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## Roman ‘*Soldatenkaiser*’ on the Triumphal Rock Reliefs of Shāpūr I – A Reassessment

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Shāpūr I’s triumphal rock reliefs at Dārābgerd (Fig. 1), Naqsh-e Rostam VI (Fig. 2), Bishāpūr I (Fig. 3), Bishāpūr II (Fig. 4) and Bishāpūr III (Fig. 5) are the most significant iconographic evidence commemorating his victories over the Roman Empire. These have been very well studied and interpreted by many scholars during the past century in the light of both oriental and occidental literary sources. There are three Roman personages depicted on these reliefs who are signified as three Emperors of the Roman *Soldatenkaiserzeit* (235–284/5).<sup>1</sup>

The corpse of a beardless Roman is lying beneath the horse of Shāpūr on the three reliefs at Bishāpūr and the Dārābgerd relief. Another Roman is kneeling or approaching before the horse of Shāpūr on all these reliefs. The third Roman is absent on Bishāpūr I. He is standing on foot beside Shāpūr’s horse on Bishāpūr II and III. The principal scene on these two reliefs is surrounded by additional registers depicting equestrian Iranians behind the King of Kings and the foreigners bearing gifts, perhaps, before him – Bishāpūr II includes two registers and Bishāpūr III five registers. On Naqsh-e Rostam VI and Dārābgerd, the third Roman stands before Shāpūr’s horse. In Naqsh-e Rostam, Shāpūr grasps his wrists above the horse’s head. In Dārābgerd, however, Shāpūr stretches his arm toward the Roman’s head. On the latter relief, where Shāpūr bears his father’s typical crown, the Iranian dignitaries are standing behind him and a group of Romans before him.<sup>2</sup>

In 1954, B. C. MacDermot identifies these figures as the three Roman Emperors who are mentioned in Shāpūr’s trilingual *Res Gestae* on the Ka’be-ye Zardosht (ŠKZ):

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<sup>1</sup> On this period of Roman history, see STROBEL (1993) and JOHNE (2008). See also MILLAR (1993) and BALL (2000) on the Roman activities in the east during this period.

<sup>2</sup> Describing the reliefs does not place within the scope the present paper. For detailed descriptions of the reliefs see the volumes of TRÜPPELMANN and HERRMANN in the *Iranische Denkmäler* series: HERRMANN (1983) 7 - 10 on Bishāpūr I; HERRMANN (1983) 11 - 21 on Bishāpūr II; HERRMANN (1980) on Bishāpūr III; HERRMANN (1989) 13 - 33 on Naqsh-e Rostam VI; and TRÜPPELMANN (1975) on Dārābgerd; see also MACKINTOSH (1973), MEYER (1990) and MAKSYMCIUK (2012). For a brief survey of the studies until the end of 1980s, see HERRMANN (1989), 31 - 33 and for a general view over the Sasanian rock reliefs, see CANEPA (2013) and CALLIERI (2014) 129 - 161.

§7. καὶ Γορδιαν[ὸς] Καῖσα[ρ] ἐπανάρη καὶ ἡμεῖς τὴν στρατείαν τῶν Ῥωμαίων ἀνηλώσαμεν καὶ οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι Φίλιππον Καίσαρα ἀνηγόρευ<sup>ν</sup>σαν.

§8. καὶ <sup>vv</sup> Φίλιππος ὁ Καῖσαρ εἰς παράκ<sup>v</sup>λησιν ἤλθεν καὶ τῶν ψ[υ]χῶν α[ύ]τ[ῶ]ν ἀντίτειμα πεντακοσίαν χειλιάδα δηναρίων ἡμεῖν ἔδοτο καὶ εἰς φόρους ἡμεῖν ἔστη ....

