

# Assimilation and Adaptation of Foreign Elements in Late Sasanian Rock Reliefs at Taq-i Bustan

Taq-i Bustan is probably the controversial monument par excellence of Sasanian art (fig. 1). First of all, its location is very unusual since it is among the very few Sasanian rock reliefs not concentrated in Fars (fig. 2). According to some scholars, the scene in the upper part of the back of the larger grotto reproducing a Sasanian king between Ahura Mazda on the right and Anahita on the left would represent a direct borrowing from Byzantine art (fig. 3). In fact, that triad could call to mind similar representations in the apse of a Christian church where Jesus appears sometimes between the Virgin Mary and a saint, usually Saint John<sup>1</sup>, not to mention the clear association with triumphal arches in Roman art with similar winged Victories carrying a garland or a laurel crown<sup>2</sup>. Also its chronology is still debated among scholars, some of whom prefer an early chronology<sup>3</sup>, while others opt for a later one<sup>4</sup>. As was suggested in some recent publications, a better chronology could be proposed for the rock reliefs in the larger grotto at Taq-i Bustan that could have been carved in two different phases<sup>5</sup>.

The aim of the present paper is above all to call the attention to several elements in the rock reliefs at Taq-i Bustan that should be considered external borrowings because of the comparison with the art of Central Asia. Also from an architectural point of view, several characteristics at Taq-i Bustan could be considered as Mesopotamian acquisitions that have been inherited by the Persians until the Sasanian period. Once more, a late chronology will be preferred for the rock reliefs of the larger grotto at Taq-i Bustan that is to say late 6<sup>th</sup>-early 7<sup>th</sup> century.

## Hypotheses on the chronology of the site

As many scholars have proposed with very interesting and (in our opinion) solid arguments, two distinguished moments can be observed at Taq-i Bustan. In a very recent publication, Pierfrancesco Callieri called attention to the big difference

in sculptural techniques between the two lateral hunting scene panels in low relief and the high relief on two levels in the back of the grotto. In Callieri's opinion, the hunting panels in low relief should be dated to the first phase of construction of the site while the sculptures in high relief in the back of the grotto would have been executed some time later<sup>6</sup>. Some other observations could be added to the very complicated history of this site. In fact, it is highly probable that the horse rider on the lower level at the back of the grotto replaced a third panel that could have been originally decorated with hunting scenes as well. The main evidence in support of this hypothesis is not only the completely different style of those groups of sculptures but also the fact that the equestrian figure is carved much more deeply into the back of the grotto than the hunting panels. However, the frame of the equestrian statue is at the same level of the lateral panels embellished with hunting scenes (fig. 3). According to Markus Mode, it could even be possible to hypothetically reconstruct that replacement panel with a scene of a relevant person hunting lions<sup>7</sup>. As it will be demonstrated below, Mode's hypothesis about an original lion hunt is extremely convincing and very appropriate for a monument like Taq-i Bustan whose meaning was most likely associated with the celebration of kingship.

More evidence in support of the arguments for a later chronology has recently been presented by Gianroberto Scarcia. According to written sources and local legends studied by Scarcia, the site could be attributed to Bastam (called also Bistam, Bishtam or Vishtam, etc.), a maternal uncle of Khusraw II Parwiz (590-628) who had Parthian origins and rebelled against the Sasanians<sup>8</sup>. He was able to control a vast territory in western Iran and even mint coins in his name until his final defeat and death around 600 CE most likely in a place not too far from Taq-i Bustan, around Hamadan according to Dinawari<sup>9</sup>. Local people such as Kurds, Azeri and Armenians (with all their linguistic variations) and ancient authors (mainly Arab and Persian ones) call that site Taq-i Bastam, »the Arch

1 Mackintosh, Taq-i Bustan.

2 Musche, Römische Einflüsse.

3 Callieri, Architecture 156-157.

4 Mode, Art and Ideology.

5 Mode, Art and Ideology. – Callieri, Architecture 156-157. – Compareti, Raffigurazione. – Compareti, Observations.

6 Callieri, Architecture 156-157.

7 Mode, Art and Ideology.

8 Scarcia, Talking about Šimurğ. – Scarcia, Ur-Farhād.

9 Scarcia, Bastam 100.



**Fig. 1** The larger grotto at Taq-i Bustan. – (Photo M. Compareti).

of Bastam», or simply Bastam and not Taq-i Bustan, »the Arch of the Garden«. In his book *Mukhtasar Kitab al-buldan*, al-Faqih al-Hamadani (9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century) called Taq-i Bustan simply *Wastan* which is another form for Bastam<sup>10</sup>. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century Persian text *Mojmal al-Tawarikh*, the anonymous translator from the original Arabic reported something really interesting about one image of Shabdez, Khusraw Parwiz' favourite horse. It is said that Shabdez' image appeared in »Kermanshahan at the village called Bishtam that is also a name of Kustehan, the uncle of Parwiz«<sup>11</sup>.

All these arguments proposed by Mode, Scarcia and Calieri could suggest a different scenario for the construction of Taq-i Bustan. The monument could have been started by

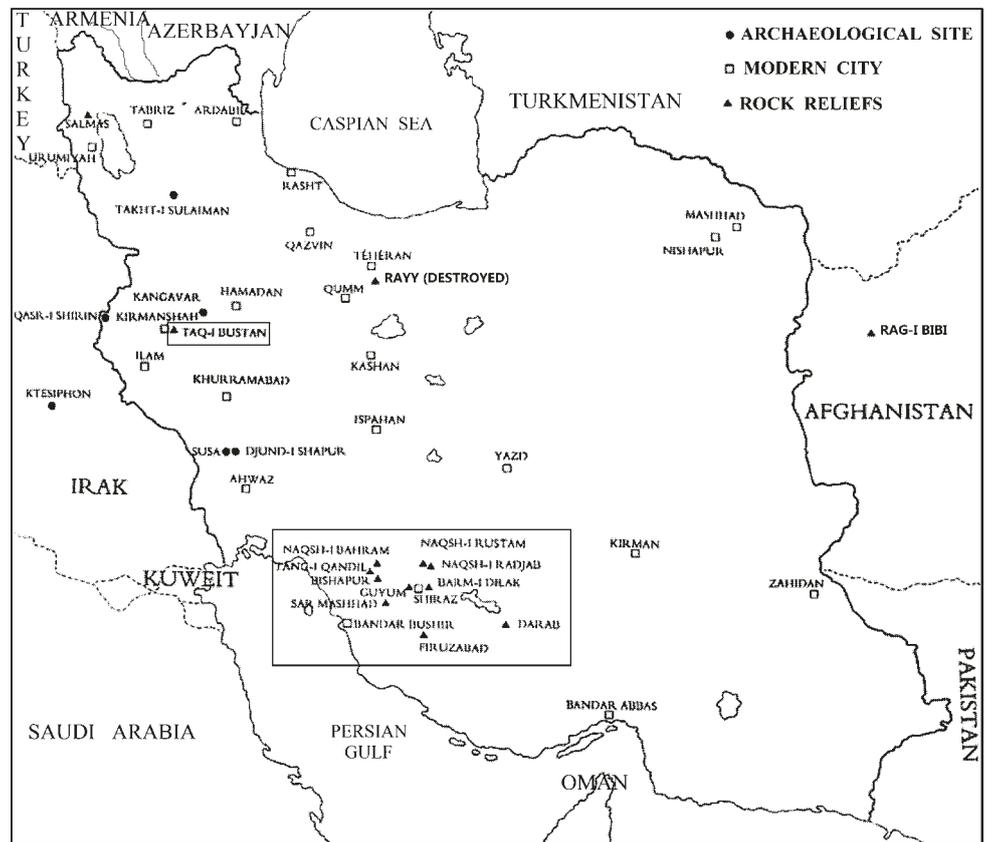
Bastam who, as it will be explained below, was inspired by western elements or simply wanted to present himself as the continuator of traditions possibly even rooted in ancient Mesopotamian civilization. He promoted the representation of hunting scenes including his own portrait as a sovereign wearing garments embellished with specific symbols and without a typical Sasanian crown. Some parallels between the hunting panels at Taq-i Bustan and the almost contemporary 7<sup>th</sup> century Sogdian paintings from Afrasyab would point to a very similar source that should be searched for in Central Asia. Non-religious Sogdian paintings such as those at Afrasyab present a realistic touch that is completely unknown in Sasanian art whose aim was just the exaltation of the king<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Massé, Ibn al-Faqih al-Hamadani 261.

