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## Iranian Reliefs through the Eyes of Western Travelers (14<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries)

Reliefs carved on free-standing rocks, cliffs or used to adorn royal buildings are one of the most distinguishing features of ancient Persian art, providing us with an incredible amount of artistic evidence of pre-Islamic Iran.

Although rock-reliefs were already carved from the Early Bronze Age, especially in the Kingdom of Elam [1], it was during the subsequent local Iranian rules of the Iron Age and onwards (Achaemenid, Parthian, Sasanian) that the proliferation rock-reliefs greatly expanded [33], as they were also conceived as an important means of political propaganda.

Many of them are intentionally placed on cliffs overlooking important communication and trade routes, therefore intended to be seen by all travelers. Others are erected within or around spaces with a religious significance, such as an open-air sanctuary or a royal cemetery, thus establishing a direct link between the rulers and the deities. Moreover, reliefs were also part of a complex decoration designed to adorn royal buildings. Finally, several reliefs are intentionally carved on or nearby much older reliefs, in order to create a link of legitimation between the present and the previous rulers, as a strong way to reaffirm the political message of the images carved on rocks. Such a relationship between reliefs and propaganda is not surprising. Art and politics interact closely with each other. Both are expressions of ideologies, created within a specific cultural context, and used to bolster a precise political agenda. Both address an audience, and art is used as a tangible means to strengthen politics. Therefore, most of these reliefs were created intentionally as an essential part of a political agenda, used for displaying regality, celebrating the kingship, and legitimizing the power of the ruler. They were part of well-planned imperial propaganda intended to establish a hierarchical order at the top of which there is the king, the beneficent creator of an orderly system which stressed images of power, victory, piety, control, and harmonious order.

The present article aims to highlight the attitude of various western travelers towards some monuments of ancient Persia, especially those related to the Achaemenid period.

Since many reliefs were often created along the main connection routes, their presence and features were already reported by the earliest European travelers who, from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, started travelling and wandering throughout the Iranian plateau.

The literature of travelers who visited Iran is extremely abundant, covering several centuries, and many references to ancient monuments can be found within them<sup>1</sup>. The report-like tone reflects the age, the knowledge, and the mentality of the viewer, since travelers tended

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed list see Scarce (1981) [26], Sancisi-Weerdenburg (1991) [25] and Sohrabi (2005) [31].

to integrate and interpret newly acquired information into their own cultural and intellectual framework. Moreover, in order to describe a new and unknown world, comparisons had to be made with terminology taken from a familiar background. This fact is clearly reflected in the interpretation of ancient Persian art, where Christian, Classical or Renaissance models and terminology were widely used.

Therefore, comments, notes, and drawings are extremely valuable as they reflect the idea of the observer. It is particularly interesting to notice the development of Western attitudes towards ancient Persian monuments, since their discovery coincided with the development of European culture, mentality, politics, and economy over several centuries.

The history of activities of western travelers in Persia can be divided into several periods, which generally reflect the political relationships between Persia and Western powers.

The first one comprised only a handful of travelers who visited the Iranian plateau during the European Middle Age. At that time, few Europeans ventured east of the Byzantine empire or the Levantine coastal area; therefore, only limited information is available. There are some scarce references by missionaries, merchants, and ambassadors, usually on their way to the Mongol rulers or China. Their background knowledge was limited, mostly consisting of information coming from the bible and thus they interpreted the monuments they saw with a Christian and Medieval eye.

The following period began at the time of the Safavid dynasty (1501–1732), and in particular during the reign of Shah Abbas I (1588–1629). Relations with Europe grew in importance and they stimulated a new influx of people visiting Persia, especially embassies coming from European monarchs seeking to establish better diplomatic and economic relationship with Persia. A new influx of Westerners came to Persia, as part of large diplomatic missions, usually composed of members of the European aristocracy. Many of them had a solid background knowledge of ancient Greek and Roman authors, thus they were well aware of the historical dynamics of ancient Persia. Subsequently, they concentrated on the monuments associated with the Achaemenid and Sasanian dynasties which had been involved with Greece and Rome. However, they were still not aware of ancient Near Eastern art, yet to be dug out from the sands of Mesopotamia, and the works of art they saw were generally described with a sense of Western superiority, considering the Renaissance art which they were mostly used to. Despite being officially invited by the local rulers, most of these earlier travelers limited their visit to the most accessible sites and this fact explains the large and repetitive amount of reports concerning Persepolis, Naqsh-e Rostam and Behistun.

