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Rock Reliefs in the Western Parthian Empire: A Case Study of the Province of Adiabene

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Abstract

Relief carving is one of the most important archaeological and artistic artifacts from various historical periods. The Parthians, as one of the most significant empires of antiquity, exhibit lesser-known artistic and historical aspects, particularly in the realm of relief carvings. The Parthians ruled with a distinct approach, and some of their provinces, such as Adiabene, enjoyed a degree of autonomy. Located in the western part of the empire, Adiabene held a strategic position on the border between the Parthian and Roman worlds, playing a crucial role in the political, military, and cultural developments of the region. Despite the importance of this border province during the Parthian period, its reliefs have not been systematically studied. This research seeks to address the question: How do the stylistic and symbolic features of Adiabene's relief carvings reflect the cultural, political, and artistic interactions between this province and its neighboring regions? The study aims to analyze the artistic and identity-related significance of Adiabene by examining 13 reliefs across five regions, employing a descriptive-analytical-comparative approach. The research data were collected through library-based methods, utilizing historical, geographical, and archaeological sources, as well as comparisons with reliefs from neighboring regions. The findings reveal that Adiabene's reliefs reflect Parthian elements—such as crowns, hats, clothing, trousers, hanging ribbons, and standing postures—that appear throughout the vast territories of the Parthian Empire. In addition to Parthian influences, local Mesopotamian elements are also identifiable, including depictions of the god Nergal, the framing of reliefs, body curvature, and the one-legged stance seen in statues and reliefs from Hatra. The reliefs of Adiabene also exhibit Hellenistic influences, such as three-quarter profiles, depictions of the goddess Nike, and a sense of dynamism and movement. Religious and political themes form the cornerstone of Adiabene's reliefs. Unlike some other regions, Adiabene's carvings do not feature reclining figures or indications of religious shifts toward Judaism or Christianity. Instead, they showcase Parthian and regional traditions that were widespread across the empire.

Keywords: Adiabene, Rock Reliefs, Parthian Empire, Hatra, Hellenistic.

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Introduction

The Parthian Empire, one of the greatest powers of antiquity—within which several provinces enjoyed relative autonomy (Ellerbroek, 2022: 159)—left profound impacts not only through its territorial expanse but also across cultural, artistic, and political dimensions in Western Asia and beyond. Among these, the frontier provinces, particularly Adiabene, played a pivotal role in international interactions and in preserving Parthian imperial identity. Adiabene, located in the western part of the Parthian Empire, functioned as a semi-autonomous province (Marciak, 2017: 257–398), though the exact degree of autonomy in Parthian vassal states remains a subject of scholarly debate. Due to its strategic position on the frontier between the two great empires of Parthia and Rome, it consistently emerged as a key region in the political and military developments of the Parthian period. Beyond serving as a vital trade and military corridor, Adiabene also functioned as a cultural and artistic hub, leaving enduring influences on the history and art of the region.

Apart from Abdissar and Monobazus I, no coins have been found bearing the names of other kings of Adiabene. This likely suggests that the region lost its minting privileges in later periods. Nevertheless, historical sources indicate (Josephus & Feldman, 1965: 399-441, Dio, 75: 197-199) that Adiabene maintained relative autonomy, and its local rulers skillfully exploited the internal conflicts of the Parthians and the Parthian-Roman wars to consolidate their position.

Numerous rock reliefs dating to various periods have been identified within the territory of Adiabene. The recent discovery of the Rabana-Merquly rock reliefs and the re-examination of the Amadiya reliefs have opened new avenues for research on Parthian-era rock carvings in Adiabene. To date, thirteen rock reliefs have been documented in this region, yet they remain understudied as a distinct corpus within the broader archaeological investigations of Parthian art. A systematic study of Adiabene and its surviving rock reliefs promises to yield deeper insights into the province's Parthian identity and its geopolitical significance during the Parthian period. This research aims to examine Adiabene's role in preserving and promoting Parthian cultural identity—as well as its interactions with neighboring imperial powers—through the lenses of geography, political history, and artistic production. Such an investigation will not only enhance our understanding of Parthian-era developments but

also underscore the critical role of frontier regions in shaping the history and culture of ancient Iran.

The study addresses the following research questions: This study, while documenting the rock reliefs of Adiabene, seeks to address key questions: 1. Which cultural traditions exerted the strongest influence on the stylistic and symbolic elements of the Adiabene reliefs? The composition of stylistic and symbolic elements in the Adiabene reliefs demonstrates that, in addition to Parthian artistic features, Hellenistic and Mesopotamian influences are also identifiable within these carvings.

2. In what ways do the thematic and stylistic characteristics of the Adiabene reliefs reflect the distinct identity-building strategies of local rulers? The thematic and stylistic variations in the Adiabene reliefs can be interpreted as reflections of the political and cultural identity-building strategies adopted by the rulers of Adiabene and the broader Parthian realm. These reliefs were not arbitrary but rather intentional manifestations of the political and cultural agendas of the local rulers.

Research Methods: This research employs a descriptive-analytical-comparative approach within the framework of the constructive-interpretive paradigm, one of the five interpretive paradigms in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018: 19). Hodder is a pioneer of interpretive archaeology (Johnson, 2020: 108–111). Although Hodder (1991: 7–15) does explicitly label his work as "interpretive archaeology," his emphasis on three key components—guarded objectivity, hermeneutic methods, and reflexivity—particularly his focus on the researcher's active role in meaning-making, allows his theoretical framework to be applied in defining the constructive-interpretive paradigm as a distinct paradigm in archaeology.

Drawing on Hodder's theories, the constructive-interpretive paradigm in archaeology can be defined as a research approach grounded in the belief that archaeological realities are socially constructed and derive meaning through interpretation and subjective understanding. This paradigm places greater emphasis on the role of human, cultural, and social factors in shaping archaeological findings.

The research data were collected through library-based methods, including historical sources, archaeological records, and comparative studies. After examining the reliefs of the Adiabene region, 13 reliefs featuring Parthian artistic elements were identified and selected for this study. In this approach, the Adiabene reliefs are analyzed not as objective

facts but as culturally constructed texts emerging from the interaction of three analytical layers: Historical context, Material characteristics, and Researcher interpretation, supported by comparative data.

Research Background

Previous studies on the rock reliefs of Adiabene during the Parthian period have been limited in scope, with researchers examining either individual reliefs or small groups of these carvings rather than conducting comprehensive analyses. A key figure in documenting these reliefs was R.M. Boehmer, whose work remains particularly valuable since some reliefs have now completely eroded away - in these cases, Boehmer's sketches, photographs and field notes serve as the only reliable records (Boehmer, 1981-1982; Boehmer & von Gall, 1973). His research included important documentation of reliefs at Gali Zardak, Herir, Khanes and Amadiya sites. Von Gall contributed significantly to the study of Adiabene's rock reliefs (Boehmer & von Gall, 1973). Mathiesen's work 'Sculpture in the Parthian Empire' (1992) provides a brief examination of the rock reliefs at Gali Zardak, Khanes, and Amadiya. Iraqi archaeologists Taha Baqir and Fuad Safar documented these monuments while preparing the archaeological map of Iraq. More recently, Kurdish archaeologist Dlshad Marf Zamua published important studies on the Amadiya reliefs (2008) and the Rabana-Merquli complex (2011). Grabowski conducted new studies on the Batas-Herir relief (Grabowski, 2011). Reade & Anderson (2013) examined all known rock reliefs in the Navkur plain, including those at Khanes and Gali Zardak. In his book Sophene, Gordyene, and Adiabene, Marciak (2017) discusses the reliefs at Herir, Gali Zardak, Amadiya, and Khanes. In a 2018 study, Khounani and Mohammadifar conducted a detailed examination of the Rabana-Merquli rock reliefs (Khounani & Mohammadifar, 2018). Subsequently in 2019, a Columbia University research team employed modern photogrammetric techniques to document the Amadiya reliefs (Bahrani *et al.,* 2019).