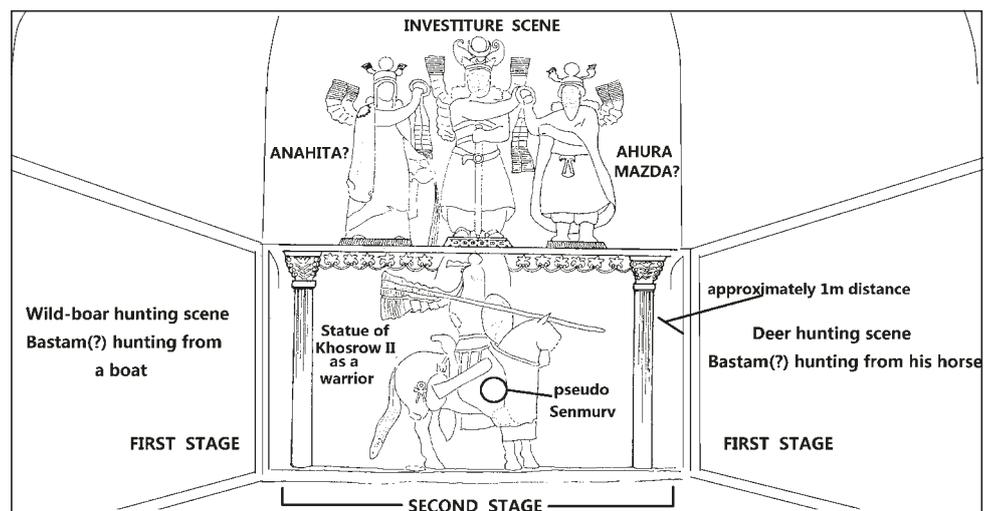
<sup>11</sup> Mohl, Extraits du Modjmel al-Tewarikh 126.

<sup>12</sup> Compareti, Observations.

**Fig. 2** Map of Sasanian rock reliefs in Iran. – (After B. Overlaet [ed.], *Splendeur des Sassanides. L'empire perse entre Rome et la Chine* [224-642] [Bruxelles 1993] 73 fig. 56).



**Fig. 3** Scheme of the larger grotto at Taq-i Bustan. – (After Compareti, *Raffigurazione* fig. 4).

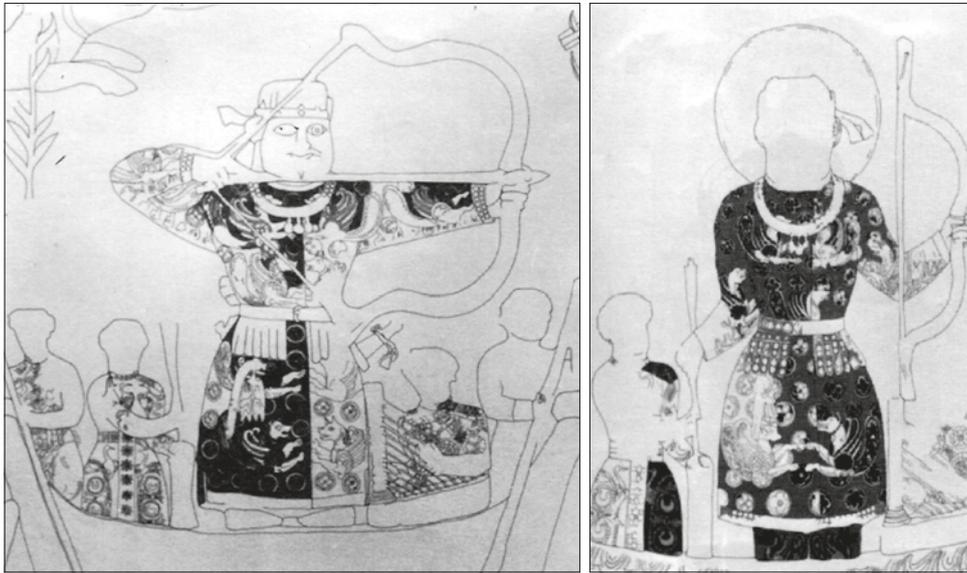


As already mentioned above, Bastam had Parthian origins and he maintained very close relations with eastern Iran. He was also appointed governor of Khorasan (and, in another moment, Armenia) by Khusraw II Parwiz when he was still on good terms with the Sasanians<sup>13</sup>. Details of his garments at Taq-i Bustan, such as the belt with hanging straps, and some of his weapons (such as the quiver or the bow-case) were definitely adopted from the steppes, most likely after the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century<sup>14</sup>. It should not be ruled out that textile decorative elements observed at Taq-i Bustan

do not represent examples of Sasanian fashion but rather Central Asian importations as well. In a personal communication, N. Schindel rightly observed that the coinage of Bastam restricts his actions to the area of Ray, in central Iran, where he minted his coins. This is definitely correct but it does not rule out another scenario. In fact, Bastam could have started the construction of Taq-i Bustan when he was still on good relations with Khusraw II and did not yet mint any coinage in his own name.

13 Shabhazi, Bestām o Bendōy.

14 Mode, Art and Ideology.



**Fig. 4** Double image of the royal archer in the wild boars hunting scene at Taq-i Bustan. – (After M. R. Ryazi, *Presentation of the Embroideries of the Sasanian Garments and Textiles* [Tehran 2002] 59 figs 18-19 [in Persian]).

### Imported textile patterns at Taq-i Bustan

Some more arguments in support of a late chronology of the larger grotto at Taq-i Bustan could be found just among the textile motifs represented on those rock reliefs. On the garments of the colossal archer reproduced twice in the wild boar hunting scene (fig. 4) and on the fabric that covers the legs of the horse rider at the rear of the grotto itself (fig. 5), a composite creature that has always represented a big problem for scholars appears for the first time in Sasanian art. According to an old theory, that creature with a dog face, wings and a peacock tail should be identified with the *Simurgh* (Avestan *Saena Marega*, Pahlavi *Senmurv*) of Iranian mythology<sup>15</sup>. Several museums include in their collections art objects embellished with this creature that have been uncritically attributed to Sasanian Persia in the past. However, none of these items come from controlled excavations and it cannot be ruled out that they probably represent the result of post-Sasanian, Central Asian or Byzantine productions<sup>16</sup>. Despite many problems not yet solved, the only (late) Sasanian monument showing that composite creature among the numerous textile patterns is Taq-i Bustan.

Simone Cristoforetti has studied very interesting texts from the Islamic period that suggest a different identification for the composite animal commonly called *Simurgh* in Persian traditions. In fact, that creature should be identified with a representation of *Farr* (Avestan *Xwarenah*, Pahlavi *Xwarrah*) that is to say, »glory« or »charisma«, a very important concept rooted in ancient Iranian culture that it was essential for sovereigns to rule and heroes to defeat their (monstrous) opponents<sup>17</sup>. In Persian literature of the Islamic period and

specifically in the *Shahnameh* there are several references to *Farr* as a nimbus or luminous aura that legitimated kings of the Kayanid Dynasty and heroes of the Iranian epos<sup>18</sup>.

In the Pahlavi text *Karnamag i Ardashir i Papagan*, the first Sasanian king was explicitly associated with a manifestation of *Xwarrah* that was following him in the shape of a very controversial creature whose aspect cannot be determined, since all Pahlavi manuscripts (written during the Islamic period) present a corrupted form to describe it (chap. VII. 11-24). That same episode about the trials of the first Sasanian king Ardashir (224-241) can be found in Firdousi's *Shahnameh* written in Farsi. One scholar expected to find a description of the *Farr* following Ardashir as a ram<sup>19</sup>, but this is not the case since Firdousi always used the very problematic term *Ghorm*<sup>20</sup>. It is not easy to decide what the *Ghorm* looked like. Actually, in Farsi *Ghorm* can mean »male mountain goat« although in some written sources it is described as a composite creature, for instance, in a unique *Shahnameh* manuscript at present in the British Library (Ms. C. III 24). In that text, the *Ghorm* is explicitly described as the creature representing the glory that was following Ardashir; it had »the wings of the *Simurgh*, the tail of a peacock, the head and hooves of Rakhsh«, that is the horse of Rustam, the principal hero of Persian mythology. Moreover, in a Persian text composed in Mughal India (*Kitab-i mustatab-i Buhayra*), the creature following Ardashir is described as a »flying dog« rendered as »*Ghorm-i ziyān*«<sup>21</sup>.