In the following century, the political and economic balance shifted toward Western powers and consequently more people from Europe traveled to Persia. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century the trade in the Persian Gulf was mainly under the control of the Dutch East India Company, but in the following century it was gradually taken over by the British East India Company. The British interest in Persia grew in importance due to the country's strategic position and the ongoing diplomatic struggle with the Russian empire. Therefore, the number of visitors increased. This eventually involved the presence of a range of British personnel — diplomats, military officials, and the professionals and technicians (such as doctors and engineers) who supported them and provided expertise for the Persian authorities as well. However, Persia never became a British colony, and the local ruler battled to retain its independence from the expansions of the French,

British and Russian empires. The diplomatic and economic interests of these countries explain the large numbers of published reports by French and British travelers, whereas those from other European countries are much fewer in number. There are Russian reports as well<sup>2</sup>, but they have yet to be studied and published within Western academia.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the numbers of visitors greatly increased. Reports from diplomats, missionaries, traders, technicians, and advisors offer a detailed glimpse of Iranian monuments, since Persia could stimulate their curiosity as much by its overwhelming physical contrasts as by its ancient culture and traditions so different from their own. However, being part of a new political order in which European expansionist powers were at the top, their descriptions partially reflect a colonialist approach.

The diplomats of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century were soon to be followed into Persia by a new type of visitor, that is the independent travelers. These were comparatively few as conditions generally were too hazardous for lone travel, but those who did reach Persia were not confined to the limits of an official program. Curiosity and adventure drove them outside the canonical routes. Therefore, new places were explored, and new reliefs were discovered. For example, the large and famous site of Susa, located far from the main roads and in an area with an unfavorable climate was only visited for the first time by Baron de Bode, first secretary of the Russian Embassy and later by A. H. Layard.

The first site to be widely visited was Persepolis. The earliest reference to it in European literature is a brief phrase of the Italian monk Odoric of Pordenone, who passed through Persia on his journey to China in 1318. He simply noted that it had once been a great city which had caused a lot of damage to the Romans.

During the 15<sup>th</sup> century the Republic of Venice was willing to establish better relationships with Persia, seen as a possible ally against the struggle with the Ottoman empire [23]. Thus, in 1474 the Venetian ambassador Josafat Barbaro, member of a distinguished family, arrived in Persepolis, where he describes a relief:

*“upon this plain there is a mighty stone of one piece, on the which are many images of men graven as great as giants, and above all the rest one image like that we resemble to God the Father in a circle, who in either hands hold a globe, under whom are other little images, and before him the image of a man leaning on a bow, which they said was the figure of Salomon”* [2, p. 81].

It is not perfectly clear which relief he refers to, citing a rock full of big figures and above them another one “similar to Our Lord”. Looking at a figure holding a bow, he reports “they say he is the figure of Salomon”, whereas another on a horse was “Samson”. His perspective on the site was still clearly Medieval, not being aware of ancient classical sources, therefore placing the figures he saw within the bible tradition. According to Lockhart, he was describing the reliefs of Naqsh-e Rostam [16, p. 292]. Moreover, at a distance of four days travelling he noticed “a tomb with a small church on top of it”, clearly referring to the tomb of Cyrus at Pasargadae.

Subsequent travelers had more knowledge of ancient Persia thanks to the availability of Greek and Roman sources, even though references to Persepolis are scarce in Greek accounts.

<sup>2</sup> A rich list of references compiled by P.Gusterin is available here: [http://ricolor.org/history/eng/vs/15\\_10\\_2015/](http://ricolor.org/history/eng/vs/15_10_2015/) (in Russian).