§22. καὶ ἐκ τοῦ ἐκεῖθεν μέρους Καρρῶν καὶ Ἐδέσσω<sup>vv</sup> μετὰ <sup>v</sup> Οὐά[λ]ερια[ν]οῦ Καίσαρος μέγα<sup>vv</sup>ς πόλεμος ἡμεῖ<sup>vv</sup>ν γέ<sup>v</sup>γονεν καὶ Οὐάλεριανὸν Καίσαρα ἡμεῖς ἐν ἰδίαις χερσίν ἐκρατήσαμεν καὶ τοὺς λοιποὺς τό<sup>vv</sup>ν τε Ἐπαρχον καὶ συνκλητικοῦ<sup>vv</sup>ς καὶ ἡγεμόνας οἵτινες ἐκείνης τῆς δυναμέως ἄρχοντες ἦσαν, πάντας τούτους ἐν χερσίν ἐκρατήσαμεν καὶ εἰς τὴν Περσίδα αὐτοὺς ἐξηγάγομεν.<sup>3</sup>

Then he concludes that the dead Roman lying underneath Shāpūr's horse is Gordian III, who was *killed in the war*; the other Roman kneeling/approaching before the Persian King should be Philip the Arab, who *became tributary and paid 500,000 denarii to Shāpūr*; and the standing figure held by the hand is Valerian, who was *made prisoner by Shāpūr's own hands*.<sup>4</sup> Although this identification gained the assent of the majority of scholars,<sup>5</sup> J. Gagé<sup>6</sup> and W. Hinz did not find it convincing. Hinz prefers to reverse the attribution of Philip and Valerian: 'Tatsächlich hat auch nach meiner Auffassung B. C. MacDermot die Bestimmung der drei Kaiser auf den Shāpuhr-Reliefs wesentlich gefördert. Nur irrt er meines Erachtens im letzten, hauptsächtlichen Punkt: der *stehende* Kaiser dürfte nicht Valerian sein, sondern *Philippus Arabs*, und der *kniende* entsprechend nicht Philippus Arabs, sondern *Valerian*, wie schon immer angenommen wurde'.<sup>7</sup> R. Göbl's study of the Roman numismatic evidence, however, convincingly confirms MacDermot's attributions.<sup>8</sup>

Most scholars do accept the identification of Gordian, Philip the Arab and Valerian in general, but the attribution of Philip and Valerian is a constant source of controversy among them, *i.e.*, one group follows MacDermot's attribution, and another group follows the reversed attribution of Hinz (see *supra*, notes 5 and 7). However, from 1970s on, four authors have presented distinct interpretations of Shāpūr's triumphal reliefs:

<sup>3</sup> See HUYSE (1999), 1/26 - 27, 1/37 for the Middle Persian and Parthian versions of the inscription as well as its German translation. See also KETTENHOFEN (1982) and EDWELL (2010) on the conflicts between the Roman Empire and Sasanian Iran during the reign of Shāpūr I.

<sup>4</sup> MACDERMOT (1954).

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. GHIRSHMAN (1962) 151 - 161; PORADA (1965) 204 - 205; GÖBL (1973); HERRMANN (1969, 1980, 1989, 1998); TRÜPELMANN (1975); SHEPHERD (1983) 1082 - 1084; MEYER (1990); DIGNAS, WINTER (2007) 81 - 82; GAROSI (2009) 50; CANEPA (2009) 58; CANEPA (2010) 579 n.75; CANEPA (2013) 866; CALLIERI (2014) 143.

<sup>6</sup> GAGÉ (1965) 368 - 388; he cannot accept that these reliefs illustrate a compendium of Shāpūr's victories. Therefore, he considers that these reliefs merely commemorate the capture of Valerian in 260.

<sup>7</sup> HINZ (1969) 175; this alternative attribution is followed by GALL (1971) 199 n. 32; GALL (2008) 150; VANDEN BERGHE (1983) 129 - 132; VANDEN BERGHE (1993) 83 - 84.

<sup>8</sup> GÖBL (1974).