Other problematic interpretations associated with the manifestation of *Xwarrah* as a protection for Ardashir can be found in at least two more passages of the *Karnamag*. In both cases the *Xwarrah* assumed the aspect of an animal,

15 Trever, *The Dog-Bird*.

16 Overlaet, *Iconography*. – Compareti, *Raffigurazione* 15.

17 Cristoforetti, *Talking about Simurğ*.

18 Shenkar, *Royal Regalia* 57.

19 Grenet, *Le geste d'Ardashir* 43.

20 Cristoforetti, *Talking about Simurğ* 344.

21 Cristoforetti, *Talking about Simurğ* 342.

**Fig. 5** Detail of the garment covering the legs of the colossal horse rider at Taq-i Bustan. – (Photo M. Compareti).



probably an onager (chapter VIII.7) and a bird (chapter X.7). It should be assumed that, according to written sources in Pahlavi and Persian, manifestations of *Farr/Xwarrah* included a plethora of forms such as fire, luminous aura, bird, dragon, onager. The possibility should not be ruled out that also the ram was another manifestation of *Xwarrah*, although such an identification has not been proved and it is just based on one reading of the *Karnamag* that still presents several problems.

The so-called *Simurgh* actually points to the representation of *Farr* in figurative arts as well. Its mistaken identification with the magical bird of Iranian mythology should be reconsidered and most likely rejected<sup>22</sup>. For this reason, the name »pseudo-*Simurgh*« should be preferred for the composite creature of pre-Islamic arts, while the real *Simurgh* has always been described and represented as a colossal bird, especially in Islamic book illustrations since the Mongol period. Parallels offered by Persian Islamic book illustrations constitute an important term of comparison with 8<sup>th</sup> century Sogdian mural paintings. It seems very probable that a small group of Ilkhanid and Inju'id *Simurghs* could be the last representatives of more ancient local artistic traditions whose only pre-Islamic specimens survived just in Sogdian paintings at Penjikent in the painted programme of the so-called Blue Hall (room 41, sector VI) depicting the trials of the great hero Rustam<sup>23</sup>. Other mural paintings from Penjikent present the trials of other heroes, religious scenes and reproductions of

banquets or receptions that in all probability really took place in the houses of rich Sogdians. Deities and important people very often appear together with beribboned composite creatures flying in front of them. It has been proposed with very convincing arguments to identify such creatures as figurative manifestations of divine protection or glorification<sup>24</sup>.

Already in a late 5<sup>th</sup>-century painting in Temple II at Penjikent (fig. 6), a goddess can be observed sitting on a zoomorphic throne whose support was shaped like a winged dog with a small horn on its head and a flower on its cheek<sup>25</sup>. Boris Marshak explicitly associated this winged doglike creature with the image of our pseudo-*Simurgh* and from a mere iconographical point of view his observation is undoubtedly correct. In this case, that Sogdian painting would represent the very first image of an almost complete pseudo-*Simurgh* (just its tail is covered by the rug on the throne) that is on the contrary absent in contemporary Sasanian art. Representations of a winged creature with a dog's face and peacock's tail started to appear as countermarks together with the Pahlavi inscription »*Xwarrah*« on 7<sup>th</sup>-century Hunnish coins from south-eastern Afghanistan<sup>26</sup>. Slightly later, those same epigraphic countermarks could also be found on some Sogdian coins (fig. 7). In this case the inscription should be read as »*Farn*« which is *Farr/Xwarrah* in the Sogdian language<sup>27</sup>. A very clear parallel could be traced between the creatures in Sogdian paintings and those in Sogdian epigraphic counter-

22 Compareti, So-Called Senmurv. – Compareti, Raffigurazione. – Compareti, Observations.

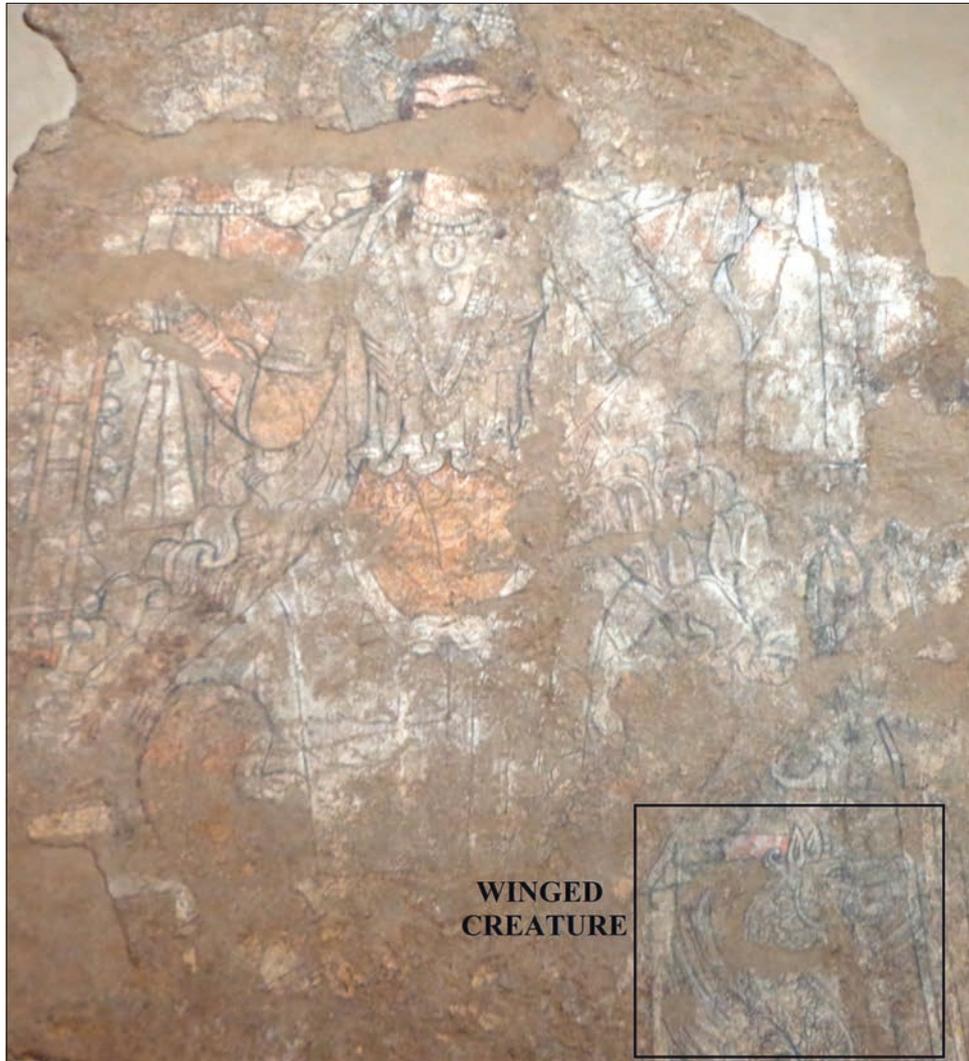
23 Compareti, Raffigurazione 25.

24 Azarpay, Iconographic Formulae. – Belenitskii/Marshak, Paintings of Sogdiana 71-73.

25 Belenitskii/Marshak, Paintings of Sogdiana fig. 34. – For an identification of the goddess see Azarpay, Imagery 60.

26 Göbl, Dokumente 156-157.

27 Compareti, So-Called Senmurv 188. – Shenkar, Intangible Spirits 139.



**Fig. 6** Late 5<sup>th</sup> century painting in Temple II at Penjikent. – (Photo M. Compareti).



**Fig. 7** Sketches of countermarks on 7<sup>th</sup> century Sogdian coins. – (After Compareti, So-Called Senmurv fig. 5).

marks in order to establish their identification exclusively with *Farn* and nothing else.