This study advances previous research in three key ways. First, it achieves comprehensiveness: unlike earlier works—often fragmentary or restricted to a small set of reliefs—it provides a systematic and exhaustive examination of all known Parthian-period rock reliefs in Adiabene. Second, it analyzes these reliefs within the broader framework of Parthian art. Rather than viewing them as isolated local productions, the study positions them as integral elements of Parthian artistic traditions, rigorously examining their

stylistic and thematic connections. Third, it makes extensive use of primary sources and recent research. By incorporating the latest archaeological discoveries and the most up-to-date field research, the study offers a more precise and nuanced understanding of these monuments.

Geographical Position of Adiabene

The province of Adiabene (Hadyab) was located in the western Parthian Empire (Fig. 1). According to historical sources, its territory largely corresponded to ancient Assyria (Mashkour, 1992: 882-881), situated between the Greater and Lesser Zab Rivers and the Tigris River. This area spans what are now the border regions of Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, specifically in modern Iraqi Kurdistan. Plutarch (74/73-63 BCE) distinguishes between Assyria and Adiabene (Marciak, 2017: 257-263). The geographical boundaries of Adiabene were never stable throughout its political existence due to its location on the contested frontier between the Parthian and Roman empires - a situation reflecting Adiabene's ongoing geopolitical predicament. Adiabene likely reached its greatest territorial expansion during the reign of either Artabanus II (Ellerbroek, 2022: 159) or Artabanus III (Debevoise, 1968: 270) between 11/12-38/40 AD, when its domains extended to include the city of Nisibis (Josephus & Feldman, 1965: 425 [Antiquities XX.67-70]; Ellerbroek, 2022: 159). In addition to Nisibis, historical sources identify Nineveh, Arbela, and Gaugamela as principal cities within the province of Adiabene (Dillemann, 1962: 147-192). The discovery of a marble statue of tlw (Attalos), a king of Adiabene, in Temple III at Hatra (Safar & Mustafa, 1997: 250) further suggests Hatra may have fallen within Adiabene's sphere of influence during this period. While some scholars interpret Roman sources as identifying Adiabene as part of Assyria (Marciak, 2017: 375-376), others equate Roman references to "Assyria" with Babylonia. Significantly, Šāpūr I's inscription at Naqš-e Rostam distinctly differentiates between Adiabene, Āsūrestān (Assyria), and Arabayestān (Arabia) (Akbari, 2008: 37). The Zagros Mountain range held profound strategic importance for the region of Adiabene. The well-known Kurdish proverb - "They have no friend but the mountains" - aptly encapsulates both the cultural and political significance of mountainous habitation in Adiabene's context. Unlike the arid southern plains, most of Adiabene received sufficient rainfall for productive agriculture (Dahlman, 2002: 273). A crucial factor in Adiabene's research landscape was its position as a frontier region between the two great empires of Parthia

and Rome. This strategic location along major trade routes established Adiabene as a vital military and economic gateway, cementing its geopolitical importance.

◄ **Fig. 1: Approximate territory of the kingdom of Adiabene (https://ebrary.net/161768/history/vassal_states_kingdoms_under_parthian_influence).**

Political History of Adiabene

Reconstructing the political history and status of Adiabene's kings remains challenging due to the scarcity of sources. The earliest classical reference to Adiabene appears in Plutarch, who mentions it as an ally of Tigranes, the King of Armenia, during the Battle of Tigranocerta (Plutarch, 2001: 346; Gutschmid, 2009: 80; Marciak, 2017: 345). This reference confirms that Adiabene was already part of the Parthian provinces by 69 BCE. Based on available sources, Adiabene likely became a tributary kingdom and vassal state under Parthian suzerainty during the reign of Mithridates II (ca. 121-91 BCE) (Marciak, 2017: 246-247; Ellerbroek, 2022: 159). Classical sources consistently present Adiabene as an integral part of the Parthian realm, particularly in contexts documenting Parthian-Roman diplomatic relations and conflicts (Marciak, 2017: 257-263). Recent research, based on coinage attributed to Abdissar (Fig. 2) (Abdisars – a Semitic name meaning "Servant of Ishtar"; Marciak, 2017: 345; Marciak & Wójcikowski, 2016: 81), identifies him as Adiabene's first attested king (mid-2nd century

BCE – ca. 164 BCE?). These studies suggest the kingdom's formation occurred between the late 3rd century BCE and early 1st century BCE (Marciak, 2017: 345–346; Brown, 2022: 931; Grabowski, 2011: 117). The proposed chronology remains subject to debate due to varying interpretations of Abdissar's coinage. The political status of Adiabene during the Parthian period—particularly from the 1st century BCE to the 1st century CE—is comparatively clearer in historical sources than in earlier periods. Artaxares, a king of Adiabene, was likely a contemporary of Phraates IV. His name appears in a text related to Augustus alongside Tiridates I of Parthia (26–29 BCE)—who is referred to as Tiridates II in some sources (Ellerbroek, 2022: 88–89). However, no further information about Artaxares survives. The mention of Artaxares as a ruler alongside Tiridates—both appearing before Augustus—strongly suggests that Adiabene sought to exploit Parthia's internal turmoil and Rome's support for Tiridates to negotiate advantageous terms. This mirrors the strategy of Izates II, who later expanded Adiabene's territory to Nisibis by backing Artabanus. Izates I (late 1st century BCE) is sparsely documented, with his name appearing only in a single text referencing Queen Helena's memorial in Jerusalem (B.J. V.147) (Josephus & Feldman, 1965: 438; Ellerbroek, 2022: 159; Marciak, 2017: 351; Debevoise, 1968: 165). Notably, Josephus identifies Helena as Izates' daughter (Marciak, 2017: 350). Monobazus I, son of Izates I, is documented as both the brother and husband of Helena while reigning as king of Adiabene (Pigulevskaya, 1993: 97). He likely died in 38 CE (Debevoise, 1968: 166).

Monobazus I's kingship is confirmed by coinage bearing his name (Fig. 3). The obverse displays ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ MONOBAZOY ("King Monobazus"), while the reverse bears the inscription ΕΒ ΛΤ, which most likely dates to 20/21 CE. Josephus' account reveals that Monobazus I transferred control of Gordyene (Corduene) to his son Izates (Antiquities XX.24), strongly suggesting this region's incorporation into Adiabene during their rule. Contemporary with King Abinerglos of Characene under Parthian King Phraates IV, Monobazus established Adiabene's growing influence. This political prominence reached its peak under Izates II, whose involvement in Parthian dynastic conflicts and the royal family's conversion to Judaism became exceptionally well-documented through Josephus' Jewish Antiquities (Josephus & Feldman, 1965: 399-441) and supplemented by Tacitus' Annals as the sole non-Jewish source. Izates II was likely born around 1 BCE. During his residence in Characene from