1. In 1978, J. M. C. Toynbee challenged the nationality of figures, especially on the relief of Dārābgerd. She suggests that this relief represents Ardashir I (224-241) celebrating a victory over the northern and eastern neighbours of the Sasanian Empire.<sup>9</sup>

2. In 1992, D. Levit-Tawil attributed the Dārābgerd relief to Ardashir I and asserted that this relief is a pictorial record of a ‘cosmic victory’ over three Roman Emperors of three different ages: the teenage Gordian III, the middle-aged Balbinus (238) and the old Pupienus (238).<sup>10</sup>

3. In 2008, H. von Gall, accepting the relief at Dārābgerd as the oldest triumphal relief of Shāpūr, found unconvincing the traditional attribution of the Roman Emperors for this relief. He maintains that it shows an event which ‘must have taken place at a time when Shāpūr was still co-regent’.<sup>11</sup>

4. In 2009, B. Overlaet suggested a new identification for the three Roman figures on Bishāpūr II, Bishāpūr III and Dārābgerd. He identifies the oval object brought by the foreign delegation on the right half of the Bishāpūr III relief (‘once held up in the air’ in the second register from the bottom and ‘once suspended from a pole with two straps carried by two men’ in the fourth register) as the Sacred Black Stone of Emesa (modern Homs in Syria). For this reason, he asserts that both the standing and the kneeling/approaching figures, and perhaps the lying corpse also, are characterising one emperor in different statuses: the usurper Emperor Uranius Antoninus of Emesa.<sup>12</sup>

Here, I shall focus first on the question of the Sasanian King represented on the rock relief at Dārābgerd, from which both Toynbee’s and Levit-Tawil’s interpretations originate. Of course, these two authors were not the first to attribute the Dārābgerd relief to Ardashir I. K. Erdmann was maybe the first scholar who paid attention to the Sasanian King’s crown at Dārābgerd, which looks like the typical crown of Ardashir I on his coins and rock reliefs – a simple skullcap surmounted by *korymbos*. According to Erdmann, Shāpūr intended to assign the capture of Valerian to his father.<sup>13</sup> MacDermot also doubts whether this relief belongs to Ardashir or Shāpūr, but the typological resemblance between this relief and the others in Shāpūr’s triumph series prevents him from attributing the relief to Ardashir.<sup>14</sup> Herrmann, however, because of some stylistic features, attributes this relief with apparent certainty to Ardashir and dates it to the final decade of that king’s reign.<sup>15</sup> Trümpelmann seems to be interested in such an attribution also, but he proposes cautiously two different phases for this relief; a beginning phase during the last years of Ardashir’s

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<sup>9</sup> TOYNBEE (1978) 174.

<sup>10</sup> LEVIT-TAWIL (1992) 178.

<sup>11</sup> GALL (2008) 150.

<sup>12</sup> OVERLAET (2009).

<sup>13</sup> ERDMANN (1948) 86.

<sup>14</sup> MACDERMOT (1954) 76.

<sup>15</sup> HERRMANN (1969) 83 - 88.

reign, when the portrait of the first Sasanian monarch was drafted, and a second phase, when the triumphs of Shāpūr were added to the relief.<sup>16</sup>

Hinz realises the complicatedness of the question of Sasanian ‘persönliche Krone’,<sup>17</sup> but it is Göbl who finds a solution for this problem. He discovered that Shāpūr wears the same crown on the rock relief at Salmās and on the famous cameo in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, which depicts him capturing Valerian by grasping his hand (Fig. 6). This is why the relief at Dārābgerd is not the sole iconographic evidence illustrating Shāpūr in his father’s crown. Göbl suggests that this crown was a reduced type specifically used in war.<sup>18</sup> But this suggestion does not justify the usage of this crown on the relief at Salmās, as well as the Dārābgerd triumph relief itself, while Shāpūr wears his own crown on the other triumphal reliefs. Actually, Meyer proposes a more convincing interpretation by dating the earliest sketch of the Dārābgerd relief, as well as the relief at Salmās, to the period of Ardashir’s joint reign with his son (240-241/2).<sup>19</sup> Shāpūr’s hairstyle and the form of his clothing at Dārābgerd thoroughly resemble his other reliefs at Naqsh-e Rajab, Naqsh-e Rostam and Bishāpūr. Furthermore, there is numismatic evidence confirming Shāpūr’s usage of his father’s crown during his own reign.<sup>20</sup>