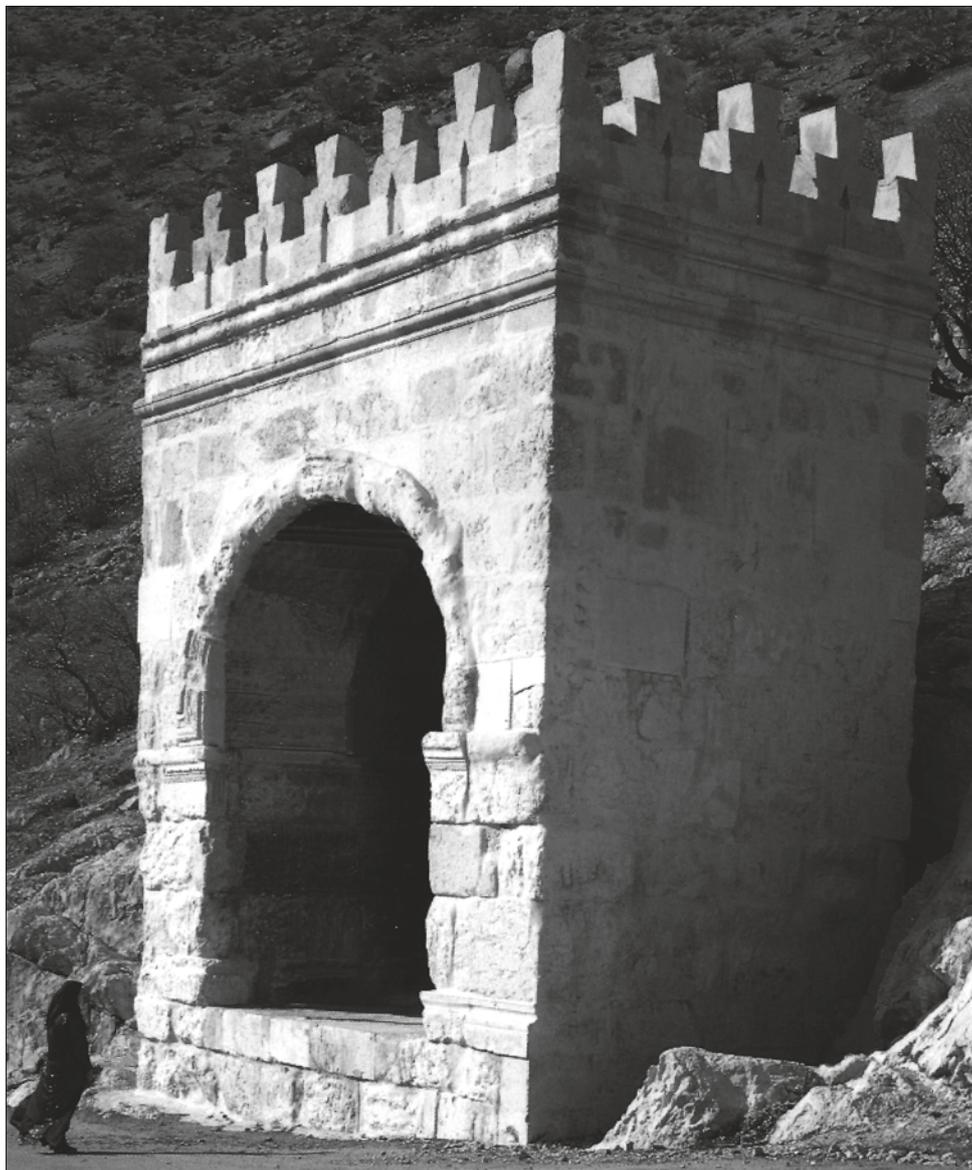
At this point, one could wonder if the composite creature symbolizing *Xwarrah* itself is really a Sasanian creation and not another importation from Central Asia. As already observed above, the first construction phase at Taq-i Bustan should be attributed to Bastam who had strong connections

with Central Asia. It should not be ruled out that he also imported some symbols to be used on his garment in the panel of the wild boar hunt to accentuate his importance. Having eliminated Bastam, Khusraw II could have appropriated his enemy's monument and also that composite creature as a symbol of glory to be shown on his own garments as a trophy.

As can be observed on 7<sup>th</sup>-century Hunnish and Sogdian coins, the composite winged creature with a dog's head was explicitly associated with the Iranian concept of glory that began to be imported from Central Asia into Persia at the end of the Sasanian period. Slightly later, that creature started to be represented also in Byzantine and Islamic art and soon spread to the Near East, the Caucasus, western and eastern Europe at least until the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Its exact meaning among Muslims and Christians is still a matter of debate, although it was definitely considered a very appropriate decoration for religious and secular purposes. This composite creature appeared quite often in Armenian and Georgian art at least from the early 7<sup>th</sup> century<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> Kazaryan, Kafedral'nyj sobor Surb Ėčmiadzin 89-90. – Compareti, Teratologia.

**Fig. 8** Taq-i Girrah, Iran. – (Photo Miras-e Faranghi, Kermanshah).



### Mesopotamian traditions preserved in Sasanian art

The hypothetical history of Taq-i Bustan just exposed above strongly suggests that some elements usually considered to be typically Sasanian actually represent importations from Central Asia that had been introduced into Persia in the late 6<sup>th</sup>-early 7<sup>th</sup> century. Something more could be observed on the architectural structure of the larger grotto that should not be considered a Sasanian creation either.

First of all, Taq-i Bustan does not represent an isolated case, since similar structures can be found in western Iran. A massive construction extremely similar to Taq-i Bustan and, in the same way, to be dated to the late Sasanian period is Taq-i Girrah in Iranian Kurdistan (fig. 8). In some early publications that

monument can still be seen as it appeared before the restoration which took place in the beginning of this century<sup>29</sup>. A very similar structure appears also on a post-Sasanian silver gilt dish allegedly said to be from Qazvin and at present kept in the Iran Bastan Museum in Tehran (fig. 9). On that dish there are also the crenellations above the monument and even a decorative crescent very similar to the one in Taq-i Bustan<sup>30</sup>. The king under the arch is probably an allusion to the royal function of this kind of building. There are no examples in early Sasanian art with the only exception of the inscribed tower-like building of Narseh (293-302) at Paikuli, in north-eastern Iraq. According to the reconstructions of some scholars, there should have been no arched door in the original plan of the tower at Paikuli<sup>31</sup>. All these monuments are very similar to one late Parthian structure in Iranian Azerbaijan called Qal'e-ye Zahak

29 Vanden Berghe, *Archéologie* pl. 126a-b.

30 Marshak. *Le décor de la vaisselle en argent* 78.

31 Callieri, *Architecture* 116-117. – According to Shenkar (*The Coronation* 128-129), Paikuli should not be included in this group of monuments.

**Fig. 9** The so-called Qazvin plate, National Archaeological Museum in Tehran. – (After Marshak, *Le décor de la vaisselle en argent* fig. 1).



(**fig. 10**). Also in this case, the colossal structure is embellished with a crenellation and the entrance consists of a big arch (actually every side of that monument has also an arch). The chronology of Qal'e-ye Zahak has been established based on archaeological data and it can be used to show that similar structures existed before the Sasanians<sup>32</sup>. Also for Qal'e-ye Zahak a use as a possible »pavilion for hunting« was proposed although without any clarification<sup>33</sup>. One stele from the area of the *temenos* at Hatra is embellished with the scene of a sacrifice on an altar under a crenellated structure which calls to mind both Qal'e-ye Zahak and Taq-i Bustan as well. In this case, however, there is one winged victory with a diadem just above the person performing the sacrifice inside the structure and two of them beside the arch exactly like at Taq-i Bustan and in Roman triumphal arches<sup>34</sup>. As it is well known, Parthian art and culture had a great impact in Hatra.

According to P. Callieri, this kind of isolated monuments that could be better defined as »pavilions« should have been connected to royal hunts exactly like Taq-i Bustan that was built in front of a big hunting park delimited by a wall still visible today<sup>35</sup>. Callieri's observation should be considered

correct since something similar can be found already in Neo-Assyrian reliefs representing royal parks. Another great expert of pre-Islamic Persian art, P. O. Harper, called attention to Mesopotamian elements still recognizable in Sasanian art<sup>36</sup>. For example, a clear motif borrowed from Mesopotamian tradition and later used in Sasanian art is the bent forefinger that important people raised to their mouth when facing a deity<sup>37</sup>. It should not be forgotten that Ctesiphon in southern Mesopotamia was always an important city of the Persian Empire under the Arsacids and the Sasanians.

