his defeat by Heraclius can be measured by the lasting effect of its slogans, especially the one projected by the left panel of Tāq-e Bostān III. The Abu-Mansuri preface to the text of the *Shāhnāme*, for instance, explains Erān-shahr as a territory stretching "from the Oxus to the Nile."<sup>51</sup> It resurfaces as rhetorical propaganda during the reign of the Il-Khānid dynasty, whose domain roughly equaled the Sasanian empire, and for whom the notion of Iranzamin was reinvented. When the right to rule of the Il-Khānids over northern Iran was challenged by their northern cousins of the Golden Hoard, the celebrated astronomer and statesman Nasir-od-din-e Tusi

<sup>50</sup>Soudavar, "The Vocabulary," 437–40. As their legends used a hybrid syntax mixing image and text, the plain reading of only the written words by Gyselen had produced an incongruent text.

<sup>51</sup>T. Daryaei, ed., *Shāhrestānīhā i Erānshahr; A Middle Persian Text on Late Antique Geography, Epic and History* (Costa Meza, 2002), 5; "ایرانشهر از رود آمویست تا دریای مصر"

(1201–74) justified the Il-Khānid dominions as the territories entrusted to them by the Great Khān Mungka (r.1251–59) from “India to the setting sun.” Similarly, the vizier Rashid-od-din Fazlollāh (d. 1319) used the “Oxus to the Nile” slogan to claim that Mameluk Egypt was part of the Il-Khānid dominion.<sup>52</sup>

There is much controversy about Sasanian understanding of the Achaemenid period, but, as Canepa rightly notes (pp. 46–49), it really did not matter since, early on, Ardashir I had raised the issue of gathering back “under one head and one monarch” the lands that once belonged to his predecessors, and had claimed to win back all the territories that “ancient Persians had once held as far as the Grecian Sea.” And before him the Parthian Artabanus II (r. 10–38AD) had laid claim through his ambassadors to the “old boundaries of the Persian and Macedonian empires.”<sup>53</sup> A claim to territories delimited by natural and/or easily understood boundaries<sup>54</sup> was always a useful propaganda tool, and the above-mentioned historical record shows that the Nile boundary had a lasting appeal ever since the Achaemenids conquered Egypt. Interestingly, the Alexander heritage once claimed by the Parthians, was reintroduced in the post-Sasanian period through the integration of the Alexander Romance in the *Shāhnāmah*.

### *Origins of the Diadem*

As part of significant symbols exchanged between Rome and Sasanian Iran, Canepa discusses the case of the diadem. The Parthians had adopted the Hellenistic diadem, which was then transformed by the Sasanians into a more elaborate version in order to distinguish themselves from their predecessors (which I have argued to be a symbol of *farr* named *dastār*). Interestingly, he explains that, on the Roman side, the diadem had a negative “Oriental” association, and was gradually abandoned (p. 198). But Canepa refutes the contention of Diodorus of Sicily and Curtius Rufus that the diadem was part of the “Persian” royal dress that Alexander adopted, and states that “the Achaemenid kings never appear in anything resembling a diadem” (p. 326, n. 45). It is possible, however, that, similar to Darius in Bisotun (Figure 19), the Achaemenids wore a crenellated gold crown so thin-looking that the Greeks perceived it as being held by a woven headband; alternatively, the Achaemenids may have actually worn a headband not unlike the ones Anāhitā offers to the king in Sasanian silver plates and coins (Figure 7).<sup>55</sup> Be that as it may, one must note that the Greek word diadem, which entered the Persian lexicon as *deyhim*, is still used in reference to crowns and regal headgears, which indicates that the Sasanian *dastār* was indeed

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<sup>52</sup>Soudavar, *Aura*, 82–84.

<sup>53</sup>M. Facella, “Darius and the Achaemenids in Commagene,” *Organization des pouvoirs et contacts culturels dans les pays de l’empire achéménide*, ed. P. Briant and M. Chauveau (Paris, 2009), 384.

<sup>54</sup>The *Fārsnameh*, for instance, defines the Persian lands: “from the Oxus until the waters of the Euphrates”; Ebn-e Balkhi, *The Fārsnāma of Ibnu’l Balkhi*, ed. G. Le Strange and R. A. Nicholson (London, 1968), 120.

<sup>55</sup>See Soudavar, “The Vocabulary,” figs. 16, 17. I am indebted to D. Huff for pointing out Darius’ crenellated crown to me.

Figure 19. Darius at Bisotun



derived from the Greek diadem, no matter what the Achaemenids or their predecessors had worn.

