

Patryk SKUPNIEWICZ* (Siedlce University, Poland)

Archers from Rag-i Bibi. Notes on the equipment depicted on Rag-i Bibi relief (Northern Afghanistan)

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Abstract: *The rock relief discovered in Rag-e Bibi in Northern Afghanistan in 2002 remains an archaeological sensation. The archery equipment depicted there has not yet been studied. The article describes the bow cases combined with quivers and associates them with the same type of kit popular in Eurasia related with spread of the recurved bows with stiff bone or horn extensions of Xiongnu/Hunnic type. This type of bows replaced shorter 'Scythian' type of bows in 1st-2nd century CE. The integrated bow case and quiver went out of use soon before the rise of the Sasanians therefore Rag-e Bibi cannot be linked with this dynastic art, based also on the depicted elements of material culture, as well as on stylistic grounds.*

Key words: Sasanian, Kushan, the rock relief, Iran, Rag-i Bibi, Afghanistan, archers

Introduction

The rock relief in Rag-i Bibi, in Northern Afghanistan, has been an archaeological sensation since its discovery in 2002.¹ It has been commonly attributed as Sasanian, with a single voice claiming its Late Kushan origin. The aim of the current article is an analyse of the archery kit, depicted on the relief, and locating it within the evolutionary networks of the bows, bow-cases and quivers of the corresponding areas and times. Such an analyse may provide another argument in an attempt to attribute the piece, however, it is treated as a separate study and only from the arms and armour history perspective. The assumption made here is that the elements of the equipment depicted in art would follow the iconographic traditions of their times and illustrate actual kit used by the highest echelons of the society, unless they were not traditional iconographic motifs of symbolic significance, which is easily traceable in visual traditions.

* ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8119-5449>. patryk.skupniewicz@gmail.com; Institute of History. The results of the research carried out under the research theme No. 107/20/B were financed from the science grant granted by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

¹ Grenet, 2005; Grenet *et al.*, 2007; Maksymiuk, 2012; Canepa, 2013; about the Late Kushan origin see Maksymiuk *et al.*, 2020.

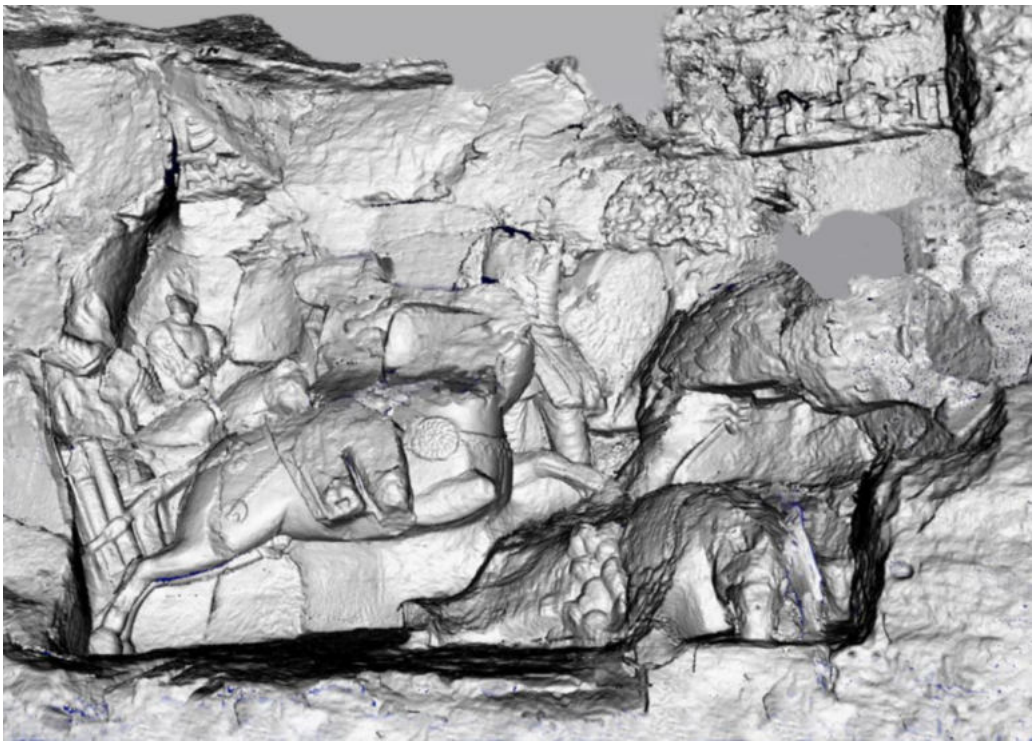


Fig. 1. Rock relief at Rag-i Bibi, above: photo by François Ory (CNRS); below: the 3D scan by Philippe Martinez (CNRS). Photos courtesy of Frantz Grenet, François Ory and Philippe Martinez.