Something more should be said on the similarities with specific structures to be observed in Neo-Assyrian reliefs. One Neo-Assyrian relief from the Northern Palace at Qyunjik (Ninive), room C, panels 8-9 (at present in the British Museum WA 124861-2) could offer very interesting insights. This relief was probably executed around 645-635 BCE at the time of King Ashurbanipal (668-627 BCE) and it represents the royal hunt in an open space, possibly a private park. On the top of a hill a pavilion practically identical to the structure in the larger grotto at Taq-i Bustan dominates the scene (**fig. 11**). Details such as the arch facing the observer or the crenel-

32 Kleiss, *Qal'eh Zohak*.

33 Whiesehöfer, *Communicators* fig. 4.

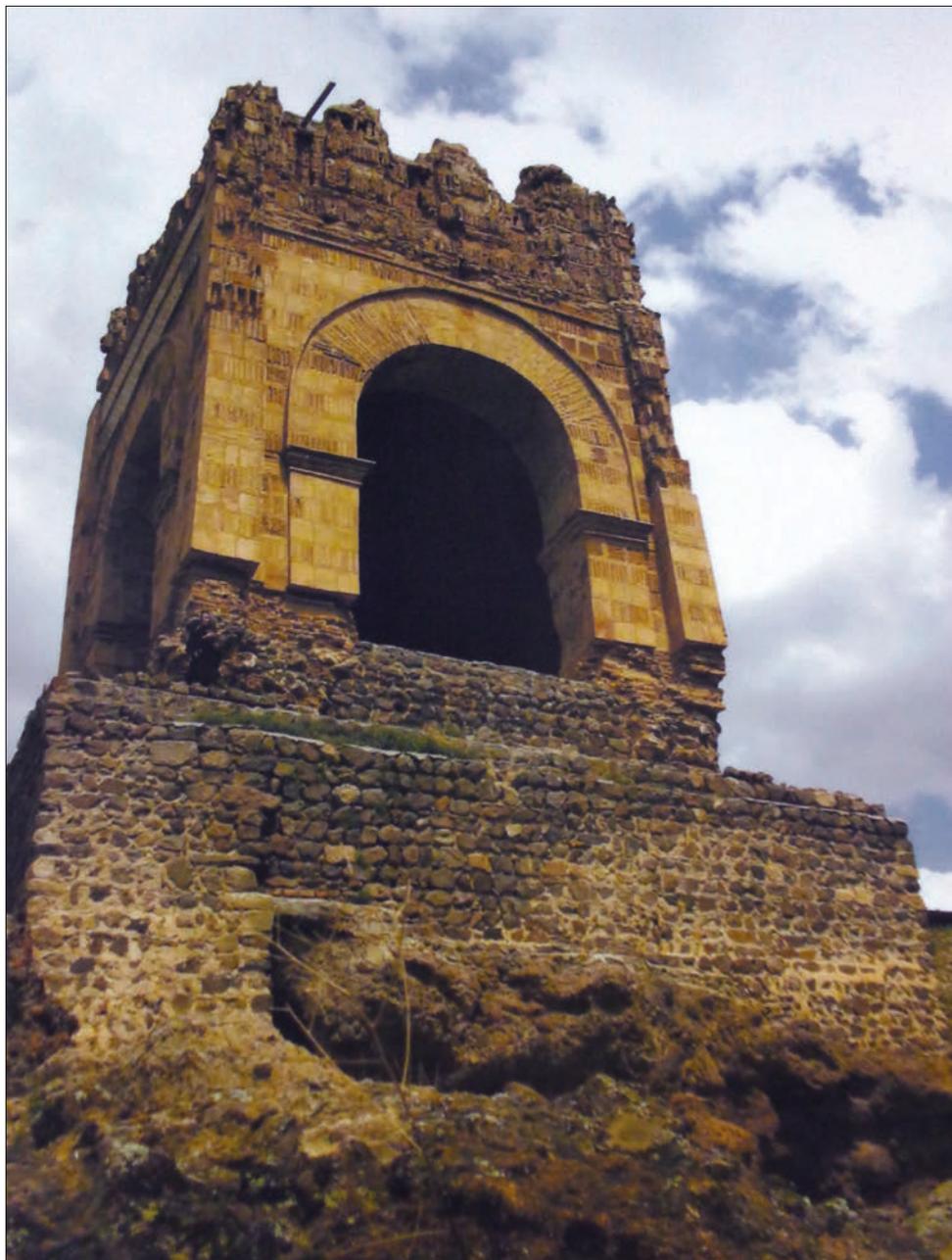
34 Dirven, *Hatra* 55.

35 Callieri, *Architecture* 68-69.

36 Harper, *In Search* 16-21.

37 Choksy, *Gesture* 204-205.

**Fig. 10** Qal'e-ye Zahak, Iran. – (Photo Miras-e Faranghi, Tabriz).



lations on its top definitely call to mind the architecture at Taq-i Bustan. That Assyrian pavilion was definitely decorated internally with reliefs and the one facing the arch at the rear of the structure is even clearly reproduced: it shows the king hunting lions from his chariot<sup>38</sup>. It is worth observing that the lion is represented twice in the same scene: still alive while attacking the king and already dead under the chariot. This seems to be a »formula« found quite often in Sasanian art as a possible allusion to the infallibility of the royal hunter<sup>39</sup>. However, it should not be considered a purely Sasanian invention, since it clearly existed already in Mesopotamian art some centuries earlier. The same structure in the larger grotto at Taq-i Bustan with an arch and crenellations above seems to be

actually rooted in Mesopotamian or, at least, in Neo-Assyrian art, although its functions and meaning are still a matter of debate. If one considers Mode's hypothesis in the light of that relief from Ninive, then there would be no doubt that he was definitely accurate in his reconstruction, since, in his opinion, in the back of the grotto there was originally a panel in low relief embellished with a king hunting lions.

Other similarities between the Neo-Assyrian reliefs at Ninive and Taq-i Bustan could be mentioned. In the Northern Palace, room S another king shooting gazelles can be seen in the left end side of the scene (fig. 12). Both the colossal king and the attendant are kneeling in a hole in the ground that reminds one of the shape of the boat in the panel of the wild

38 Matthiae, Ninive 71. 174. – Albenda, Royal Gardens 116.

39 De Francovich, Il concetto della regalità 89-98.



**Fig. 11** Relief from the Northern Palace at Ninive, room C, panels 8-9, British Museum. – (Photo M. Compareti).

boars hunt at Taq-i Bustan<sup>40</sup>. Even though the king at Taq-i Bustan (reproduced twice) is not kneeling, every detail seems to be represented in a very similar way (fig. 4). For example, the attendant is much smaller than the colossal king and he is there just to supply his sovereign with arrows exactly like in the Assyrian relief. In another relief from Northern Palace, room S at Ninive (panel 3-4, Or. Dr. V, 22), the king can be seen as a hunter on a boat together with some soldiers shooting at lions which are forced in his direction into the marshes by other attendants, according to a scheme that reminds one of the wild boar hunting scene at Taq-i Bustan<sup>41</sup>.

One last enigmatic building can be found among the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century BCE Neo-Assyrian reliefs of the Northern Palace room H, panels 8-9 at Quyunjik (Ninive) at present in the British Museum (WA 124939). In this example, an isolated columned building with a crenellated decoration above is dominating a park from the highest point of a hill (fig. 13). Next to it there is an architectural element described in academic literature as the stele of an Assyrian king, possibly Ashurbanipal, with the bent finger of his right hand raised in front of his face<sup>42</sup>. The image of that king definitely calls to mind Assyrian steles but it should not be ruled out that it could be the arch

40 Matthiae, Ninive 172.

41 Nadali, Urban Perspective 170-171.

42 Matthiae, Ninive 41. – Fiorina, Sennacherib 38-39.

**Fig. 12** Relief in the Northern Palace, room S at Ninive, British Museum. – (Photo M. Compareti).



of a pavilion very similar to the one in room C of the same palace at Ninive. Steles like this can be observed in some other Neo-Assyrian reliefs such as in the Royal Palace in Khorsabad (relief 17, room 2) where the scene is part of a siege. Outside of the sieged city (to be possibly identified with Tikrakka) on the right, there is in fact a stele embellished with the figure of a standing king. However, at Khorsabad there is no crenellation above the stele but just a simple frame<sup>43</sup>. Even if the identification with a stele could be confirmed in that panel from room H at Ninive, it is very clear that a cubical structure surmounted by a crenellated decoration stands next to the isolated columned hall (*bit hilani*) on the top of the hill. Other objects such as trees and water channels reveal an attempt by the Assyrian artist to render an idea of perspective in the scene. Only the path through the park leading to the stele or the arched entrance of the pavilion is reproduced straight, practically cutting the entire scene in two parts. Moreover, one altar surmounted by a crenellated decoration stands just in front of the pavilion. Not only its elevated position next to a columned hall on the top of a hill but also the altar and the presence of a king (intended to be real or in relief on a stele) should be considered as alluding to the importance of this architectural structure. That very altar can be found also in more ancient Neo-Assyrian reliefs from Sargon II (722-705 BCE)

Khorsabad palace, northern wing, room 7, panels 12-13<sup>44</sup>. There is also the two columned hall or building that faces the altar, as in Ninive, although in this case the external pillars do not present any capital. The position of the two structures is inverted: the columned hall appears in the water at a lower level while the altar stands on a hill (**fig. 14**). In any case, in the Khorsabad reliefs there is no trace of the arched pavilion with crenellations above like in Ninive.