18/19 CE to 22/23 CE and until 37/38 CE, he married Symacho, daughter of the Characene king (Marciak, 2017: 358). His political significance emerged through supporting Artabanus II during Parthian succession struggles, for which he received distinctive royal privileges including the Parthian tall crown, a golden throne, and control over Nisibis (Josephus & Feldman, 1965: 425). The latter years of his rule saw mounting opposition, culminating in 52 CE when Adiabene's nobility petitioned Vologases I for assistance against their king. Vologases I's planned invasion of Adiabene was aborted when eastern hostilities (likely occurring early in his reign) demanded his attention. Josephus further records that in Izates' final years, King Abias of the Arabs launched an attack against Adiabene (Josephus & Feldman, 1965: 331-337). Izates II probably died in 55/56 CE. Tacitus provides critical insight into Izates' opportunistic role during the 49 CE Parthian civil war between Gotarzes II and Mithridates. Initially supporting Mithridates, Izates ultimately betrayed him by withdrawing his forces when his political calculus shifted toward favoring Gotarzes II (Marciak, 2017: 359). Monobazus II, brother of Izates II, likely ascended to the throne of Adiabene in 55/56 CE. During his reign, Tigranes VI established Roman-backed rule over Armenia, with Tigranocerta falling under Roman control by 61 CE. Tigranes subsequently launched an invasion of Adiabene, prompting Monobazus II to request military aid from Vologases I (r. c. 51/50-79 CE). The ensuing Parthian counterattack on Tigranocerta escalated into full-scale Roman-Parthian warfare (54-63 CE), which concluded with a formal peace treaty (Pigulevskaya, 1993: 106-107; Debevoise, 1968: 185-196). Notably, Monobazus II participated as a signatory witness during the treaty negotiations (Debevoise, 1968: 195).

Monobazus II is again documented during the Jewish revolt against Rome in 66 CE (Marciak, 2017: 362). Historical records remain silent about Adiabene until 115-117 CE, coinciding with Roman invasions of Mesopotamia and Armenia. During Trajan's eastern campaigns against Parthian territories, Adiabene was ruled by King Mebarsapes (Marciak, 2017: 366-374; Pigulevskaya, 1993: 109-111). Trajan first conquered Armenia in 114 CE, followed by the capture of Antioch and Dura-Europos (Mohammadifar, 2010: 41). When the Roman army advanced into Mesopotamia, King Mebarsapes of Adiabene mounted a defense but ultimately lost Nisibis before retreating to Arbela, Adiabene's capital. By 116 CE, both Adiabene and Ctesiphon had fallen to Roman forces.

Following Trajan's death in 117 CE, Mebarsapes successfully reclaimed his throne (Marciak, 2017: 373-378). The Chronicle of Arbela (Arbela 1985), which documents the lives of Christian bishops in Arbela (ca. 104–544 CE), mentions a certain Raqbakt as the ruler of Adiabene during the reign of Vologases II (?). Although Pigulevskaya considers Raqbakt a semi-legendary figure, the Chronicle describes him as a closet Christian subordinate to Vologases, whom the Magi sought to execute due to his newfound faith (Arbela 1985: 4–6). In addition to governing Adiabene, Raqbakt held the military rank of commander (equivalent to the Parthian title vspuhr). According to Pigulevskaya (1993: 113–116), he was dispatched by Vologases to aid the Parthians in their campaign against the Alans, where he perished in battle. Following this period, references to Adiabene disappear from historical records. During the Roman-Parthian wars of 161-166 CE, when Rome captured extensive Parthian territories including northern Mesopotamia, it is plausible that Adiabene too saw military engagement (Marciak, 2017: 379-382). The chronicles mention one final ruler—Narseh (c. 170-200 CE)—who rebelled against Parthian authority according to the Arbela Chronicle. For this defiance, Vologases IV launched a punitive campaign, culminating in Narseh's dramatic demise by drowning in the Great Zab River (Debevoise, 1968: 259; Arbela Chronicle, 1985: 13). The name Adiabene resurfaces in historical records in 195 CE when Vologases V (r. c. 191-208 CE), leveraging Rome's internal power struggles and supported by Adiabene and Osroene, launched a military campaign against Rome. During this conflict, Adiabene backed the Roman usurper Gaius Pescennius Niger's imperial claim and participated with Osroene's forces in besieging Nisibis. In response, Septimius Severus counterattacked, conquering Parthian territories including Adiabene (Cassius Dio, 75.1-3).

In 216 CE, Emperor Caracalla proposed marriage to the daughter of Artabanus IV (?) (r. c. 216-224 CE), but the Parthian king rejected the offer. Seizing this pretext, Caracalla launched an invasion of Adiabene (Ellerbroek, 2022: 111). The Roman forces advanced through Mesopotamia before turning toward Adiabene's heartland (Pigulevskaya, 1993: 123), marking one of the last major confrontations between Rome and the fading Parthian Empire. According to Roman historical accounts, Caracalla "razed fortress walls, captured Arbela, violated Parthian royal tombs, exhumed and scattered the bones of their kings" (Pigulevskaya, 1993: 123; Debevoise, 1968: 265). The Arbela Chronicle suggests the last Parthian-era ruler of

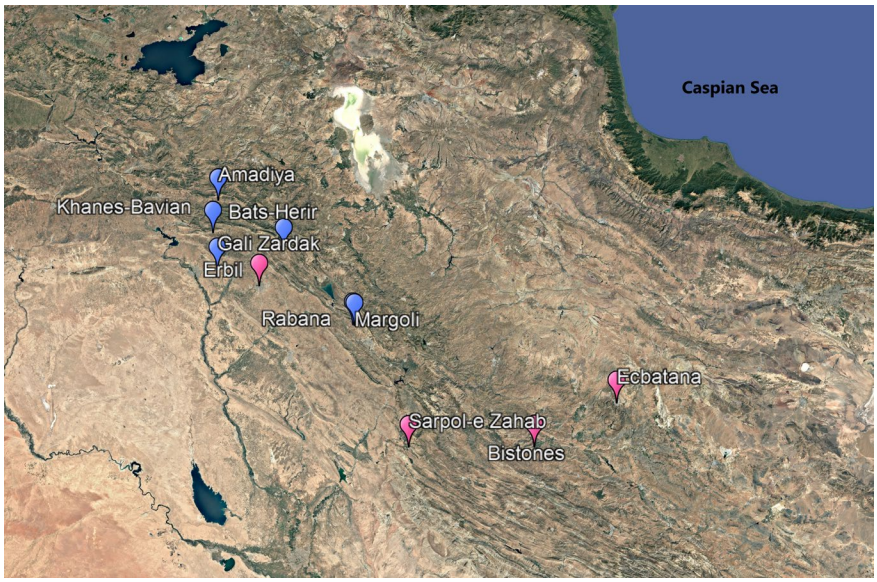
Adiabene was likely a certain Shahrat (or Shahrad, c. 220 CE) (Arbela Chronicle, 1985: 14-15), marking the twilight of this ancient kingdom before the Sassanian rise. Shahrat reportedly accompanied Artabanus IV during his invasion of Roman territories. Following the fall of the Parthian Empire and the rise of the Sassanids, the inscription of Shapur I at Ka'ba-ye Zartosht - which refers to Ardashir, the Sasanian prince, as the "King of Adiabene" (Akbari, 2008: 58) - can be considered as evidence documenting the end of Adiabene's local dynasty.

▲ Fig. 2: Coin of Abdissar (Marciak, M., & Wójcikowski, 2016: Fig. 2).

Rock Reliefs of Adiabene

Within the territory of Adiabene, thirteen rock reliefs (Fig. 4) have been identified as particularly significant among all known reliefs in Iraqi Kurdistan for Parthian-era studies. These carvings are documented across five sites: Herir, Amadiya, Khanes, Gali Zardak, and Pir Magrun. The reliefs have suffered extensive damage, with some completely obliterated over time. For instance, certain reliefs at Gali Zardak can now only be identified through early archaeological reports. Scholars attribute these carvings to three distinct cultural periods: Hellenistic, Parthian, and Sasanian, reflecting the region's layered artistic heritage.

▲ Fig. 3: Coin of Monobazos I (Marciak & Wójcikowski, 2016: Fig. 8).