The Spanish diplomat Don García de Silva Figueroa (1550–1624), sent as ambassador by king Philip III to Shah Abbas, traveled extensively throughout Persia, visiting the ruins near Shiraz, and correctly identifying them as the remains of Persepolis [6, pp. 160–163].

At the same time, the Italian traveler Pietro della Valle also visited the site, leaving a report of its visible reliefs. He carefully observed the procession and recognized how cypress trees were carved, as ornament, between the figures. However, he was not impressed by the reliefs, since he reported how the figures of animals and men were not designed well, nor was the work executed by the hand of a “*maestro eccellente*” [7, p. 256], therefore considering it a work of poor quality. The beauty of the representation was mainly expressed by the antiquity of their garments, which were copied from natural prototypes, and in the magnificence of the stones from which the monument was built. Moreover, he also claimed to notice a hierarchy within the people represented, considering them of a low social status, since they wore the same type of trousers and jackets used at the time by the local people [7, pp. 253–254].

In 1628, the Brit Thomas Herbert explored the ruins and left a detailed description [13, pp. 84–109] and some drawings with his own interpretations (Fig. 1). He is in general well impressed by the remains of the buildings and carefully describes the reliefs; he considers several members of the procession of being of low social status, since they wore skirt and sandals, whereas rests curiously his eyes on the armed guards and the Persian dignitaries. Moreover, he precisely describes the animals, the beasts, the fighting scenes and especially the images of the king, which he correctly identifies by the use of some specific regalia, such as tiara, scepter, diadem and mitre. In such description, however, some echoes of Eurocentrism are discernible, when, describing one of the reliefs showing the Achaemenid king with his dignitaries, Herbert confronts it with the local contemporary rulers, as a “kings among infidels”; he also remarks on the imitation of European monarchs in their use of regalia.

In the following decades, the site continued to attract the interest of Western travelers. Some of them, like the French Jean Francois Tavernier were not particularly impressed by it, while others, like the Dutchman Jan Struys probably never even visited the site, considering his report is full of imaginary descriptions of giants, tigers and bulls, Olympic games, and battles [24, p. 13]. He also drew a fantastic reconstruction of the palace (Fig. 2).

Further parallels full of ancient Greek and Roman echoes were drawn by John Freyer [10, pp. 251–253]. He described the columns of the Apadana as made of Corinthian and Doric orders, whereas the building was the “*pomaerium of Cambyses*”. Moreover, he compared the throne-carriers supporting king Darius with a Greek phalanx, and a horse named as Bucephalus; he also reported that people on the relief were more similar in clothing to ancient Greeks than modern Persians.

A better knowledge for the general public of Persepolis’ ruins was made possible by two further visitors: Jean Chardin and Cornelis de Bruijn. The Frenchman Chardin left a detailed report of his travels in Persia and visited Persepolis three times [4, pp. 140, 164]; he was also the first one to realize a plan of the site.

Much more interesting material for the artistic details is observable in the reports of the Dutch artist Cornelis de Bruijn, who spent almost three months amidst the ruins and became very well-acquainted with the site, leaving in-depth descriptions [8; 3, pp. 261–284] and beautiful drawings (Fig. 3).