### *Roman Mithraism*

Among the misconceptions that have restricted the scope of Sasanian studies is the separation of Roman Mithraic societies from its Iranian counterpart. By force of repetition of spurious arguments, the separation of the two has gained “reality” status, and no scholar seems to be bold enough to challenge it, even when it hampers its own investigations. Since I am in the process of writing a book on the subject, I restrict my arguments here to two issues raised by Canepa, which are better explained if one admits into the equation the possibility of cultural exchange through the bias of Mithraic societies.

The first is Canepa’s interpretation (p. 120–21) of the three gift-bearing Magi appearing on the fold of Theodora’s (r. 527–48) robe in the church of San Vitale in Ravenna. For Canepa, the three Magi represented Sasanian *mowbeds*, whose gift bringing indicated the “subjection of the Iranian religion and sovereign to the Roman religion—Christianity—and Christ’s earthly representative, the Roman Emperor.” But, as others have suggested, the Magi giving homage to the newborn Jesus implied, in fact, the victory of Christ over Mithra.<sup>56</sup> The Magi on Theodora’s robe are conceived in black and white, but in the same city of Ravenna, in the basilica

<sup>56</sup>M. Félix, *Le livre des Rois Mages* (Paris, 2000), 15, 25.

Figure 20. The three Magi mosaics, in St Appolinare Nuovo, Ravenna



of St Appolinare Nuovo, which was rebuilt by Justinian (r. 527–65), the three Magi wear the distinct red Phrygian bonnet of the priests of Mithraic orders (Figure 20). It therefore seems that less than a century and half after Julian’s revival of the cult of Mithra, Christianity still felt the need to articulate its dominance vis-à-vis a rival ideology. If the symbolism of San Vitale was primarily for local consumption, as Canepa surmises, one must then assume that, for the locals, the distant land of Iran was less of a concern than a rival pagan ideology.

The second issue is a repetitive pattern that appears on the silk garment of Justinian (Figure 21) in the church of San Vitale, which Canepa describes (p. 206) as a “duck in a pearl roundel medallion,” similar in spirit and design to the medallions on Khosrow’s garment in *Tāq-e bostān* III. A closer look, however, reveals that the bird in question is not a duck but a pheasant, and the roundel itself is very much like a motif that appears on numerous Sasanian silver wares and textiles (e.g., Figure 22). It is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate on the merits of this bird; I shall do so in my forthcoming book on Mithraic societies. For the time being, suffice it to say that it represents the bird *Chamrosh*, which, according to the *Bondabesh*, is aided by Apam Napāt to rise to the summit of Mount Alburz and annihilate the enemies from an-Erān who sought to invade Erān.<sup>57</sup> As such, it has two characteristics. Firstly, because of its association with Apam Napāt, and its power to vanquish an-

<sup>57</sup>M. Boyce, “Apam-Napāt,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (1987) II: 149–50. A different translation used by Alain Williams for the same passage of the *Bondabesh* gives an erroneous image of the deities involved (A. Williams, “Camruš,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (Online edition, 1990)).



Figure 21. Justinian's pheasant roundels. San Vitale



Figure 22. Silver jug (MFA Boston)



Erān, it is endowed with a powerful *farr*. Secondly, he wears a pendant with three pearls that we recognized as a symbol of Tishtrya, which puts further emphasis on the powerful *farr* that this bird portends. Be that as it may, we find the same bird on a Roman sarcophagus of the first–second century, which displays Mithra, the sacrificial bull, the peacock and the pheasant, with the latter wearing a pendant with three

Figure 23. Sixth-century Sasanian silk



*Source: Splendeur, 279.*

Figure 24. Roman Sarcophagus, first–second century (Archeological Museum, Istanbul)



pearls around the neck, which is badly corroded but still there. Thus, Mithraic societies, through their symbols and rituals, also acted as a conduit for the transfer of Iranian elements into Roman royal iconography. It is a conduit that perhaps merits further study in the future.

*Conclusion*

As the text of this article fully recognizes, it is Matthew Canepa's wide-ranging study of Roman and Sasanian interactions that has allowed me to consider the development of Sasanian iconography more fully, in order to compare their similarities and differences. I was pleasantly surprised to see how the shifts in iconography responded to shifting circumstances and aspirations, but at the same time conformed to what Vanden Berghe had correctly seen as a desire to project the conveyance of *farr* to kings. More importantly, it has allowed me to focus once again on the misconceptions that are rampant nowadays in Sasanian studies, and show how they derail conclusions that could have been more relevant. Although misconceptions are hard to kill, it is my hope that logic will one day prevail and the analysis of text and image will follow sound principles of political propaganda rather than the obsession with family encounters.