◄ Fig. 4. Geographical distribution of Adiabene rock reliefs at Amadiya, Bātas – Herir, Khanes – Bavian, Geli Zardak and Rabana-Merquly (Authors, 2024).

The Bats-Herir Rock Relief

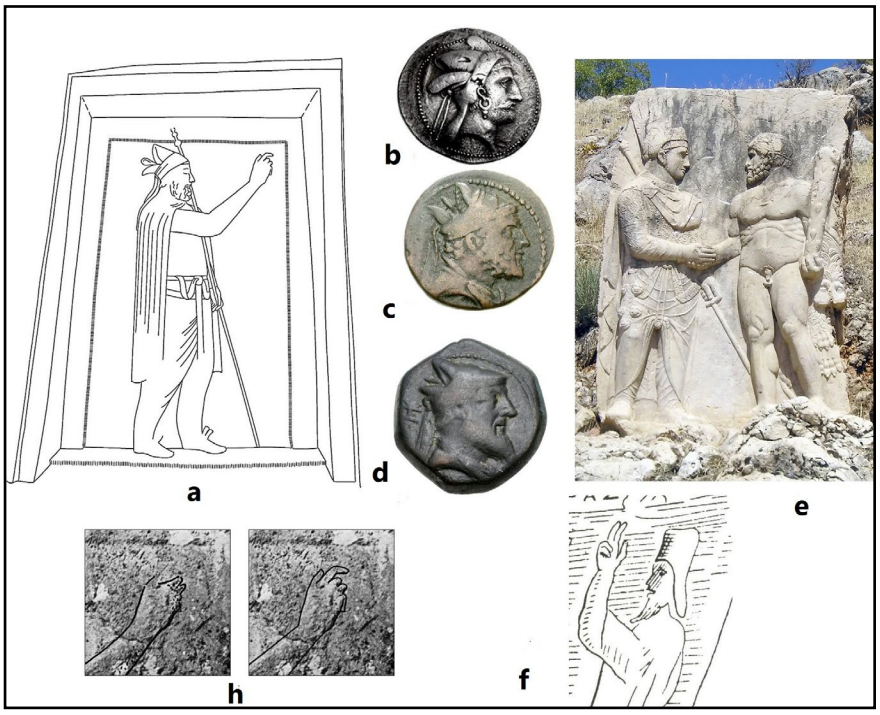
The Bats-Herir rock relief (Fig. 5) is located approximately 74 km northwest of Erbil, near the village of Bats in the Herir region. The nearest archaeological site to the relief is Tell Tlai, where Hellenistic and Parthian pottery has been identified (Boehmer 1974: 103–104). Carved

▲ Fig. 5: The rock relief of Bātas-Herir (Boehmer & von Gall, 1973: Pl. 28).

into a natural rock face, the relief depicts a standing male figure in profile view. Unfortunately, the sculpture has suffered significant weathering and damage over time. Based on a drawing (Fig. 6: a) by Grabowski (2011: 121), the figure in this rock relief raises his right arm in a bent-elbow posture, performing a symbolic gesture of worship or reverence with a curled finger (Fig. 6: h). His left hand holds a royal scepter at his waist. The figure wears a tiara (a type of Iranian headdress) adorned with a royal diadem, its edges folded upward. The figure wears a knee-length tunic tightly fastened with a belt, with the front of the garment gathered by a ribbon hanging from the waistbelt. A cloak with regular folds is draped over his shoulders and knotted at the chest. His lower attire consists of fitted trousers and laced boots. His short hair, beard, and mustache are clearly delineated, and he is depicted wearing earrings. The Bats-Herir rock relief exhibits comparable and shared characteristics with artistic traditions across a broad spectrum of the Iranian cultural sphere. The relief's frame likely represents a regional feature, also observed in the Rabana-Merquly rock reliefs (Khounani & Mohammadifar, 2018: 53) and on two Parthian-era columns from Ashur (Mathiesen, 1992: 191).

The tiara depicted in the relief resembles those worn by Bagadates (the frataraka) (Fig. 6: b) (Mohammadifar & Amini, 2015: 7), Abdissar of Adiabene (Fig. 6: c), and Xerxes of Sophene (Fig. 6: d) (Marciak, 2017: 506 & 543). Stylistic parallels between the Bats-Herir relief and Commagene sculptures—particularly in the use of royal scepters and fitted trousers—are evident (Fig. 6: e) (Brijder, 2014: 159). However, a key distinction lies in the frontal depiction of figures in Commagenean art, contrasting with the profile view at Bats-Herir. The tiara and cloak motif was widespread in Parthian art, while the raised-arm gesture with a bent index finger closely mirrors that of Mithridates II (Fig. 6: f) (123–87 BCE) at Bisitun (Mohammadifar, 2010: 190).

Scholars have proposed varying chronological attributions for the relief based on stylistic analysis. Debourse and Marciak date it to the late 2nd or early 1st century BCE (Mathiesen 1992: 182; Marciak 2017: 337–338), while Boehmer (1974: 101–102) and von Gall (Boehmer & von Gall 1973: 75–76) assign it to the 1st century CE. Conversely, Grabowski (2011: 134–135) associates it with the first half of the 2nd century BCE. The form of the tiara (Fig. 7) in this rock relief has been the subject of extensive scholarly debate, prompting various historical interpretations. Boehmer and von Gall identified this headdress as a royal upright tiara, proposing that Izates of



◄ **Fig. 6. a: Bātas-Herir relief (Grabowski 2011: 121); b: Bagdād AR drachm (Mohammadi-Far & Amini 2015: 7); c: Abdissar AE (Marciak & Wójcikowski 2016: Fig. 2); d: Xerxes (Adiabene) AR (Marciak & Wójcikowski 2016: Fig.4); e: Antiochus I (Commagene) (Livius.org); h. Hand Gesture (Bātas-Herir) (Mohammadifar 2010: 190); f: Mithridates (Bisotun) (Grabowski 2011: 128).**

Adiabene may have received permission to wear it from Ardavan II, the Parthian king. They attributed the relief to Izates II, king of Adiabene, and suggested a creation date between 52–54 CE (Boehmer & von Gall 1973: 75–76). In contrast, Grabowski (2011: 120–125) rejects the identification as an upright tiara, arguing that the headdress's peak tilts backward, closely resembling the tiara of Apages (or satrapal tiara). He contends that it bears greater similarity to the headdresses depicted on coins of Abdissar, king of Adiabene, and proposes that the relief likely portrays Abdissar, the first known king of Adiabene (ca. 164 BCE). However, due to the relief's severe damage and lack of accompanying inscriptions, all attempts to definitively identify the figure remain speculative. The stylistic features of this artwork—including its parallels with Commagenean art, the coin portraits of Xerxes of Sophene, Bagadates the Frataraka ruler of Persis, and Abdissar, as well as the bent-elbow gesture with curled finger (similar to Mithridates' relief at Bisitun)—more strongly suggest a late 2nd or early 1st century BCE date rather than a 1st century CE attribution.