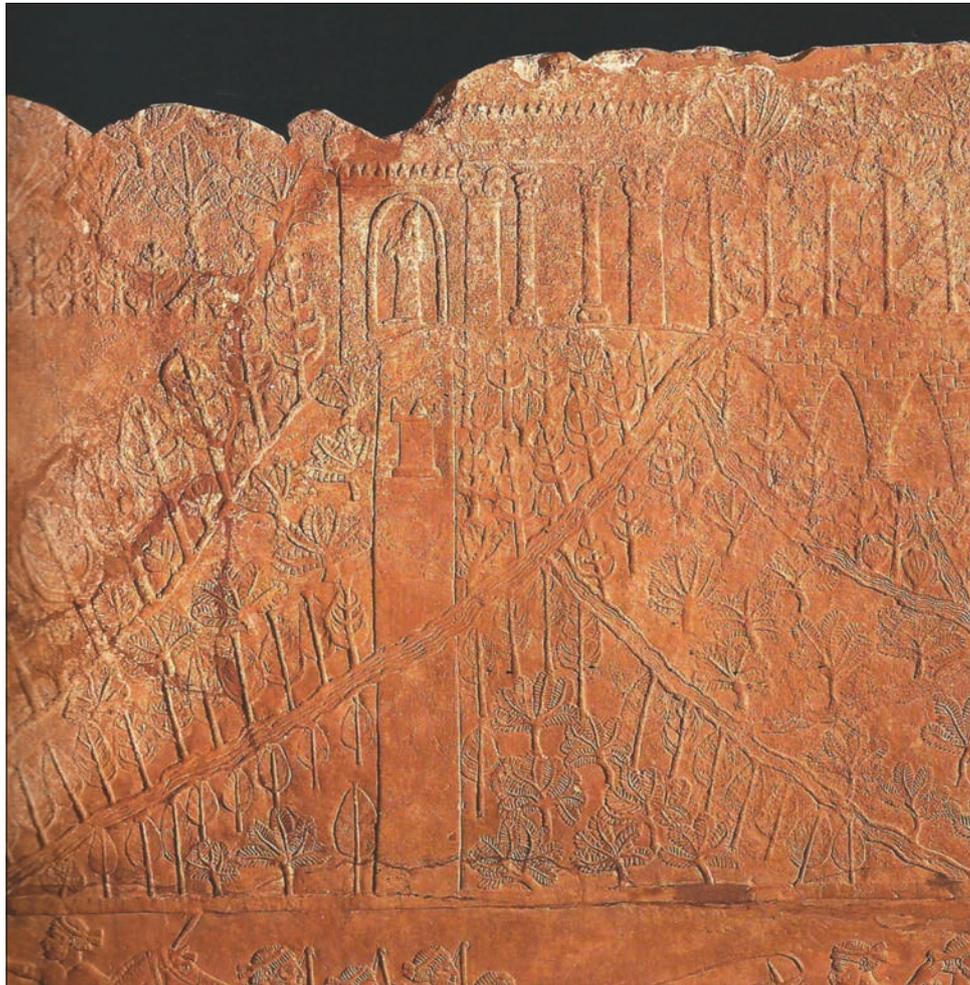
One scholar has called our attention to Neo-Assyrian reliefs that reproduce isolated columned halls such as at Khorsabad and Ninive since those buildings still present many enigmatic aspects<sup>45</sup>. Strangely enough, no parallel has been established with the arched pavilion represented in the hunting scene of the Northern Palace at Ninive. Although a clear identification of the arched pavilion in Assyrian art does not exist, some hypotheses could be proposed. In fact, many hints observed specifically in the relief from the Northern Palace, room H at Ninive could suggest a ritual use possibly associated with the homage to the kings of the past in the framework of royal hunts to be performed in a special park. Such observations call to mind the importance of hunting parks in the Iranian world<sup>46</sup>. Paolo Matthiae pointed out an inscribed stele of Sennacherib (705-681 BCE) mentioning a »gate of the park« as the arrival point of a road built by

43 Matthiae, *L'arte degli assiri* fig. 5.14. – Gillmann, *Représentations architecturales* pl. XLVII.

44 Stronach, *The Garden* 172-173. – Gillmann, *Représentations architecturales* pl. LVI. – Albenda, *Royal Gardens* 107-108.

45 Gillmann, *Représentations architecturales* 263-296.

46 Gignoux, *Chasse*. – Stronach, *The Garden*. – Briant, *Histoire* 309-310.



**Fig. 13** Relief of the Northern Palace, room H at Ninive, British Museum. – (After Matthiae, Ninive 41).

that king. Since this precise name does not appear in the list of the fifteen city gates of Ninive, that scholar considered it as something else, most likely the »triumphal arch« of the hunting scene already observed above (fig. 11). In his text, Matthiae accepted the identification of that pavilion as a real access to the enclosed royal park, although this does not seem to be the case since that structure is isolated or annexed to a columned hall in Neo-Assyrian reliefs<sup>47</sup>. Moreover, a wall facing the arched entrance can be definitely observed and it is even embellished with a hunting scene. The same peculiarity can be observed on the pavilion of room H, where a king or a stele with his image is represented on the back of the building facing the arched entrance (fig. 13). So, the entire structure was not exactly a passage or door but an isolated construction whose functions are not yet clearly identified. This does not rule out the possibility that the inscribed stele mentioned by Matthiae was actually referring to that pavilion when mentioning a »gate of the park«, since also isolated buildings like those just observed above could have been considered a kind of gate (for example, similar to the well-known Gate of Ishtar) because of their shape. Matthiae himself called the structure a »triumphal arch« but possibly

because he had in his mind something similar in Roman art. At least one more scholar who had noticed the pavilion in Neo-Assyrian reliefs proposed an association with Roman triumphal arches<sup>48</sup>.

Not only in Persia but in Central Asia too there were parks like the ones in Neo-Assyrian reliefs dedicated to the pleasure of the king and possibly to perform some form of rituals. Enigmatic Chinese sources mentioned a temple located at the eastern fringes of medieval Sogdian cities, where a precious casket containing the bones of the royal ancestors was located to be worshiped by local kings. The information is particularly important to identify the scenes of the 7<sup>th</sup> century painted programme at Afrasyab (ancient Samarkand) commonly called the »Hall of the Ambassadors«, where a very similar celebration can be observed. Opposite the wall depicting the parade of the Sogdian royal family moving in the direction of a building identified as the temple of the ancestors (southern wall) there is the wall dedicated to China (northern wall). This Chinese scene is divided into two parts and in the right portion the Chinese emperor is performing a cultic hunt that in ancient times fell possibly around the New Year celebrations (fig. 15). According to Chinese sources, the

47 Matthiae, Ninive 71.

48 Musche, *Römische Einflüsse* 194. – Albenda, *Royal Gardens* 116.

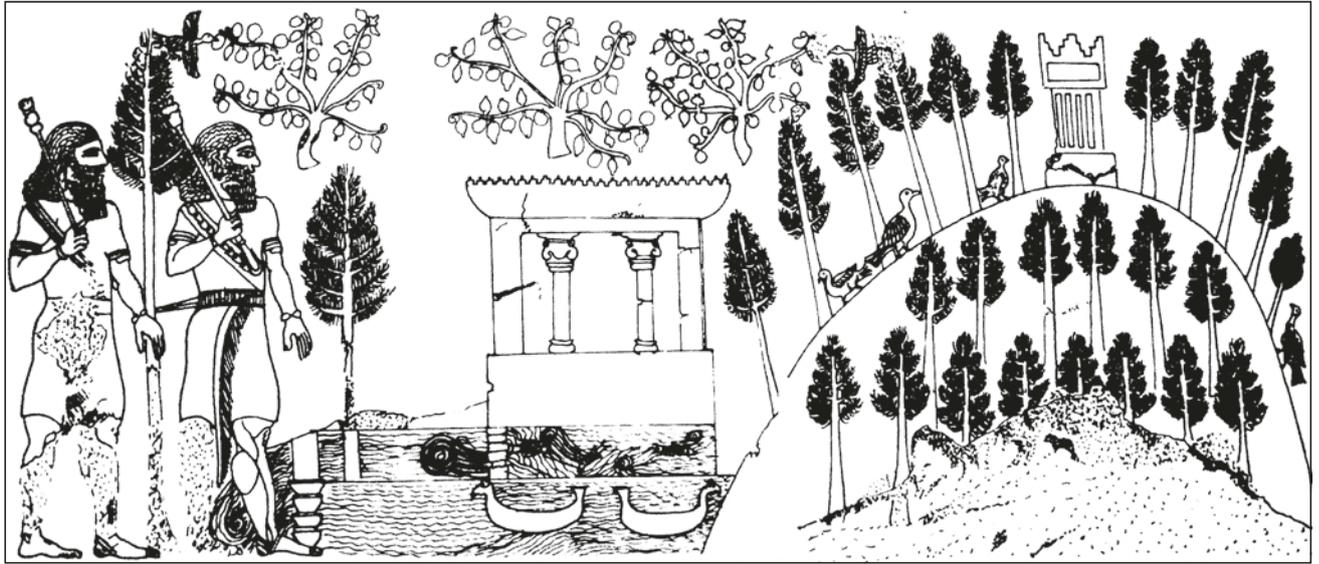


Fig. 14 Khorsabad palace, northern wing. – (After Gillmann, Représentations architecturales fig. pl. LVI).