Although these facts are enough to invalidate the reinterpretation of Levit-Tawil, one can also compare the Roman figures of Dārābgerd with the portraits of Balbinus and Pupienus on their coins, which have no similarity in details (Figs. 7-8). Even the Roman numismatics does not support her opinion. Moreover, there is no literary source accounting any conflict between Ardashir and these two Roman co-Emperors.

Overlaet’s interpretation is more complicated. He recognises the Sacred Black Stone of Emesa brought by the Roman delegation to Shāpūr in Bishāpūr III.<sup>21</sup> The Stone of Emesa was a baethyl appearing on the coins of Antoninus Pius (138-161), Caracalla (198-217), Elagabalus (218-222) and Uranius Antoninus (253/254)<sup>22</sup> issued in the mint of Emesa. On the reverse of the coins, the Sacred Stone is usually depicted as an oval object, on which an eagle is perching; or as a huge stone held in a temple<sup>23</sup> (Fig. 9); or between two umbrellas, on a quadriga, advancing to left<sup>24</sup> (Fig. 10). In spite of the resemblance between the oval object in Bishāpūr III and the Sacred Stone figured on the Roman coins, it is

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<sup>16</sup> TRÜMPELMANN (1975) 16 - 20.

<sup>17</sup> HINZ (1969) 146.

<sup>18</sup> GÖBL (1974) 38. H. von GALL also considers this headdress as a ‘crown-shapes helmet’, but he attributes the Paris cameo to Shāpūr II, without providing any convincing reason and interpretation; cf. GALL (2008) 149 - 150.

<sup>19</sup> MEYER (1990) 268 - 271, also followed by OVERLAET (2009) 494 - 495.

<sup>20</sup> See SCHINDEL (2009) 13, 48, nos. 22–23; SCHINDEL (2010) 30, Pl. III no. 12 and Pl. IV no 13; see also SHAVAREBI (2014b) 115 n. 33.

<sup>21</sup> OVERLAET (2009) 463 - 470.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. RIC IV/III, 205, no. 2; see also BALDUS (1971) on the coinage of Uranius Antoninus.

<sup>23</sup> BALDUS (1971), Nr. 35, 38 - 43.

<sup>24</sup> BALDUS (1971), Nr. 69.

difficult to accept Overlaet's identification of the Roman Emperors on the reliefs of Shāpūr as Uranius Antoninus.<sup>25</sup>

G. Herrmann, contrary to those scholars who consider this relief influenced by Roman iconographic concepts of victory,<sup>26</sup> convincingly explains it as an attempt to revive Achaemenid patterns. In this connexion she cites parallels between the right registers in Bishāpūr III and the reliefs depicting the provincial delegations on the facades of Apadāna at Persepolis.<sup>27</sup> Even so, the appearance of the Black Stone of Emesa on Bishāpūr III is still not impossible; but, as Overlaet himself confessed,<sup>28</sup> there is still an obvious absence of precise information concerning the removal of the Stone to Persia during the reign of Uranius Antoninus and what happened to it afterwards.