The Rock Reliefs of Amadiya

Three rock reliefs are located in the city of Amadiya (also known as Amadi/ʿImadiya), situated in the Zagros Mountains within the Duhok Governorate of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. The city is perched on a

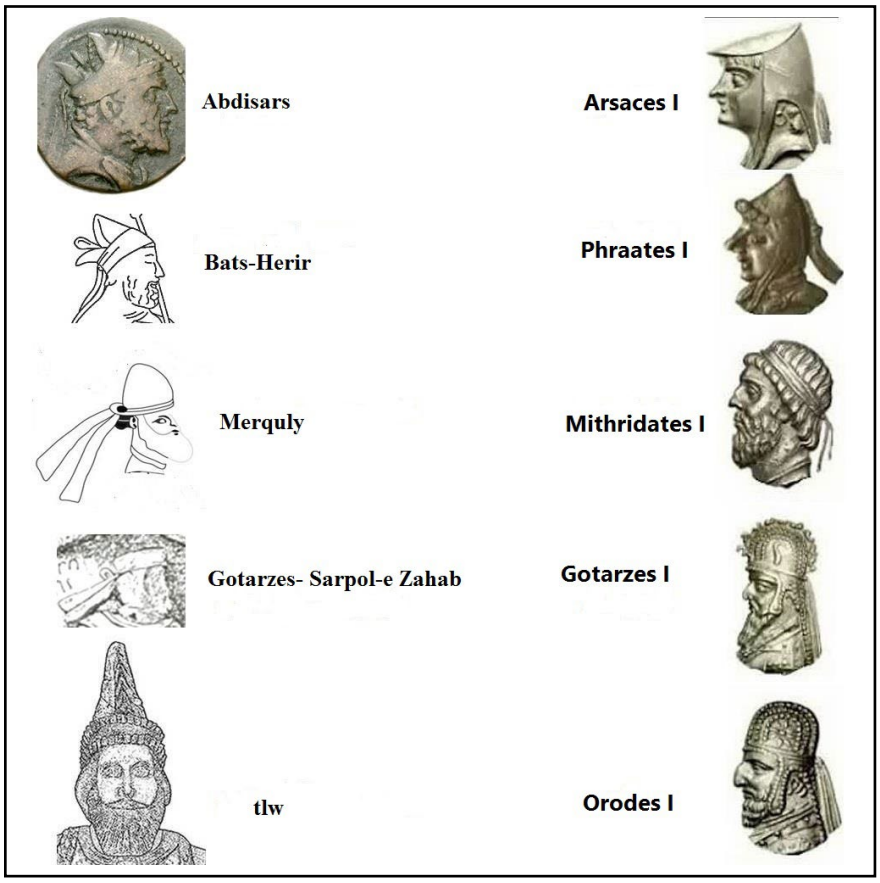


Fig. 7: Comparison of royal headgear types on Parthian coins (Abdissar), Adiabene rock reliefs, and the statue of Tlw at Hatra (Authors, 2024). ◄

rocky elevation, giving it a naturally fortified and defensible position. The existing Amadiya Fortress was constructed by the Seljuk emir Imad al-Din Zengi (r. circa 1085–1146 CE). However, older architectural remains have been documented both inside and around the fortress (Bahrani *et al.,* 2019: 1). Carved into the rock face adjacent to the western Bhedinan/Mosul Gate are three arched niches, each measuring 10-40 cm in depth, featuring life-sized depictions of standing figures. These reliefs have suffered significant deterioration over time. Scholarly opinions vary considerably regarding their chronology: Huff attributes them to the Hellenistic period, interpreting the figures as regional princes; Debourse proposes a late Parthian or early Sasanian dating (Mathiesen, 1992: 183); Boehmer draws parallels with reliefs at Geli Zardak and assigns them to the second century CE (Boehmer, 1981: 157); while Taha Baqir and Fuad Safar advocate for a broader temporal range between 138 BCE and 226 CE (Marf Zamua, 2008: 116). The Columbia University mapping and archaeological team has likewise dated the reliefs to a period spanning the 1st century BCE through the late 2nd century CE (Bahrani *et al*., 2019: 1).

Rock Relief No. 1 of Amadiya

Located just 5 meters from the Bhedinan Gate, rock relief no. 1 (Fig. 8) is the closest such carving to the gate. The life-sized frontal depiction of a male figure is housed within an arched niche measuring 2.81 meters in height and 1.54 meters in width at its broadest point (Marf Zamua, 2008: 115). According to published images from the Columbia University team (Bahrani *et al.*, 2019: 7), the male figure leans slightly to the left with a faint forward bend at the torso, his weight clearly placed on the right leg. His left arm is bent with the hand resting on a sword hilt, while the right arm extends outward to hold a long spear or staff. The hand grasps the spear/staff precisely above the elbow, topped with a distinctive curved, bell-shaped element. This spear/staff spans the full height of the relief, serving as a framing element along the figure's right side. The man appears to wear full-length trousers that taper at the ankles. Although the face and head are severely eroded, traces of hairstyle and a headband remain discernible. The figure's thick, rounded locks cascade down to shoulder level, appearing particularly distinct on the left side of the body. While no definitive beard is visible, a slight protrusion on the upper chest may suggest stylized facial hair. From behind the head, two long, flowing ribbons extend diagonally leftward - bending at the shoulder and terminating near the left elbow. Additionally, a separate semicircular element (unrelated to the ribbons) frames the head, positioned above the figure's left side and possibly representing either a ceremonial ornament or part of the headdress. On the left side of the figure, two distinct weapons are clearly visible: a broad, elongated sword that follows his leg line down to the foot, and a narrower, long sword extending from the man's hand to the edge of the relief space. Along the right side, tracing the thigh and waist, appears a curved, spiral-like line. Beneath this line, faint traces suggest another weapon adjacent to the right calf. While the damage to the relief prevents detailed analysis and comparison, its overall composition - particularly the body's curvature and one-legged stance - shows distinct features also seen in Hatrene art (Al-Salihi, 2023: Figs. 33, 60B, 67, 73, 86), the Hercules depiction at Tang-e Botan (Group 1), and the northern facade of Tang-e Sarvak I (Mohammadifar, 2010: 205-215). The figure's frontal orientation, curved and sloping body contours, bundled hairstyle, headdress ribbons, and weapon positioning all bear noticeable similarities to Parthian representations found at Tang-e Sarvak, Khong-e Nowruz, and Bisitun (Ibid: 194-219), suggesting strong stylistic connections within this artistic tradition.

Fig. 8: Rock Relief No. 1 at Amadiya (Bahrani *et al.*, 2019: 7). ▶

Rock Relief No. 2 at Amadiya

The second rock relief (Fig. 9) is situated 17.75 meters from the gate, featuring a full-length standing female figure carved within a robust niche measuring 2.35 meters in height and 1.61 meters in width. Positioned along the descending slope of the castle's exterior staircase, Relief No. 2 is the most severely weathered of Amadiya's reliefs. The niche's lower contours are slightly more rounded, and the overall structure is somewhat smaller than the other two relief niches (Marf Zamua, 2008: 115). Despite the niche's extreme deterioration - previously described as an empty frame by European travelers and scholars and notably omitted by Boehmer and Mathiesen in their studies of Amadiya's reliefs - it was successfully identified and documented during Dlshad Aziz Marf Zamua's 2008 survey. The photogrammetry conducted by the Columbia University team has revealed traces of a standing figure wearing a long garment (Bahrani *et al.*, 2019: 8). Based on the published sketch, the upper section—where the head was likely located—is heavily eroded and damaged, but the slope of the left shoulder is discernible. Traces of clothing are visible. According to the Columbia University team's assessment, the figure may represent a female, dressed in a Greek-style tunic (chiton) and a cloak (himation). The folds of the cloak drape diagonally across the body, seemingly pulled to the side and held in place by the left hand in a conventional pose associated with Seleucid and Parthian-era art. This feature is also observed in some female statues from Hatra (Fig. 10) (Safar & Mustafa, 1997: Nos. 240-241-

◄ Fig. 9: Rock Relief No. 2 at Amadiya (Bahrani *et al.*, 2019: 8, Fig. 3).

