

Gholamreza KARAMIAN * (Azad University, Tehran, Iran)

A new Parthian rock relief from Southern Iran

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Abstract: In 2024 a PhD student made an accidental find of the rock relief in the mountainous area in the north of the city of Likak, in the south of Iran. The relief is clearly Parthian which is attested by the coiffures of both personages and the clothes of the small personage on the left side.

Key words: Rock Relief, Parthian, Southern Iran, Likak, Heracles

In 2024 a PhD student made an accidental find of the rock relief in the mountainous area of the border area in the north of the city of Likak, in the Bahmai County, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad province, in the south of Iran [Fig. 1].

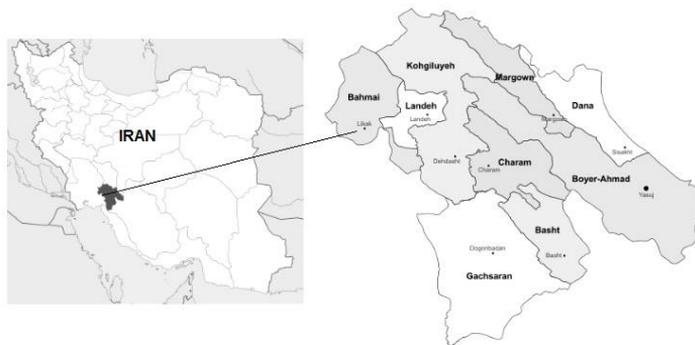


Fig. 1. Location of the Likak in southern Iran

Description of the relief

The relief measures 90x70 cm. Despite the small size it reveals interesting features which may contribute to the research of the Parthian culture in the area.

The relief depicts the standing male nude figure placed between smaller, reaching the waist of the main protagonist, dressed male figure on the left and hour-glass shaped vertical object, identifiable as an altar, on the right. The altar reached mid-thigh of the central personage. The surface is weathered but the musculature of the nude central personage and the elements of the robe of the small personage on the left side remain visible [Fig. 2].

* Corresponding Author. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4200-2592>. karamianreza@yahoo.com; Central Branch Tehran Azad University.

The main figure stands with both feet, in a moderate stride, directed to the right. His knees are slightly bent. The feet position directs the personage towards the altar. From thighs up, the figure is depicted frontally. His head is disproportionately large, together with the neck it is approximately of the torso length. The coiffure consists of hair reaching below ears and what seems a fringe over the forehead which is in line with the Parthian examples from Elymais. The beard also seems to follow typical Parthian triangular pattern. It seems that the moustache was also depicted, to enforce the association with the Parthian sculpture. The nose and the eyes are not visible, except for the contour of the eye-brows.

The torso of the central personage is athletic with pronounced pectoral and abdomen musculature, as well as navel, remain visible despite weathering. The remnants of the small genitals are seen between the thighs.

The right arm of the figure is extended horizontally to the left. The arm is slightly bent and terminates above the head of the small figure on the side of the protagonist. The hand is not clearly seen, however at the place where the arm ends an element protrudes upwards extending visually the line of the small standing figure. The element consists of a short shaft with a ball or a crescent at the end. Despite heavy weathering, contextually, the object may be identified as a mace with a short grip and huge spherical head.

The left arm of the central figure falls down, reaching the edge of the altar. It is heavily damaged and has awkward proportions, being too short in comparison with the shoulder width and torso length. The scratches at the end of the arm might have originally represented the fingers. No object is visible held in the hand.

The small figure to the left is shown standing in profile towards the center. His both feet are directed to the right. His head is disproportionately large turned slightly up, towards the central personage. The head is too large in comparison with the rest of the body, resulting in somehow childish proportions, however the exaggeration is less visible than at the central figure. The face is heavily weathered and no facial features can be recognised, however the sharp, triangular, ending of the face suggests the beard.

The right arm of the personage is extended towards the central figure, across the chest and slightly bent upwards in the elbow. The arm is disproportionately long in comparison with the torso. The left forearm protrudes from below in the same oblique direction. The proportion of the left arm is even more off. It is clear that the importance of the gesture was the main factor and anatomical realism was of lesser importance.

The personage wears belted tunic and trousers. The details are illegible because of weathering.

Discussion

The relief is clearly Parthian which is attested by the coiffures of both personages and the clothes of the small personage on the left side. The position of the central figure corresponds with numerous depictions of the sacrificers in the Parthian and related art, including the reliefs from Parthian Elymais.

The mace in the hand of the naked central figure identifies him as Heracles as possibly associates with the relief in Bisotun [Fig. 3]. Another immediate reference

comes from the reliefs of Antiochus I of Commagene from Nimrud Dagh [Fig. 4]. It is likely that the nude figures on later Sasanian silverware should be also associated with this visual tradition. The mace held by the Heracles on the presented relief varies from the weapons of this type in iconography of Heracles, where it is a wooden club tapering towards the handle rather than elaborated and meticulously shaped weapon. It must be believed that this is the local feature introduced to Hellenic iconography.

The very large head of the central figure suggest that originally identifiable facial features must have been applied, possibly marking a recognisable personage.

The position of hands of the small figure on the left are typical in cult scenes and appear already in Achaemenid times. The clumsy proportions of the personage prove that the cultic meaning prevailed mere depiction.



Fig. 2. The relief from Likak (photo by Farzad Astaraki)

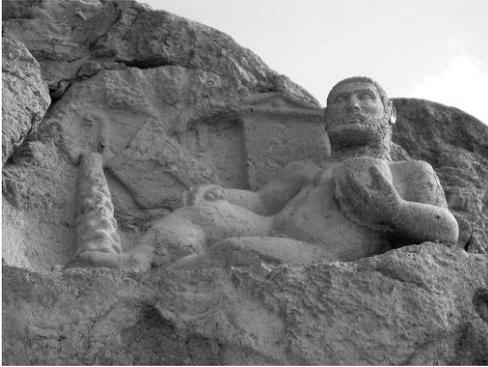


Fig. 3. Herakles at Bisotun, sculpted for a Seleucid Governor in 148 BCE¹



Fig. 4. Antiochus I of Commagene, 70-31 BCE, Arsameia²

Conclusion

In summary, the scene depicts veneration of Heracles by a local noble. It is impossible to state whether the hero should be identified as Verethraghna as in case of Nimrud Dagh, or we are facing a remnant of a Hellenic cult rooted in this part of Iran. The large head of Heracles suggest that his face was rather iconographically recognisable. It allows further speculation whether it was a king embodied as Heracles and the reverence was partially political and partially religious.

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² Photo by Verity Cridland [Public Domain: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nemrut_Dagh_area_A_Commagine_carving.jpg]