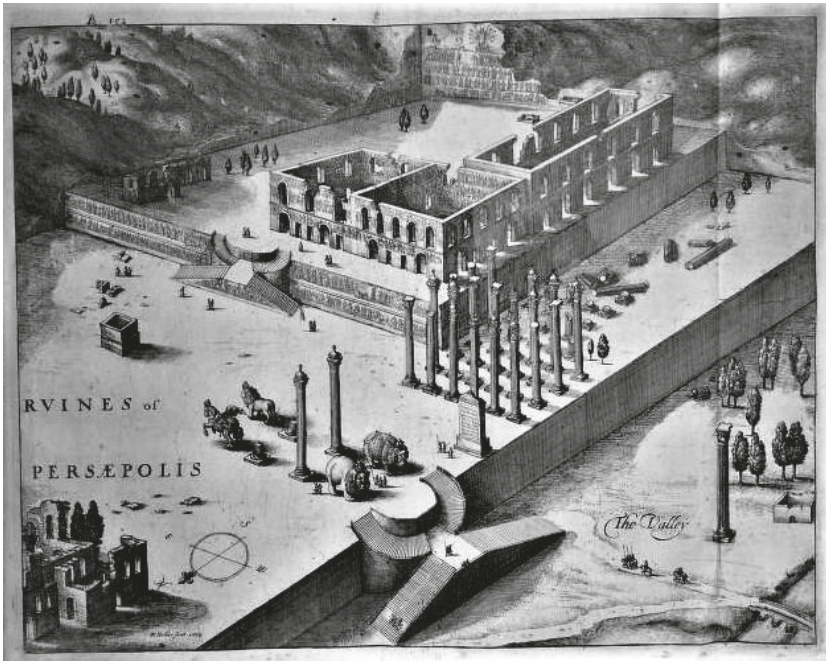


Fig. 1. Ruins of Persepolis by Thomas Herbert (1677) [13]

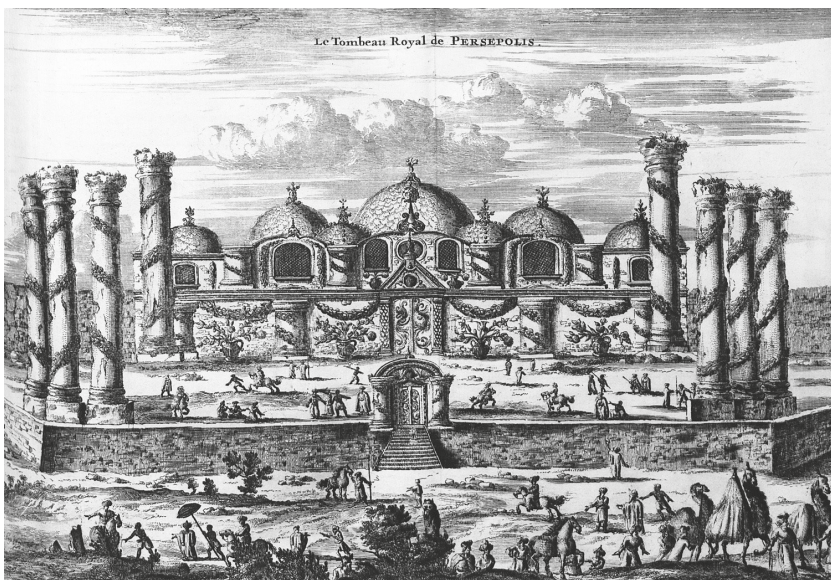


Fig. 2. Fantastic depiction of Persepolis by J.J. Struys (1676) [26]