243). Since the head area leaves a significant space in the niche—consistent with the composition—it can be speculated that a headband was present at the top, and a few short vertical lines may indicate such an ornament. Near the left foot of the figure, there appears to be an object resembling an oval shield. On the opposite side, to the right of the figure, the space in the relief and the expected compositional balance suggest that the figure was holding something beside it. No visible evidence remains there, but based on the spatial context and comparative materials, it can be speculated that an object such as a spear, a flag, or a palm branch—similar to depictions of goddesses on Parthian coins (Sarfaraz & Avarzamani, 2010: 41-42)—was once represented. Delshad Aziz has reported the presence of a hanging ribbon, measuring 65 cm in length, in this relief (Marf Zamua, 2008: 115).

▲ Fig. 10: Statue No. 243 from Hatra (Safar & Mustafa, 1997: No. 243).

Amadiya Relief No. 3

Relief No. 3 (Fig. 11) is located 7 meters from Relief No. 2 and 25 meters from the Behdinan Gate. Within an arched niche, a full-length male figure is depicted in profile, measuring 2.21 meters in height and 1.79 meters in width. Among the three reliefs, this one has the deepest carving. The niche narrows toward the top and widens at the base (Marf Zamua, 2008: 115). According to the published sketch by Columbia University's team (Bahrani *et al.*, 2019: 10), the figure in this space is carved in a distinct style and with different proportions compared to the first relief. The image portrays a male figure in profile, with his upper torso slightly leaning

Fig. 11: Relief No. 3 at Amadiya (Bahrani et al., 2019: 10, Fig. 5). ▶

▲ Fig. 12: Statue No. 215 from Hatra (Safar & Mustafa, 1997: Cat. 215).

backward, suggesting an upward movement. The figure is depicted mid-stride, moving upward toward the right side of the relief as if in an ascending motion. The right side of the body and traces of the head are visible. The right arm is slightly raised, bent at the elbow across the chest. The figure's movement aligns with the slope of the staircase. Carved larger than life-size, the figure dominates most of the relief's height. Behind the figure, on the left side of the relief and behind the right leg, we see what appears to be fabric strips - possibly parts of a belt, a cloak, or perhaps indications of a weapon. The figure wears a knee-length tunic and a tight-fitting upper garment or armor. Behind the figure's right shoulder, there are traces of fabric ends that could be identified as part of a hanging headband. The lower section of this fabric appears neither flat nor pleated, but rather displays a thick, curved pattern along its bottom edge. The figure likely held a spear raised by the left arm, as traces of a pointed object are visible in the enhanced photogrammetric imagery. A curved object appears near the right side of the waist. Relief No. 3 of Amadiya presents a particularly unique upward movement that has no direct parallel in Parthian art. While the profile composition bears comparison with Parthian reliefs, its dynamic quality surpasses that of typical Parthian representations such as those at Rabana-Merquly. In fact, its style may evoke Hellenistic artistic traditions. The clothing and weaponry find closer parallels with certain sculptures from Hatra (Fig. 12) (Safar & Mustafa, 1997: Nos. 37-215).

The Khanes-Bavian Relief

The Khanes-Bavian relief (Fig. 13) is located near the villages of Khanes and Bavian in the Navkur Plain of Iraqi Kurdistan, close to Sennacherib's canal (Mathiesen, 1992, II: 184–185). The area contains a series of Assyrian reliefs, to which a depiction of a horseman—likely added during the Parthian period—was incorporated, possibly replacing part of an original inscription or relief. Scholars such as Layard, Bachmann, Andrae, and Debevoise studied and documented this relief in the 19th and 20th centuries. According to research by Reade & Anderson (2013: 97-120), three distinct phases can be proposed for the relief's development:

Phase One: During the Neo-Assyrian period, the rock face was decorated with reliefs depicting Assyrian kings and deities, likely including either an inscription or a large-scale figural composition.

Phase Two: In the Parthian period, portions of the original Assyrian relief were deliberately defaced and replaced with an image of a mounted rider. This alteration may reflect contemporary political or religious shifts.

Phase Three: In subsequent periods, two burial niches? were carved into the existing relief, representing a later functional repurposing of the monument (They should not be older than 230 AD, but they are probably not later than the 4th or 5th century AD either.).

Based on the reconstruction proposed by Reade and Anderson, the original Assyrian relief featured scenes of two standing Assyrian figures worshiping Assyrian deities. These carvings were executed on a large rock surface covering approximately 9.5 square meters. The relief depicts two standing figures - likely Assyrian kings - facing each other in an act of divine worship. The Assyrian gods are represented either mounted on sacred animals or accompanied by their divine symbols. Additionally, there exists a separate stone projection standing over 8 meters tall with dimensions of roughly 8 by 6 meters. This massive structure is surrounded by colossal carvings of winged bulls with human heads, featuring additional scenes of the king worshiping his gods. Two or three lion/sphinx-shaped pedestals atop the cliff and on the large panel likely supported statues or a columned structure. A group of approximately eleven or more carved stone stelae, each about 2 meters tall and bearing inscriptions depicting the king in worship, overlook the canal route. The stone carvings were probably once brightly painted (Reade & Anderson, 2013: 97). The equestrian relief, likely added during the Parthian period, shows a bearded male rider wearing a crown-

like headpiece and spiral necklace, mounted on a galloping horse moving rightward. The 4.2m tall by 6.7m wide panel depicts the rider holding a long spear in his right hand while wearing garments with U-shaped folds and a V-shaped neckline (Mathiesen, 1992 II: 184). The horse's carefully trimmed mane and decorated bridle are visible, with its forelegs raised and hind legs planted. The relief has suffered severe damage from both natural erosion and later incorporation of two burial niches into its surface.