The relief

Rag-i Bibi relief is located near village Shamarq, some 10 km from Puli Khumri in Baghlan Province of Afghanistan. The relief is 4.9 m high and 6.5 m wide. It is destroyed in large part and important elements of it are missing, the general layout is preserved and some details survived in surprisingly clear shape. The destruction might partly result from weathering, natural wear and tear and partly from intentional acts of, bigotry-inspired, vandalism. The relief is high, in some places almost round and its depth is deliberately employed stylistic value employing volume, with soft wavy lines and not accentuated contours.

The relief depicts the riders hunting the rhinoceroses covered with scales. The scene is composed symmetrically, it consists of two halves on both sides of the vertical axis. The right side is dominated by the main rider on the galloping horse, directed to the right. The rider is shooting from the bow in the direction of the move, which can be deduced from the shape of the remains. His torso and head are preserved only in outline, still protruding from the background. The body of the horse is preserved, however it is missing head and the right foreleg which was apparently independently protruding to the front. Rider's right leg is also partly preserved. He was depicted wearing wide trousers, with folded surface, which is badly weathered. His upper thigh was covered with a fold of tunic, or kaftan as the outline only survived. The rider's foot is missing. Behind his leg hangs obliquely a large rectangular quiver with integrated tubular arrow cases. The back and rump strap of the harness are preserved. Above the front leg the strap supports large, round phalera. The smaller phalera is shown on the rump strap. The front part of the strap are decorated with the overlapping sharp arches. A pendant in shape of lunula with sharp spike between the arms is suspended on a chain, obliquely from the saddle. The tail of the horse is tied tightly. Behind the main figure two other riders are shown in smaller scale. The head of the one closer to the front, placed further towards left edge of the relief, is missing, however similar quiver integrated with the tubular arrow cases is visible. The torso of the personage is preserved only in outline, however arms in folded sleeves are partly visible. The left arm is directed down and ends behind horse's neck while the right arm is raised. The forearm and the hand are missing however it is clear that they were directed up. It seems most likely that the rider carried a javelin or a lance in his raised hand. Behind, another rider is visible with his forearms raised but hands missing. His horse's head is visible just over the bow case of the frontal figure.

In the middle of the relief, in front of the main character's horse stands partially preserved figure in wide trousers and a kaftan with the lower folds protruding obliquely to the sides. His feet are not seen, partly hidden behind the left front leg of the main characters mount. The personage marks the vertical axis of the composition however stands behind the main personage. This was even more emphasised when the horse's head was visible, hiding part of man's torso. His head and left arm are not

preserved the left arm was hidden behind the man personage's horse head, now visible only in outline. Because the head of the standing personage did not leave the outline, it must have been made in round. Also, no trace of the left arm on the surface strongly suggests that it must have been raised.

At the bottom of the right side of the relief lies a body of the dead rhinoceros covered with scales, while the second scaled rhinoceros runs away from the riders over the dead one. Both beasts create volumous slope on the left edge of the relief. Behind the escaping rhinoceros a canopy of the mango tree is visible, recognisable by the leaves.

The Archers

The archery equipment depicted on the Rag-i Bibi relief unmistakably refers to the bows with double reflex and stiff bone extensions which derived from earlier 'Scythian' type, being much shorter and worn usually on the left thigh (with only few Greek iconographic examples showing it worn on the right hip) in combined bow and arrows case called gorytos. The new type was extended with stiff ears which allowed greater power at the cost of the size.

The emergence of the new type of bow, commonly labelled as 'Hunnic' should be linked to the Xiong Nu expansion,² although it should also be noted the peculiar time lag between the expansion itself and the widespread adaptation of the new type of bow throughout Eurasia, indicating a peculiar conservatism of warriors and fighting techniques. It is also important to note the conventionality of the term. Although, in fact, the first bows with extensions should be associated with the Xiong Nu, but the identification of this ethnos with the later Huns is not clear. Perhaps the conversion of entire 'armies' (here we have in mind war bands, hordes and other modes of steppe warfare organisation) to new weapons was so difficult that it did not immediate effect, and required top-down investment. Whatever the reason, the revolution that was the adoption of the 'Hunnic' type of bow is noticeable in Western Eurasia at the turn of the era, more often in the 1st-2nd century CE.³

The long, Hunnic bow, with its rigid extensions, did not allow the use of the classical gorytos of the Achaemenid, Scythian, early Parthian and Bosporan versions. However, since the integrated bow and arrow case remained the preferred solution, the gorytos increased in size and took the form of a large, flat case with one or two arrow tubes. The transfer of the design to the right hip also became a significant difference.

² Nikonorov & Khudyakov, 2004: 45-69; Vinogradov & Goroncharovskiy, 2009: 189-193.