Even if we were certain that the carried object on Bishāpūr III is the Emesa Sacred Stone, it could not be a satisfactory reason for Overlaet's attribution of Uranius Antoninus as depicted twice or more in different statuses on one relief. According to him, the artists have sculpted consecutive moments of a scenario on one relief – once on his knees pleading for mercy, then accepted as an ally beside the Sasanian King, and probably once more beneath the hooves of Shāpūr's horse which could be 'an indication that he was killed at some stage' or 'an allegorical representation of the defeat of the "Roman Empire"'.<sup>29</sup> Synchronisation of different events is, of course, a well-known feature of the Sasanian rock reliefs. But Overlaet attempts to foster a concept of *diachronic nature* for the triumphal reliefs of Shāpūr, assuming *dynamic component(s)* within a frozen *static whole* including the *key constituent* (subject). This idea is, however, against the hitherto known patterns and criteria of the Sasanian iconography. Overlaet states that 'the combined display in one scene of consecutive events as well as of events that are separated by a significant amount of time is a widespread oriental (and Sasanian) artistic convention' and examples the hunting scenes of Khosrow II at Tāq-e Bostān.<sup>30</sup> Overlaet is to some extent right, of course; but in the Tāq-e Bostān hunting reliefs, not only are the animals repeatedly depicted in the consecutive phases of the hunt, but the hunter – the *key constituent* – is also sculpted in different positions as a *dynamic component*. Except for the investiture reliefs, Sasanian sculptors were always putting stress on the King of Kings, who usually appears as the subject, rather than the object. Also, in the Sasanian royal imagery, this is exactly the subject who plays the key role and should be considered as the *key constituent*. Therefore, if they wished to create a representation of *diachronic nature* with *dynamic component(s)*, this dynamic component (or one of these components) should have been the King of Kings. This idea is not only illustrated by the Tāq-e Bostān hunting scenes, but also by the double equestrian combat

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<sup>25</sup> OVERLAET's reinterpretation has not been completely followed by any further scholars by far; e.g. cf. CANEPA (2010) 579 n.75; MAKSYMIUK (2012); CALLIERI (2014) 143.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. MACKINTOSH (1973) and GALL (2008).

<sup>27</sup> HERRMANN (1998) 42 - 46.

<sup>28</sup> OVERLAET (2009) 497 - 498.

<sup>29</sup> OVERLAET (2009) 471.

<sup>30</sup> OVERLAET (2009) 470.

relief of Bahram II at Naqsh-e Rostam (Naqsh-e Rostam VII),<sup>31</sup> which follows the same criterion.

After all, though the Roman Emperors have almost similar clothing, hairstyle and wreath/diadem, their faces look different. I shall briefly discuss the differences of these figures and try to reattribute them in the following.

*The dead Roman:* the head of this man (Figs. 11-12) thoroughly fits the figure of young Gordian represented on his coins and his statues (Figs. 13-14): a beardless teenager with short hair.<sup>32</sup>

*The kneeling/approaching Roman:* this man has the same hairstyle as the dead Roman. He has whiskers, but no moustache (Fig. 15-16). Roman numismatics supports MacDermot's identification of this figure as Philip the Arab (Fig. 17).<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Roman statues of Philip (Fig. 18) have a close similarity with the kneeling figure of the Sasanian reliefs.<sup>34</sup> There is, however, a more precise proof confirming this attribution; a 'commemorative' gold coin of Shāpūr with a unique iconography on its reverse.<sup>35</sup> This coin depicts Shāpūr as a horseman, before whom a standing Roman Emperor approaches as a suppliant (Fig. 19), quite similar to the approaching Roman on the rock relief at Dārābgerd. The reverse legend of the coin reads as follows:

*ZNE ZK AMTš pry pws kycry AP hrwm 'y PWN b 'cy W OBDk YKAYMWN / HWEd*

*ēn ān ka-š firipōs kēzar ud hrōmāy pad bāz ud bandag<ih> estād hēnd*

'This (was at) that (time) when the Caesar Philip and the Romans stood in tribute and subjection to him'.<sup>36</sup>