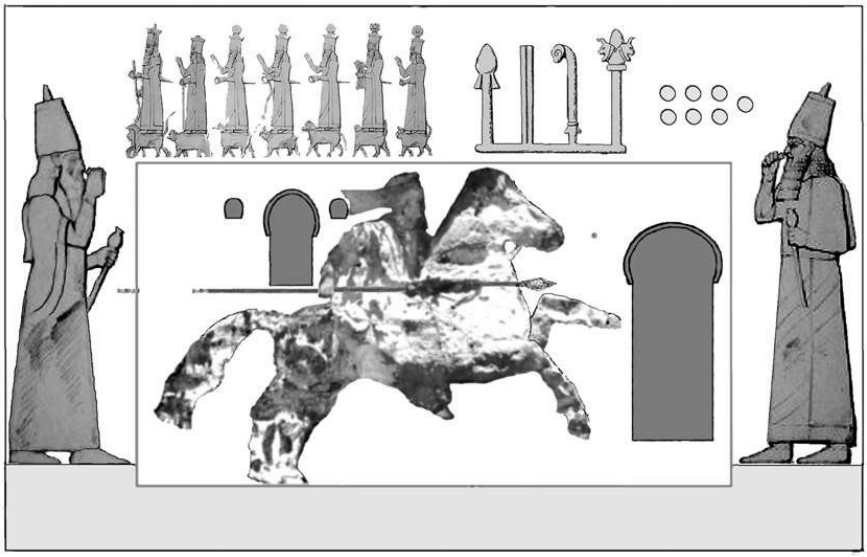
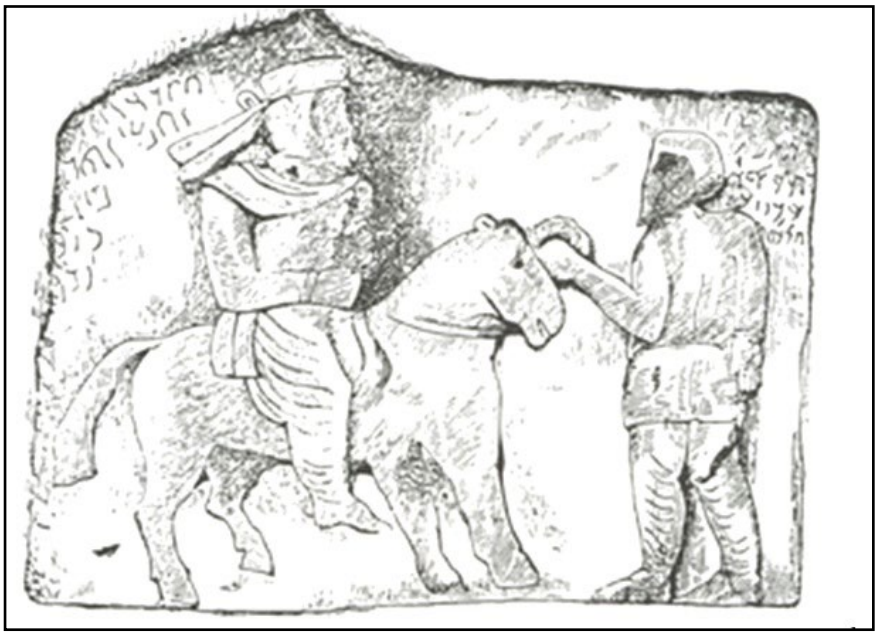
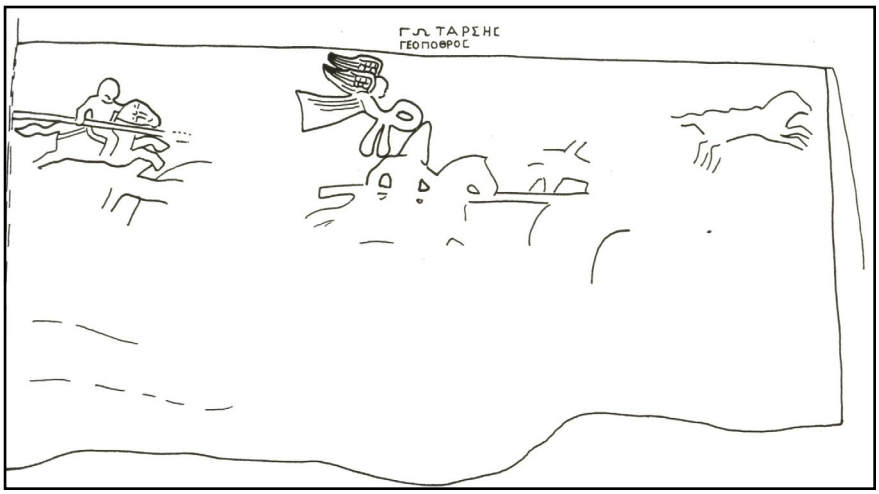


Fig. 13: Khanes-Bavian rock relief (Reade & Anderson, 2013: Fig. 68). ▶

The equestrian relief is generally attributed to the Parthian period. Some scholars, such as Debevoise, have suggested that it might depict Tigranes II, the King of Armenia. However, this suggestion has been questioned due to inconsistencies with Tigranes' coin portraits, which consistently show him clean-shaven. An alternative hypothesis proposes that the relief could represent Alexander the Great commemorating his victory at the Battle of Gaugamela (331 BCE), though this interpretation has also been challenged based on stylistic and iconographic discrepancies (Mathiesen, 1992, II: 184; Reade & Anderson, 2013: 111-114; Marciak, 2017: 340-341). The depiction of a spear-bearing horseman held particular popularity in the Parthian-era Near East (Kawami, 2013: 63). This relief can be compared to the portrayal of Gotarzes at Bisitun (Fig. 15), particularly in terms of the horse's dynamic posture. Additionally, the headband with ribbons in the Khanes-Bavian relief finds parallels with Gotarzes' depiction at Sarpol-e Zahab (Fig. 14). Overall, this relief likely dates to the 1st century BCE through 1st century CE and probably represents a Parthian ruler or king commemorating military victories.



◄ Fig. 14: Rock relief of Gotarzes at Sarpol-e Zahab (Mohammadi-Far, 2010: 196).



◄ Fig. 15: Rock relief of Gotarzes at Bisotun (Mohammadi-Far, 2010: 192).

The rock reliefs of Gali Zardak

In northwestern Mosul, at a site called Gali Zardak - a roughly oval-shaped valley - six rock reliefs and one rock-cut chamber have been identified (Fig. 16: h). In some cases, the reliefs have completely eroded away. The following description is based on sketches, photographs, and writings by Boehmer (1981: 151-165) and Mathiesen (1992 II: 182-183). The Gali Zardak reliefs have been attributed to the Parthian period. Boehmer has suggested with high probability that this complex represents a burial site for Parthian princes dating to the 2nd century CE, approximately contemporary with Hatra.

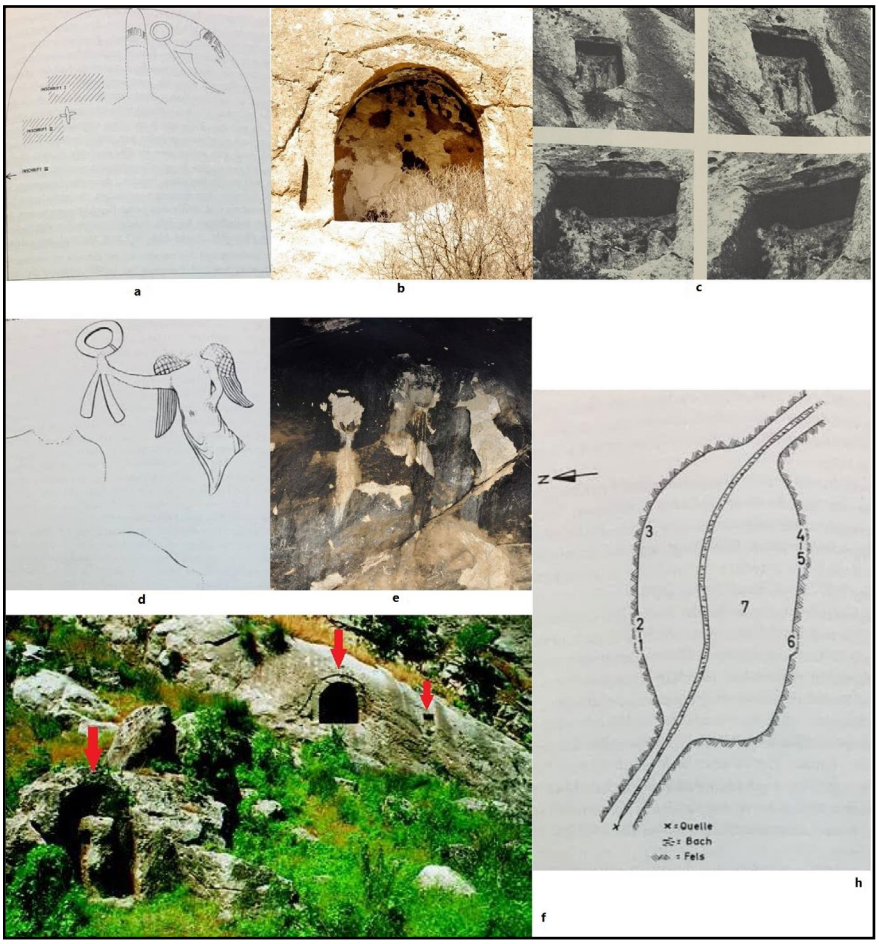
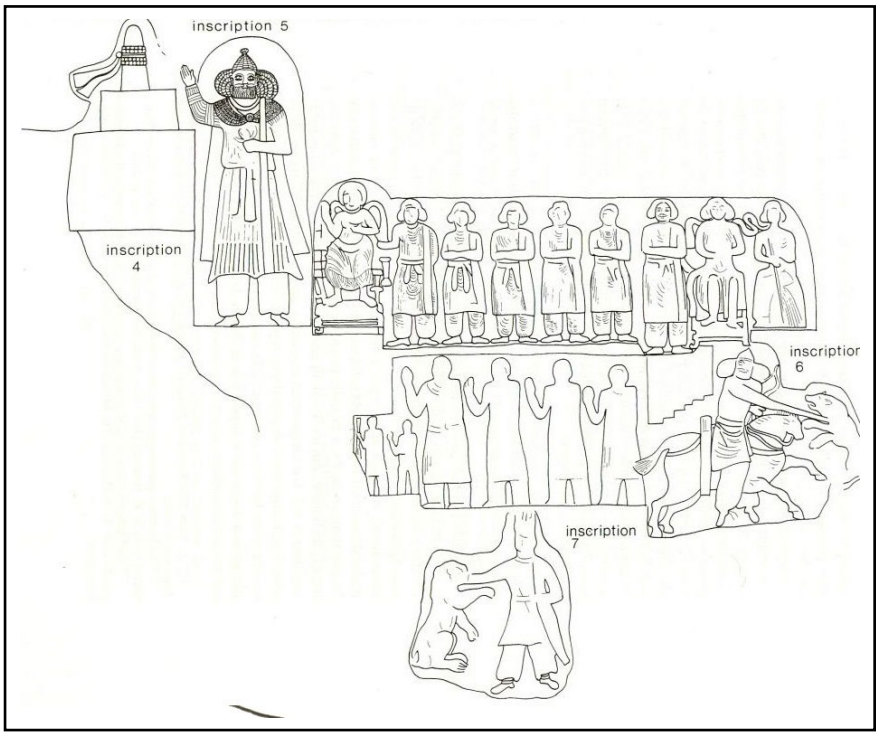