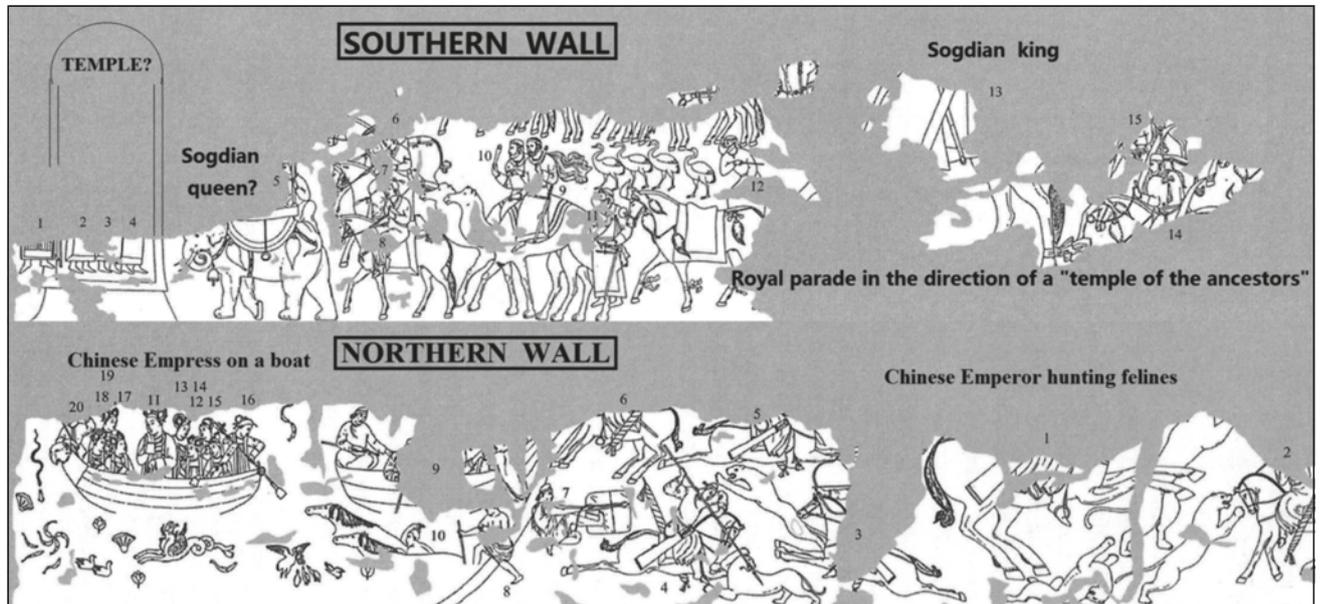


Fig. 15 Sketches of the southern and northern walls at Afrasyab. – (After Compareti, Samarkand figs. 11-2).

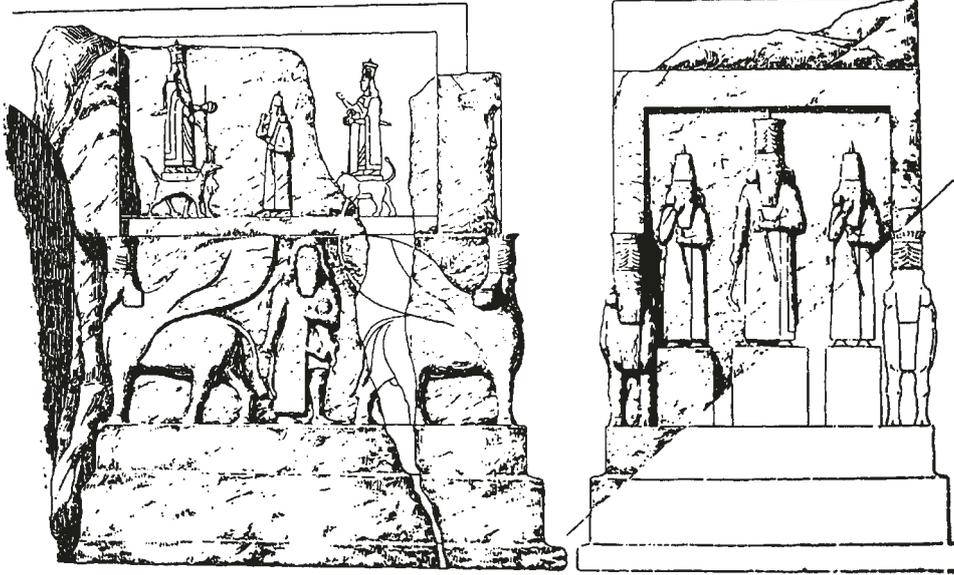
meat of the animal killed during the imperial hunt had to be presented to the »temple of the ancestors«. It seems very likely that the Sogdian artists (and the customers as well) of that painted programme included also those Chinese scenes, because they could have represented a precise parallel with habits still popular in mid-7<sup>th</sup> century Sogdiana. As it was observed by this writer in a study entirely dedicated to the Hall of the Ambassadors, there was a precise correspondence of similar elements among the paintings of every wall (also in calendrical terms) that were dedicated to those peoples in contact with Sogdiana at the dawn of the Arab conquest<sup>49</sup>.

In more general terms, it appears very clearly that Mesopotamian elements (such as the New Year celebration, royal hunts, etc.) and even specific deities (such as Nana and Nabu/Tir) had a dramatic impact on the culture of the Iranian peoples and especially in Central Asia<sup>50</sup>. The study of these elements could be possibly very useful to identify many enigmatic points of Iranian art and, at the same time, it could shed some light on those aspects of Mesopotamian art not yet completely clear. Also, the so-called Ka'aba-ye Zardusht at Naqsh-i Rostam and the Zendan-i Sulayman at Pasargade (Fars) could be included in this group of enigmatic

49 Compareti, Samarkand 126-173.

50 Compareti, Nana and Tish.

**Fig. 16** Sketch of the Neo-Assyrian reliefs at Bawian (Iraq). – (After Matthiae, Ninive 128).



Persian buildings shaped like »towers«. Although they do not have any arched entrance or crenellation on their tops, they present some connections with more ancient Mesopotamian traditions being possibly copies of more ancient Urartean prototypes<sup>51</sup>. Other controversial buildings usually called »stepped and tower structures« appear quite frequently in Achaemenid glyptic and had already been associated with the tower like buildings at Naqsh-e Rostam and Pasargade<sup>52</sup>. They look more similar to Neo-Assyrian pavilions and, possibly, stepped structures in Frataraka coins whose function is still a matter of debate among scholars<sup>53</sup>. Although those Persian pavilions and crenellated towers under discussion here do not seem to be exactly like the Ka'ba-ye Zardusht and Zendan-i Sulayman ones, they all could present some connections with more ancient (and enigmatic) Mesopotamian architecture.

## Concluding remarks

Observations on specific aspects of Taq-i Bustan point at an unusual monument whose typology was not invented in Persia and was embellished with several non-Sasanian decorative elements. Details of the garments and accessories in fashion in late Sasanian Iran allow one to consider the court of Ct-esiphon as very open up to exoticisms and external borrowings coming from Central Asia, Byzantium and neighboring kingdoms. Such observations constitute a formidable tool to propose a better chronology of Taq-i Bustan along with other authors' hypotheses recently formulated. The idea of two constructive phases matches quite well with the history of late Sasanian Persia. It is very likely that Bastam started the construction and, in a second phase, Khusraw Parwiz continued it.