In fact, the kneeling/approaching Philip is pleading for peace, after the defeat and death of Gordian, and agrees to pay 500,000 *denarii* as ransom. The Perso-Roman peace of 244 was also reflected as an achievement of Philip in the Roman world. A Philip issue of *antoniniani* from the mint of Antioch bears the legend PAX FVNDATA CVM PERSIS 'peace [has been] established with the Persians'.<sup>37</sup>

*The standing Roman:* this figure is commonly accepted to be Valerian (Fig. 21), who was captured by Shāpūr in 260 and spent the rest of his life in captivity. He has been depicted, on the Sasanian reliefs, as a beardless elderly man. On Bishāpūr II, III and

<sup>31</sup> See VANDEN BERGHE (1983) 139 - 140.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. GÖBL (1974), Taf. 2. See also RIC IV/III, 1-53 on Gordian III's coinage.

<sup>33</sup> See RIC IV/III, 54-95 on Philip the Arab's coinage.

<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, Hinz insists that the standing Roman is Philip; cf. HINZ (1969) 182, Taf. 111.

<sup>35</sup> M. Alram has introduced and analysed this unique coin; cf. ALRAM, BLET-LEMARQUAND, SKJÆRVØ (2007). It has recently been reinterpreted by the author; cf. SHAVAREBI (2014a).

<sup>36</sup> Transliteration, transcription and translation by P. O. Skjærvø in ALRAM, BLET-LEMARQUAND, SKJÆRVØ (2007) 23.

<sup>37</sup> RIC IV/III, 76, no. 69, pl. 7.2; see also GYSELEN (2010) 75, Fig. 11.

Naqsh-e Rostam VI (Figs. 2, 4-5), he is grasped with hand by the Persian King, as pictorial representation of Shāpūr's statement in his *Res Gestae* (see *supra*). At Dārābgerd, however, Shāpūr puts his left hand on Valerian's head. Overlaet challenges his identification on the Dārābgerd relief, discussing the size of his head in comparison to Philip's portrait and concludes that they are both representing the same person.<sup>38</sup> Although one can easily detect dissimilarities in certain details of these figures, they both have stubble on the cheek (Fig. 20). At first glance this might preclude the attribution of the standing figure to Valerian, but a few coins of Valerian do indeed show him with whiskers (Fig. 22) and this supports MacDermot's identification.

In conclusion it seems that none of the post-1960s reinterpretations was successful in rejecting MacDermot's attribution of the Roman Emperors on the triumphal reliefs of Shāpūr. The figures should be identified as Gordian III, Philip the Arab and Valerian who were mentioned by Shāpūr in his *Res Gestae* – and Shāpūr's triumphal rock reliefs were apparently pictorial representations of the text of his *Res Gestae*. On these reliefs, Shāpūr appears as a victorious *Šāhānšāh* enjoying his splendid triumphs over his most powerful adversary – the Roman Empire. Gordian is killed in the war, Philip is pleading for the peace which made him tributary, and Valerian is standing beside or before Shāpūr, grasped by hand as a prisoner.

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<sup>38</sup> OVERLAET (2009) 495 - 496, Fig. 15.