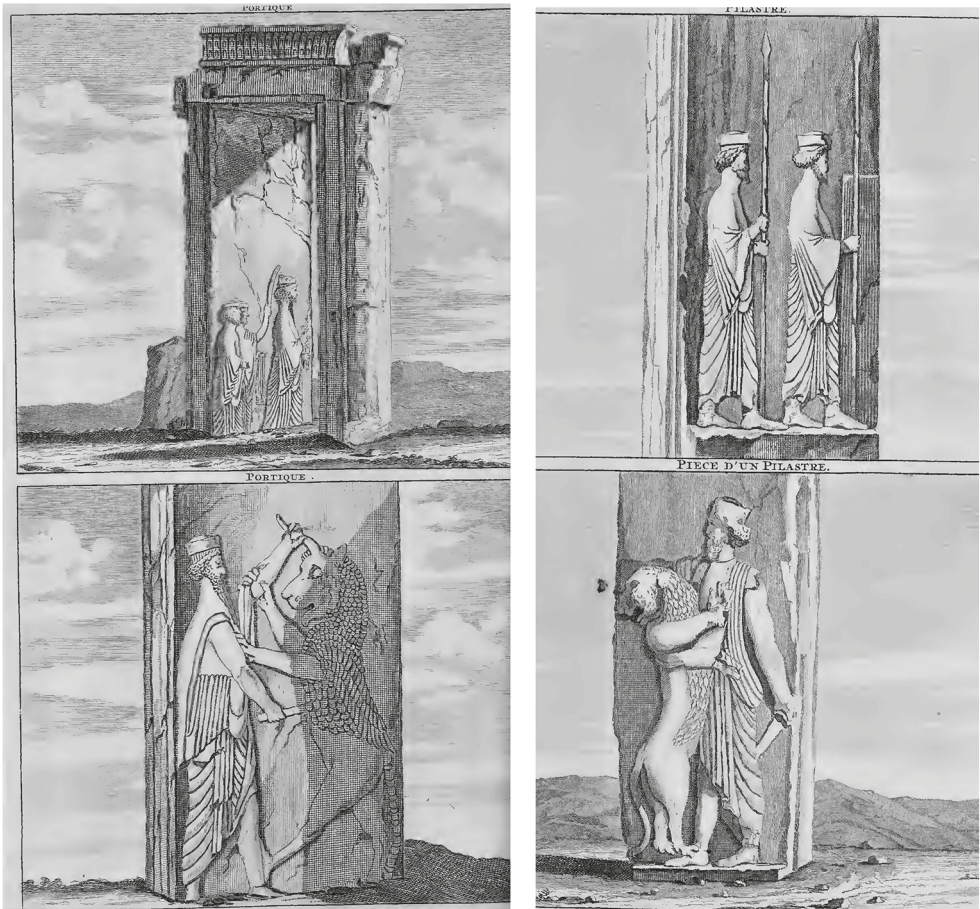


Fig. 3. Reliefs in Persepolis. Drawing by Cornelius de Bruijn (1718) [3]

De Bruijn correctly identified the site as the ancient capital of the Achaemenid empire but was not always able to interpret the functions of the buildings; however, he correctly recognized that the rock reliefs situated nearby are part of a royal tomb. He also mentioned the four Achaemenid tombs at Naqsh-e Rostam and the Sasanian rock reliefs, which he believes to be representations of the legendary Persian hero Rostam. His artistic skills and trained eye allowed him to focus on details previously not taken into analysis. For example, he noticed how muscles were not carefully expressed on the figures of the reliefs, such as in the Greek-Roman tradition, trying to explain it as if art had not progressed enough, or that it was a habit of that time not to show it.

In general, Persepolis, with its huge ruins and widespread decorations, attracted attention and plenty of different interpretations for many parts of the site. Several interesting interpretations were dedicated to the “Gates of all Nations”. This structure consists of one large room whose roof was supported by four stone columns with bell-shaped bases. A pair of massive