³ Mielczarek, 1999: 44; Vinogradov & Goroncharovskiy, 2009: 190.

Three factors may have caused the change:

- Reaching for the arrows with the longer bow hand became much more difficult, resulting in a change in shooting technique, where the right hand reached for the arrows and pulled the string.
- The emergence of long-bladed swords, carried on the left side forced the transfer of shooting equipment to the right side.
- Or a combination of both factors occurring almost simultaneously, when the transfer of gorytos to the right hip made it possible to hang a long sword on the left, hitherto carried stuck behind the belt behind the back or avoided as difficult to draw and impractical for the rider. Development of the rigid ‘horned’ saddle, with the wooden frame which allowed manoeuvrability required for wielding the long lance in heavy armour, also enhanced flexibility of the riders on their horses, thus allowing longer swords, greater bows and facilitating change of their sides.

Gorytos adapted to a Hunnic-type bow was found at the Niya site in Xinjiang.⁴ Further examples can also be found in depictions on plaques from Orlat,⁵ on plaques a Takht-e Sangin,⁶ where they are shown together with the ‘Hunnic’ type bows just used. Large gorytos with side arrow sleeves are depicted on gold clasps from the Siberian Collection of Peter I.⁷ The presence of ‘Hunnic’ type bows, corresponding gorytos and long-bladed swords in sheaths suspended on the scabbard-slides, prevents the objects from being frequently dated to the 4th to 2nd centuries BCE and brings them closer to the aforementioned objects from Orlat and Takht-e Sangin, as well as a plaque from Kalala-Gyr 2.⁸ In the Black Sea region, the 1st century CE is a transitional period where new ‘Hunnic’ type *gorytoi* appear alongside *gorytoi* of the older, ‘Scythian’ type.⁹ This means that the adaptation of the new form of weaponry was not immediate and explains the long time between the appearance of the heavy Xiong Nu bows and their adaptation in the rest of Eurasia. Bosporan monuments, such as the epitaph of Stratonik, son of Zeno, and Matian, son of Zaidar, indicate that the practice of carrying the outstretched bows became widespread. Similarly, as mentioned above, the ‘Scythian’ bow, with the *gorytos* worn on the left hip, was used in Parthia until at least the 2nd century CE. Perhaps the longer times of drawing of the heavier bows resulted in surviving preference of the latter. It must be borne in mind that the Parthians faced varied opponents and against majority of them traditional

⁴ Ilyasov, 2013: 100.

⁵ Pugachenkova, 1987; Brentjes, 1990; Abdullaev, 1995a; 1995b; Nikonorov, 1997: 17, 75, fig. 43a-c; Ilyasov & Rusanov, 1997/1998; Nikonorov & Khudyakov, 1999; Olbrycht, 1999: 204-206.

⁶ Nikonorov, 1997: 11, 59, fig. 27; Litvinskij, 2001.

⁷ Simpson & Pankova, 2017: 57 (inv. Si 1727 1/162, 64, inv. Si 1727 1/70).

⁸ Ilyasov, 2013.

⁹ Mielczarek, 1999: PL. XVII; Vinogradov & Goroncharovskiy, 2009: 159, 162, 191; Nefedkin, 2011: 139.

‘Scythian’ bow was sufficiently effective with advantage of long tradition of use and manufacturing.

A change in the type of bow can also be seen in Parthian art, as evidenced by the reliefs from Elymais such as Tang-e Sarvak,¹⁰ as well as terracotta relief from the British Museum,¹¹ where the curious practice of placing a dagger, or short sword, on the surface of the *gorytos*, between the tubes for the arrows, is illustrated. An identical *gorytos*, comprising a case for a strung bow and two tubes intended for arrows, carried on the right side is also shown in relief at discussed relief in Rag-i Bibi.

The large *gorytos* with Hunnic bows must have been quite a nuisance to get on horseback or walk on foot. They are depicted almost always with riders. Meanwhile, one of the hurried warriors in the battle scene from the Orlat plaque has a *gorytos* attached to his belt. Possessing a *gorytos* at his belt, losing his mount, the warrior was therefore able to conduct firing. It is therefore difficult to say whether the practice of attaching to saddles actually existed, or whether it depended on locals or personal preference. However, there seems to be more argument in favour of the fact that large *gorytos* for ‘Hunnic’ bows with arrow tubes were worn at the waist, on the right side.

As mentioned above, large, heavy bows were also carried unstrung.