If the historical reconstruction proposed in this paper could be considered convincing, it would appear obvious to regard Taq-i Bustan as an important monument possibly connected with kingship and legitimation. When Khusraw defeated Bastam, he did not destroy the monument but decided to modify it in order to appropriate the entire rock relief complex. Khusraw embellished the back wall of the larger grotto at Taq-i Bustan with images of Ahura Mazda and a female deity to be possibly identified with Anahita standing beside his own figure that is even higher than the two gods. Such a concentration of deities is quite unusual in Sasanian art in Fars but not at Taq-i Bustan, since an image of a god with a rayed halo appeared already in the 4<sup>th</sup> century rock relief just outside the two grottoes. His identification with Mithra as the god of contracts is commonly accepted by scholars despite his unusual position on a lotus flower reproduced according to Indian stylistic touch<sup>54</sup>. From this point of view, Taq-i Bustan is a less typical Sasanian monument but the most exotic one where elements of foreign origin were assimilated and adapted.

Something more should be added about the concentration of Avestan deities at Taq-i Bustan. In fact, only Ahura Mazda is usually represented (and mentioned) in Sasanian rock reliefs (and inscriptions), with rare exceptions. Some interesting elements can be observed again in the Mesopotamian milieu. At Bawian, in northern Iraq (not too far from the ancient Assyrian capital Ninive), there are two rock reliefs attributed to Sennacherib which could present some common points with the reliefs of the larger grotto at Taq-i Bustan (fig. 16). In the first relief at Bawian the king is reproduced between the two main deities of the Assyrian pantheon, Marduk and Ishtar, standing on their symbolic animals in an

51 Stronach, *Urartu's Impact* 315, 320. – Dan, *From the Armenian Highland to Iran*.

52 Garrison, *Ritual Landscape* 316-322.

53 Potts, *Foundation Houses*. – Haerincq/Overlaet, *Altar Shrines and Fire Altars?*

54 Kröger, *Sasanian Iran and India* 443-444.

upper position while below another scene can be observed. The other relief at Bawian is even more interesting, since the central king and the two figures standing beside him (possibly duplicates of that same sovereign) are positioned on a square pedestal in frontal view<sup>55</sup>. The division in two levels of one relief, the presence of the king between the images of the gods (one male and one female), the frontal position of the main characters and the concentration of more reliefs at the same site would all suggest that in (northern) Mesopotamia there possibly existed an ancient sculptural tradition whose traces could have continued at least until the very late Sasanian period.

The presence of other Zoroastrian deities together with Ahura Mazda definitely represents an anomaly in the framework of Sasanian art but it should not be forgotten that Taq-i Bustan is not in Fars. It is not improbable that the people of north-western Iran followed another form of Zoroastrianism to traditional Sasanian centres of Fars and other parts of ancient Iran as well. Some authors who lived in north-western regions of the Sasanian Empire reported very interesting information about the Persian religion. For example, 5<sup>th</sup> century Christian Armenian authors such as Eznik Koghbaç'i or Eghishe Vardapet mentioned unexpectedly Zurvanism (that was a heterodox form of Zoroastrianism) as the main religion of the Sasanians<sup>56</sup>. Armenians lived much closer to Taq-i Bustan than Fars and one should not rule out the possibility that those specific authors referred only to the situation in the north-western Persian Empire in their texts.

Anahita and Mithra do not represent an isolated case, since some other Zoroastrian deities appeared on figurative column capitals belonging to the so-called »basket typology« that was introduced from Byzantium not earlier than the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century. Specimens of these column capitals have been

found around Bisutun and Kermanshah. Until a few years ago, approximately ten figurative column capitals were kept in the park at Taq-i Bustan not far from the larger grotto in the place that it is now occupied by the newly excavated canal and enlarged pool. As it was demonstrated in many other studies, one side of those column capitals was embellished with the image of a Sasanian king wearing the same crown and dressed exactly like the one in the upper level of the back wall of the larger grotto at Taq-i Bustan. Also, the king in the column capitals was reproduced in the act of receiving a beribboned ring from a deity on the opposite side while on the lateral parts there were just vegetal or geometrical decorations. On the reverse of some rare gold coins of Khusraw II Parwiz, the frontal bust of a deity with a halo of flames can be found exactly like one on a single figurative column capital from Isfahan. Unfortunately, no inscription has been useful to propose any clear identification of those deities but it is very evident that they cannot be always the representation of Ahura Mazda, since in at least one case there is a goddess (probably Anahita) wearing a typical cloak, in the column capital from Isfahan just mentioned above the deity has a flaming halo, while in a couple of other cases the god is wearing armour and is definitely male because of the beard still visible on one unique column capital from Kermanshah<sup>57</sup>. From an iconographical point of view, all these column capitals have more than one point in common with Taq-i Bustan.

For all these reasons Taq-i Bustan represents an enigmatic and unique monument that could help us to better understand the cultural milieu of Sasanian Persia at the dawn of the Arab invasion. In this paper I did not want to propose any definitive identification but just some suggestions in order to consider Taq-i Bustan in all its complex historical and cultural framework.

55 Matthiae, Ninive 128. – A very similar image can be observed on at least one Neo-Assyrian seal of the time of Sennacherib embellished with a divine couple and a worshiper turned in the direction of the male god. Those deities are identified more correctly with Ashur standing on dragons and his wife Mullissu on a lion. See Watanabe, Seals 315.

56 Zaehner, Zurvan 419-428. – Russell, Zoroastrianism 8.

57 Compareti, Figurative Capitals.

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## Zusammenfassung / Summary / Résumé

### Assimilierung und Adaptierung fremder Elemente bei den spätsasanidischen Felsreliefs von Taq-i Bustan

Ziel des vorliegenden Artikels ist es zu beweisen, dass Taq-i Bustan ein spätes sasanidisches Denkmal war, wo sehr alte mesopotamische und (weniger alte) zentralasiatische Elemente beobachtet werden können. Nach Meinung des Autors sollte Taq-i Bustan nicht als Leistung eines sasanidischen Herrschers, sondern zweier unterschiedlichen Persönlichkeiten betrachtet werden. Laut einiger muslimischer Autoren war Taq-i Bustan ein Gebäude von Bastam, einem Onkel mütterlicherseits von Khusraw II., der Gouverneur von Khorasan war, bevor er gegen die Sasaniden rebellierte. Er hat nichts erfunden, sondern führte die alten, in der mesopotamischen Kultur verwurzelten Traditionen fort. Nachdem er Bastams Rebellion unterdrückt hatte, übernahm Khusraw II. das Denkmal und modifizierte es. Gleichzeitig akzeptierte Khusraw einige dekorative Elemente und benutzte sie sogar, um seine Kleidung als Trophäe auszuschnücken.

### Assimilation and Adaptation of Foreign Elements in Late Sasanian Rock Reliefs at Taq-i Bustan

The aim of the present paper is to prove that Taq-i Bustan is a late Sasanian monument where very ancient Mesopotamian and (less ancient) Central Asian elements can be observed. In this author's opinion, Taq-i Bustan should not be considered the achievement of one Sasanian sovereign but two different personalities. According to some Muslim authors, Taq-i Bustan was a building belonging to Bastam, a maternal uncle of Khusraw II who was governor of Khorasan before rebelling against the Sasanians. He did not invent anything but continued at Taq-i Bustan more ancient traditions rooted in Mesopotamian culture. After suppressing Bastam's rebellion, Khusraw II adopted the monument and modified it. At the same time, Khusraw accepted some decorative elements and he even used them to embellish his garments as a trophy.

### Intégration et adaptation d'éléments étrangers dans les reliefs rupestres sassanides tardifs de Taq-i Bustan

Cet article vise à démontrer que Taq-i Bustan était un monument sassanide tardif réunissant des éléments très anciens de Mésopotamie et (plus récents) d'Asie centrale. L'auteur pense qu'il ne faut pas voir dans Taq-i Bustan l'oeuvre d'un seul souverain sassanide, mais celle de deux personnalités différentes. Selon certains auteurs musulmans, Taq-i Bustan était un monument commandé par Bastam, un oncle maternel de Khusrô II et gouverneur du Khorasan, avant sa rébellion contre les Sassanides. Bastam n'a rien innové, mais perpétué les anciennes traditions ancrées dans la culture mésopotamienne. Khusrô II, après avoir maté la rébellion de Bastam, reprit ce monument et le modifia. Il retint certains éléments décoratifs et les utilisa pour faire un trophée de ses habits.

Traduction: Y. Gautier