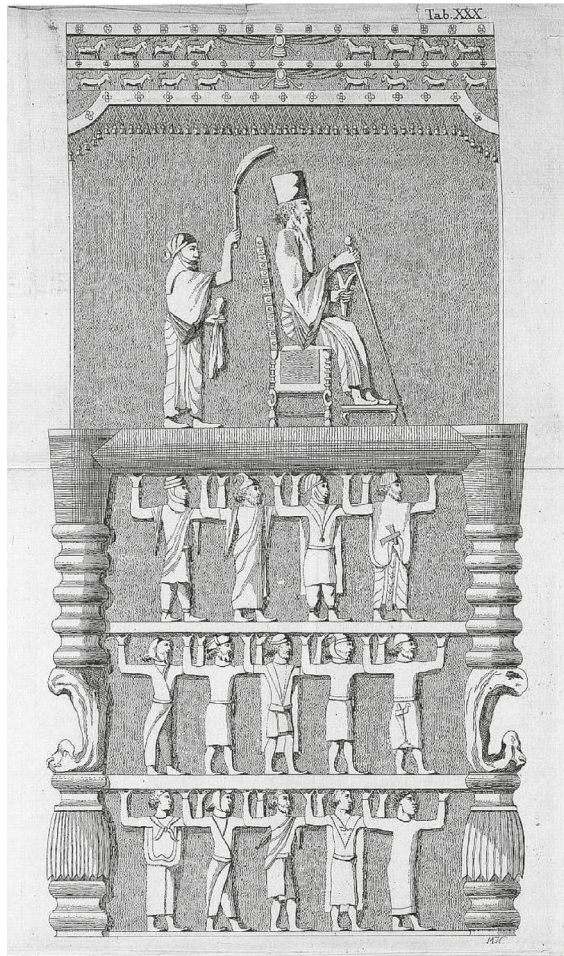


Fig. 4. Drawing of the relief of Darius I by C. Neibuhr (1778) [15]

bulls and two Lamassu in the Assyrian style stood at the western and eastern doorways. Since Near Eastern parallels coming from Assyria were yet unknown, earlier visitors had really no idea what kind of creatures they were, which stimulated their curiosity and imagination: Herbert thought they were elephants, rhinoceroses, and Pegasus [13, pp. 88–89], whereas Niebuhr, who carefully drew other reliefs (Fig. 4), called them unicorns or sphinxes [19, p. 126, pl. 20].

It is also interesting to note how many travelers left their name incised on this monument to mark their visit to the site [28; 29; 30].

Along with description of statues and reliefs, earlier travelers were also surprised by the strange signs they saw carved in the stones: Pietro Della Valle, Engelbert Kaempfer, Jean Chardin and Cornelius de Bruijn described the curious ‘arrowheaded’ writing which gave rise to the terms ‘Persepolitan’, ‘cuneatic’ and finally ‘cuneiform’ [29, p. 343].

Another important site attracting the interest of travelers is the rock-decorated panel carved on a limestone cliff of Mount Behistun, near the city of Kermanshah in Western Iran<sup>3</sup>. It overlooks an important road connecting Mesopotamia and the Iranian plateau. Therefore, its presence has long been reported and several ancient authors have mentioned it. The first citation was by Greek physician Ctesias of Cnidus (ca. 400 BCE), who described a place with a well and a garden beneath a monument at a mountain known with the name of Bagistanus, sacred to a god, which Ctesias calls by his Greek name Zeus. Here, the Assyrian queen Semiramis smoothed off the lowest part of the cliff and “engraved thereon a likeness of herself with a hundred spearmen at her side”, adding also an inscription in “Syrian letters”. Ctesias’ text is now lost, but it is quoted by Diodorus of Sicily<sup>4</sup>.

An interesting later reference comes from the 10<sup>th</sup> century Arab traveler Ibn Hauqal, who thought that the relief represented a teacher in front of a group of pupils, seeing Darius’s bow as a whip used by the teacher to punish his students [17, p. 137].

In 1598, the British brothers Robert and Anthony Sherley traveled to Persia part of a diplomatic mission [27]. One of their servants was a Frenchman, Abel Pinson, who wrote that on very high cliff he had seen a representation of ‘the ascension of our Lord’ with an inscription in Greek and he thought that the image of Ahuramazda and the twelve men represented Christ and his disciples [14, pp. 12–13].

During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century other travelers visited and described the site. The Scottish army officer of the East India Company J. M. Kinneir visited the site but interpreted them as a work of the Sasanian period [15, pp. 136–137], whereas G. Olliver identified the eight figures as possible tribute bearers [20, pp. 43, 45].

Another curious reference has been reported by the French A. de Gardane, who interpreted the relief within a Christian framework since he thought it represented twelve apostles standing under Jesus’ cross [5, p. 83]. The influence of the biblical tradition continued: in 1818, the British scholar Ker Porter made the first drawing of the monument (Fig. 5). Although he correctly understood the large figure (third from left) to be a king, the dignitaries to wear Median dresses, and the scene to show a victory, Porter misidentified the relief as a representation of the victory of Shalmaneser V over the lost tribes of Israel, which he believed were signified by the 10 captives [21, pp. 159–160]. Porter also left beautiful drawings of the reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam (Fig. 6).