An interesting source illustrating the transition period between the ‘Scythian’ and ‘Hunnic’ bows is the stele of Athenaios from Kerch, on which the deceased is shown on horseback in two panels; in one, facing left, he has a ‘Scythian’ bow at his left shoulder, and in the panel below, facing right, he is shown with a ‘Hunnic’ type bow with two arrow tubes.¹²

As an example of a *gorytos* relic, a model preserved in a burial from Olgakhta of the Tarim Basin with a stick imitating a bow and miniature arrows in a separate case, now in the Hermitage collection,¹³ can be used. The relic is dated to the late 3rd /early 4th century CE, which may indicate a peculiar conservatism of local military technology or a prolonged other use of the object before being placed in the tomb. Tashtik art appears to show ‘Scythian’ bows despite dating to the 2nd-3rd century CE.¹⁴ This may be due to the simplified stylisation of the images.

During the Sasanian period, the bow did not lose its symbolic function related to power.¹⁵ Among the numerous depictions of horsemen, the king while riding has almost always a quiver with him. The large and long Sasanian quiver, with no room for a bow, seems to have gained in importance. It is possible that by avoiding depictions of integrated bow and arrow cases, the Sasanians intended to visually

¹⁰ Colledge, 1977: 92-93; Kawami, 1987: 201-204; 2013: 760; von Gall, 1990: 13-19; Mathiesen, 1992: 130-132; Skupniewicz, 2021a.

¹¹ Inv. 135684; Herrmann, 1989: 766, 794, pl. Vb.

¹² Brentjes, 1995/1996: 184, 193; Vinogradov & Goroncharovskiy, 2009: 189-191, il. 92.

¹³ Inv. 2864/21; Simpson & Pankova, 2017: 351.

¹⁴ Pankova, 2011.

¹⁵ Skupniewicz, 2021b.

separate themselves from the previous dynasty. Of course, in the relief at Firuzabad,¹⁶ both sides have distinctive large quivers of the Sasanian type, which may mean that they appeared already earlier and only by the third decade of the 3rd century CE, had definitely replaced the large integrated bow and arrow cases in Iran. It is also possible that the long quivers were perceived as a status marker, by which Firuzabad indicates that fighting was between equal opponents.

It seems that the abandonment of the integrated bow and arrow case was gradual, and although the lack of references to such a solution is a prominent feature of Sasanian iconography, the abandonment of the bow and arrow case was more evolutionary and preceded the appearance of the Sasanians. Iconographic material is provided by Palmyrean art, where single tube-shaped quivers with no connection to arrow cases for long bows with extensions, appear alongside *gorytos* with two or one arrow tubes. The so-called Odaenathus mosaic¹⁷ shows a double arrow tube, but no integrated bow case is visible. If the dating of the monument is correct, it would date from the reign of Shapur II, that is, the time after the fall of the Arsacid dynasty, when large *gorytos* with room for a bow and two arrow tubes ceased appearing in Iranian iconography. Similarly, in the case of the Dura Europos, the synagogue's wall paintings, unanimously considered to refer to Parthian iconography, as well as the graffiti, depict long, sleeved quivers rather than integrated *gorytoi*. On the graffiti with the Iaribhol cult scene or lion hunt,¹⁸ the tube is divided into two parts, perhaps the depiction should be understood as two connected sleeves, analogous to the 'Odaenathus mosaic'. It should also be noted that the iconography of the iconic Iarhibol scene from Dura Europos includes the tassels hanging from the saddle, an element characteristic of Sasanid imagery. Single quivers in the shape of a tube were shown in the mithraeum paintings at Dura Europos and graffiti with scenes of pursuit of fleeing game from Hatra.¹⁹ It seems that the quivers shown at Dura Europos and Palmyra represent the type known from depictions of Syrian archers from Trajan's column, which would have been worn on the back in a situation of fighting on foot, but strapped to the waist, or hung so as to be on the hip or thigh, while riding on horseback, while the graffiti from Hatra characterises quite mature, 'Sasanian' archery equipment.²⁰ Regardless of the direct inspiration, or the reason for the abandonment of *gorytos* in favor of separate quivers, a process begun in the Late Parthian period, the graffiti from Dura Europos suggest that double arrow tubes were still in use even after they ceased to be combined with arrow cases.

¹⁶ von Gall, 1990; Nikonorov, 2020.

¹⁷ Gawlikowski, 2005.

¹⁸ Rostovtzeff, 1934: pl. XXV, XXVI.

¹⁹ Dirven, 2016.

²⁰ Ricciardi, 1998.

Conclusions

The archery equipment depicted on the Rag-i Bibi relief clearly represents the stage of development predating Sasanian introduction of long quivers as the representative form of arrow cases, suitable for the kings and nobility. It is certain that the new type did not replace the older ones immediately, however, given the important semantic function of archery kit in Sasanian art, designating the people in power, where the older type does not appear even once, it must be stated that the relief does not belong to Sasanian imagery. It does not share Sasanian stylistic features and therefore cannot be treated as Sasanian. The arms depicted on Rag-i Bibi relief represent earlier stage of the kit development.

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