

SASANIAN BISHAPUR AND ITS ROCK RELIEFS



Map source: <https://www.sasanika.org/wp-content/uploads/sasanika-map2.jpg>

In anticipation of the article by Pei Chengguo which follows in this number of our journal – his subject involving the importance of what was undoubtedly Sasanian silver coinage along the silk routes in China – I thought it would be useful to invite readers to explore other aspects of Sasanian history and culture. There are many good sources to assist in this (see the bibliographic note below).

Why should one care? Founded in 224 CE, when Ardashir I defeated the last of the Parthian rulers of the Middle East, the Sasanian Empire then lasted more than four centuries until its conquest by the Arabs. The Sasanian armies checked Roman expansion to the East, at the same time that they drew on Roman engineering expertise to help shape their impressive built environment. At its greatest extent, the Sasanian empire encompassed much of the Middle East, extending into Central Asia and occupying the ocean shore. It controlled major routes of Eurasian trade; its cultural influence reached far into East Asia. No study of the Silk Road would be complete unless it devoted significant space to Sasanian history.

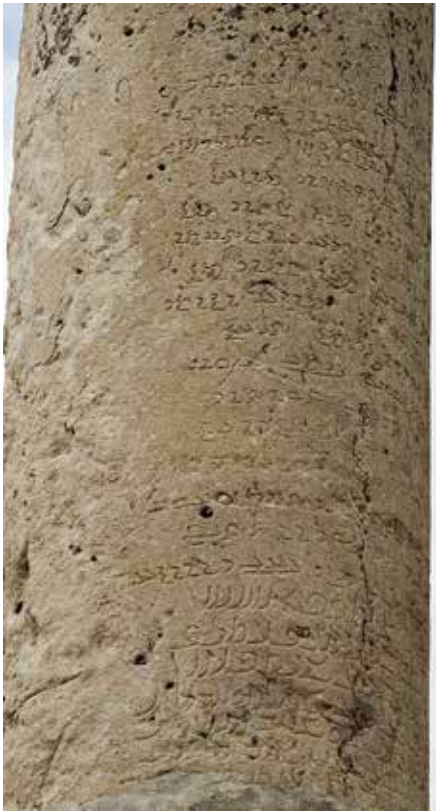
To travel in Iran, as I was privileged to do for about a month in 2010, brings one into contact with dramatic visual evidence of the Sasanians – remains of large palaces and forts, waterworks, and, among other things, a great deal of relief sculpture. The Sasanian kings lavished resources on public monuments proclaiming their relationship to their gods and their military victories. Among the most noteworthy of such relief sculptures are those at Bishapur, the new capital founded by Shapur I (r. 240–270) where the Shapur River emerges from the Tang-e Chogan valley at a key intersection of trade routes in southwestern Iran.

For further reading: A good introduction to Sasanian history is Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London: IB Tauris, 2013, pb. ed.; first published in 2009). Daryaee is in the process of creating a major on-line resource about the Sasanians, “Sasanika: Late Antique Iran Project” <sasanika.org>, which will eventually include many articles, images, etc. There are some good general essays in Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart, eds. *The Sasanian Era. The Idea of Iran, Vol. III* (London: London Middle East Institute at SOAS and British Museum, 2008). For Bishapur, see the elegant, short essay by Dietrich Huff with a wonderful aerial photo, in David Stronach and Ali Mousavi, eds., with photographs by Georg Gerster, *Ancient Iran from the Air* (Darmstadt: Philipp von Zabern, 2012), pp. 88–90. Generally authoritative if dense and sometimes a bit dated, but accessible on-line, are the articles in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, in particular Edward J. Keall. “Bīšāpūr” [1989] <<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bisapur-town>>, and G. Herrmann and V. S. Curtis, “Sasanian Rock Reliefs” [2002] <<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/sasanian-rock-reliefs>>. Jona Lendering’s “Livius.org: Articles on Ancient History” (see esp. <<http://www.livius.org/articles/place/bishapur/>> contains descriptions and a good many excellent images of most of the Sasanian reliefs (the reference designations being those of Vanden Berghe’s catalogue), but somewhat glosses over the ongoing arguments about interpreting certain of them.

-- Daniel C. Waugh

The walls of Bishapur.





Columns in the central square with Parthian and Middle Persian inscription suggesting they were once topped with a statue of Shapur I and erected at the time the city was completed in the 260s.



Temple possibly dedicated to water goddess Anahita.

Remains of a fire temple that had a huge dome.



Composite image of the "garrison" looking north.





Mosaics from the floor of the Bishapur "palace" now displayed behind dusty glass in the National Museum, Tehran.



The badly damaged Bishapur I relief on the left side of the river, commemorating, apparently, Shapur I's investiture and his first major victory over the Romans. It was modeled on the investiture relief (here on right) at Naqsh-e Rostam (near Persepolis), showing Ardashir I and the deity Ahuramazda.





The Bishapur 2 relief on the left side of the river, depicting in the center Shapur I presumably as he takes the Roman Emperor Valerian captive and accepts submission of Philip the Arab, while his horse is trampling the body of Emperor Gordian III. The upper image is a composite.





Bishapur 3, the third of Shapur I's reliefs proclaiming his victory over the Romans. Shown in its setting on the right bank of the river. The image in the middle is a large composite from across the river; the details at bottom show the damage caused when an irrigation pipe was constructed along the cliff base in the 19th century.





Bishapur 4: Bahram II (r. 274–93) receives submission of a delegation of Arabs. The 19th-century irrigation pipe cut through the middle of the relief.



Below and right: Bishapur 5. Investiture of Bahram I (r. 271–74).





Bishapur 6, difficult to photograph except at an angle, depicts Shapur II (r. 309–79) receiving tribute in a victory ceremony.



The area along the river below the reliefs is a popular picnic spot today.