The first serious attempt to examine the rock relief was made by Henry Rawlinson in the summer of 1835 [22]. He managed to climb the cliffs several times in order to make a drawing of it and the cuneiform texts. His efforts, along with those of the German scholar Georg Friedrich Grotefend, soon enabled the decipherment of the Persian cuneiform alphabet.

Along with the main sites, other reliefs were progressively discovered, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when travelers explored even the remote areas of the Iranian plateau. Many Sasanian reliefs were discovered during this period [12; 33, pp. 13–14] and they were immediately recognized as belonging to the late Iranian empire. Few reliefs, however, have been known since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when J. B. Tavernier discovered Taq-I Bustan. The same relief is the subject of a very interesting drawing made few decades later by an Italian monk, Leandro di S. Cecilia

<sup>3</sup> For the history of research and studies see Lushey (1974) [17].

<sup>4</sup> Diodorus, *Bibliotheca Historica* 2.13.



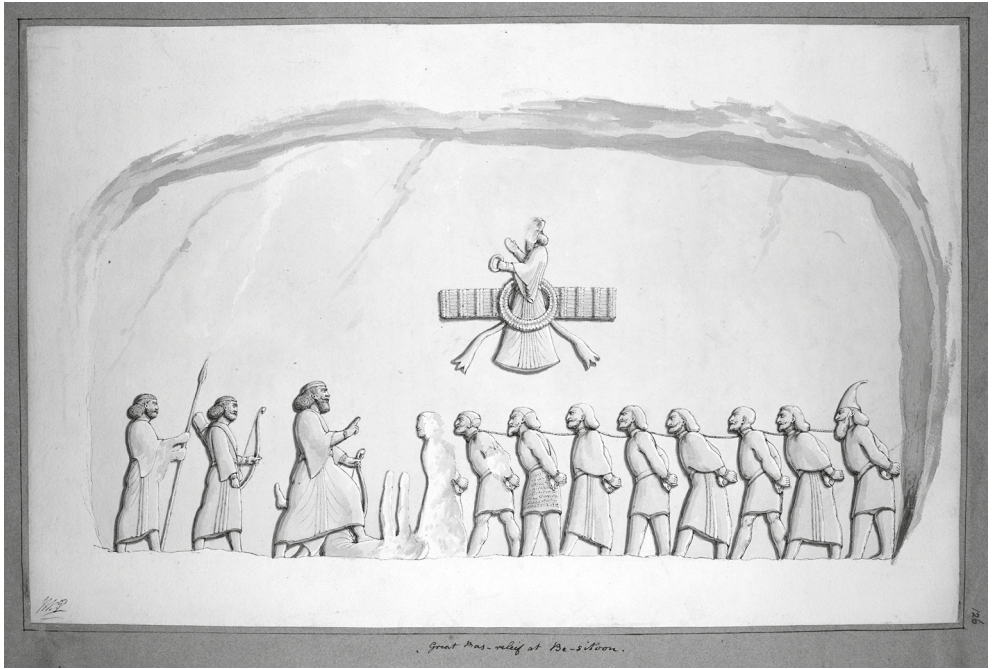


Fig. 5. The relief of Behistun. Drawing by Robert Ken Porter © British Library

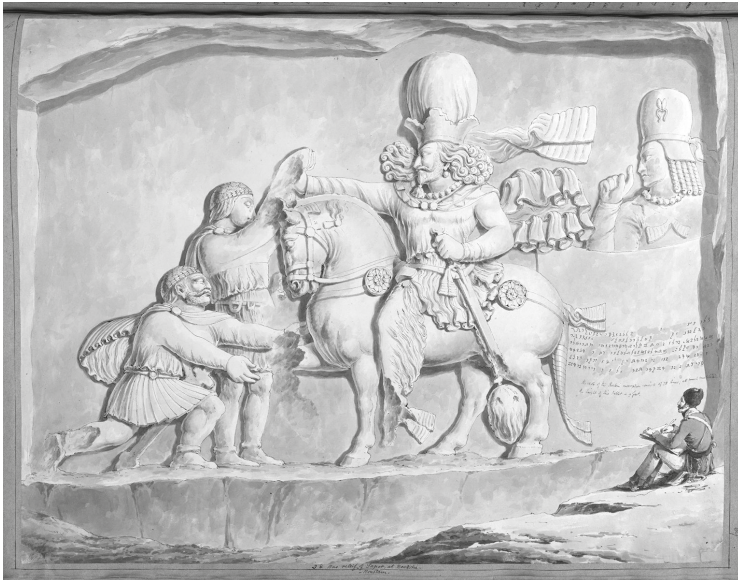


Fig. 6. The relief of the triumph of Shapur I over the Roman emperors Valerian and Philip the Arab at Naqsh-e Rostam. Drawing by Robert Ken Porter © British Library

## Lib. II Tab. I. S. III. P. 26. DAG BOSTAN



Fig. 7. Drawing of the relief of Taq-I Bostam made by Leandro di S. Cecilia [11]

[11]. His European background led him to heavily transform the original composition, and the Equestrian statue of Khosrow II clearly resembled the bronze statue of Marcus Aurelius in Rome (Fig. 7).

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was also the beginning of a new era. Large excavations began to be carried out in Mesopotamia and subsequently also in Iran. Then, toward the end of the century photography gradually began to spread. Undoubtedly it facilitated the recordings of monuments since it was not necessary to be a skillful drawer, but it also took out the personal bias for interpreting an unknown past.

The previous literature gave an interesting insight in how European travelers tried to read, interpret, and describe the astonishing things they saw (or thought they saw) with their limited — if nonexistent — knowledge they had inherited from biblical and classical studies.

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**Title.** Iranian Reliefs through the Eyes of Western Travelers (14<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> Centuries)