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## Figures



**Fig. 1**

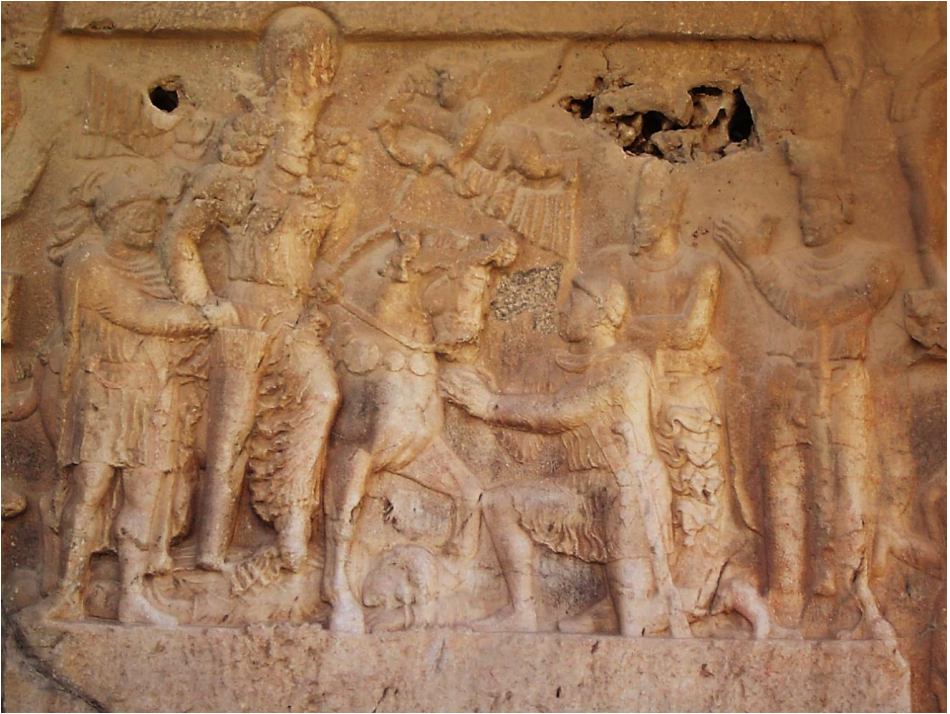


**Fig. 2**



**Fig. 3**





**Fig. 4**



**Fig. 5**



**Fig. 6**



**Fig. 7**



**Fig. 8**



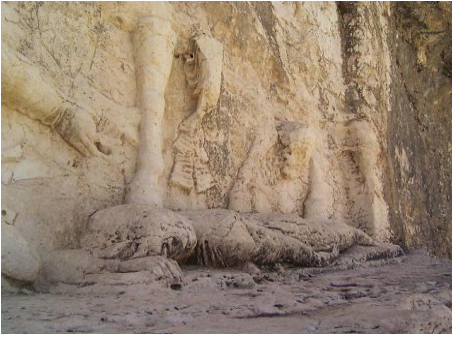
**Fig. 9**



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**Fig. 10**





**Fig. 11**



**Fig. 12**



**Fig. 13**



**Fig. 14**



**Fig. 15**



**Fig.16**



Fig. 17

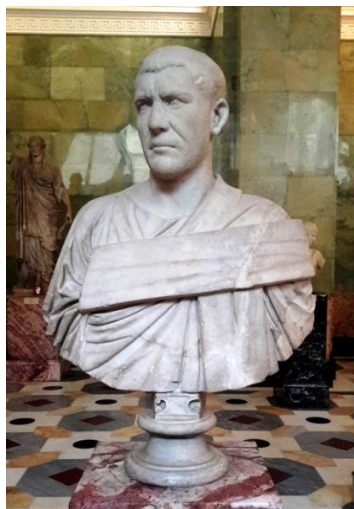


Fig. 18



Fig.19



Fig. 20





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## Summary

Five rock reliefs surviving in Persis/Fārs province in southern Iran represent the victories of Shāpūr I (241–272 AD), the second Sasanian King of Kings (*Šāhānšāh*), over the Roman Empire. The three Roman Emperors depicted on these reliefs have traditionally



been identified as Gordian III (238–244), Philip I – known as ‘the Arab’ – (244–249) and Valerian I (253–260). From the 1960s onward, new interpretations are presented. In the most recent of these, Uranus Antoninus (253/254) is recognised on three of Shāpūr’s triumphal reliefs. The present paper aims to re-examine these new hypotheses by considering numismatic materials, including a unique gold coin of Shāpūr which bears an image of the same topic accompanying a legend on its reverse.

**Keywords:** Shāpūr I, Sasanian rock reliefs, Gordian III, Philip the Arab, Valerian, Uranus Antoninus, Bishāpūr, Dārābgerd