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**Abstract.** From the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, European travelers became acquainted with ancient Iranian monuments, especially those of the pre-Islamic Iranian kingdoms, such as the Achaemenid and Sasanian empires. Artistic representations dating to these periods included mainly reliefs carved on natural rocks or adorning royal buildings and tombs.

Many of them were intentionally placed on cliffs overlooking important communication and trade routes, intended to be seen by all travelers. These reliefs, widespread throughout the Iranian Plateau, were the main visual expression of the conception of kingship and power by ancient Iranian ideology. The present contribution aims at exploring the different approaches of European travelers between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century for the analysis and interpretation of rock-reliefs and architectural sculpture. It is particularly interesting to notice the development of Western attitudes towards ancient Persian monuments, since their discovery coincided with the development of European culture, mentality, politics, and economy over several centuries.

**Keywords:** Iranian art, relief, Achaemenid, Sasanian, Persepolis, Behistun

**Название статьи.** Иранские рельефы глазами западных путешественников XIV–XIX века

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**Аннотация.** Европейские путешественники, начиная с XIV в., стали открывать для себя древние иранские памятники, в особенности монументы доисламских образований, таких, как державы Ахеменидов и Сасанидов. Художественное наследие этих периодов было представлено, в первую очередь, скальными и архитектурными рельефами царских гробниц и дворцов. Многие из них располагались на хорошо обозреваемых скальных массивах рядом с главными дорогами, и привлекали внимание путешественников. Подобные рельефы были одним из основных средств репрезентации власти и выражения иранской царской идеологии. В статье рассматриваются разные подходы европейских путешественников в период XIV–XIX вв. к анализу и интерпретации скальных и архитектурных рельефов древнего Ирана. Особенно интересно проследить периодизацию и развитие западного восприятия древних персидских памятников, поскольку их постепенное открытие на протяжении нескольких столетий совпало с развитием европейской культуры, менталитета, политики и экономики.

**Ключевые слова:** искусство Ирана, скальные рельефы, архитектурная скульптура, Ахемениды, Сасаниды, Персеполь, Бехистун