Fig. 16: a) Drawing of Gali Zardak Relief No. 1 (Boehmer, 1981: 155, Fig. 12); b) Current state of Relief No. 1 (Pierdaniele, 2021: Fig. 22); c) Relief No. 2 (Boehmer, 1981: Pl. 40); d) Drawing of Relief No. 4 (Boehmer, 1981: 160, Fig. 15); e) Current state of Relief No. 4 (Pierdaniele, 2021: Fig. 23); h) Location of reliefs and Chamber 3 at Gali Zardak (Boehmer, 1981: 154, Map 5); f) Position of Reliefs 1, 2, 7 (Reade & Anderson, 2013: Fig. 67). ▶

Gali Zardak Relief (Mathiesen No. 136 / Boehmer No. 1)

When reaching the oval-shaped valley, on the left side of the smooth, sloping northern wall, at a height of 2 to 3 meters above the valley floor, there is a deep niche. The niche is semicircular at the top and separated from the rock by a wide frame (Fig. 15: b). The back wall of the deep arched niche (approximately 2.2 by 2 meters) is decorated with a betyl (which Boehmer identified as a person's headgear) and the goddess Nike flying opposite it while holding a ribboned wreath (Fig. 16: a). The arm and hand of the goddess Nike are extended forward. During Boehmer's visit, only the left wing of the goddess Nike remained visible. To the left of the betyl, there were two damaged inscriptions. Additionally, a third inscription existed on the left wall of the niche. Today, the relief has been completely destroyed by both human and natural factors. The Oxford Dictionary defines a betyl as a "sacred meteorite stone." The term betyl is of Semitic origin, meaning "house of God." The veneration of stones or their sacred status has ancient roots. Betyls have been documented in historical sources and

archaeological records across various regions of Western Asia, Greece, and Rome (Marinatos, 2009: 73-80). The betyl appears on the reverse of coins from Roman emperors such as Trajan (Rowan, 2008: 35-39). The betyl depicted in the Gali Zardak relief can be compared to the betyl of Tang-e Sarvak II (Fig. 17) (Mohammadifar, 2010: 217). The goddess Nike holding a ribboned wreath of power also finds parallels with the Gotarzes relief at Bisotun (Ibid: 192), though the wings of the Nike figure at Gali Zardak differ from those at Bisotun and show greater similarity to examples from Hatra (Al-Salihi, 2023: 19).



◄ **Fig. 17: Tang-e Sarvak II (Mohammadi-Far, 2010: 217).**

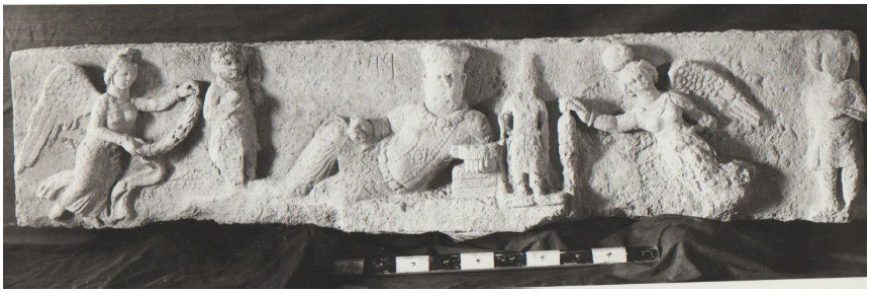
The Gali Zardak relief (Mathiesen No. 137/Boehmer No. 2) has no surviving drawings, only a few poor-quality photographs (Fig. 16: c) and Boehmer's descriptions remain. This small relief is carved on a nearly vertical rock face, measuring about 0.90 meters tall and 0.80 meters wide. It shows a standing male figure on the right side with the head missing. The figure wears a knee-length tunic with loose trousers and a short cloak over it. In his left hand he holds either a sword or staff that reaches to hip level. The head, right shoulder and arm are completely gone. The left arm is separated from the body with the hand resting on the waist, probably holding the hilt of a sword hanging down from that point. This type of clothing is commonly seen in Parthian period statues and reliefs, like those found at Hatra. The three-dimensional statues of Parthian princes placing

their hands on their weapons in this manner are well-documented. His right hand rests above what appears to be an altar(?) positioned beside him. His right foot seems broader than the left, suggesting a side view perspective. Additionally, his chest appears relatively narrow. The altar-like structure beside him might represent the lower portion of a standing figure, possibly a woman wearing a full-length garment. Boehmer has compared this relief with the depiction of Vologases at Bisitun.

Gali Zardak Relief (Mathiesen No. 138 / Boehmer No. 4)

The relief is carved on the back wall of a deep arched niche (approximately 3.30 by 4.10 meters). It appears to depict a rider moving leftward, with the goddess Nike holding a ribboned wreath positioned above his head (Fig. 16d). Currently, the relief is heavily covered in soot due to fires lit by shepherds (Fig. 16e). The front edge of the relief is severely damaged. However, as can still be seen today, a 15-17.5 cm wide border of rock remains along the sides. Behind this border, the side walls have been carved vertically to a length of 3.27 meters and a height of 1.82 meters up to a protruding band-like feature, beyond which the vaulted arch begins. The height of the arch measures 3.45 meters from the floor at the front and 3.73 meters at the rear. The architect of this structure appears to have been familiar with arched constructions and decorative bands, similar to those well-preserved at Hatra. The rear wall was decorated with a relief sculpture. While the main portion of this relief is severely damaged, it can still be discerned that it originally depicted a horseman. The horse's back line and the point where the tail attaches remain clearly separated from the background. Of the rider, only the rough outlines of the upper torso are distinguishable, with the shoulder lines being the most clearly visible parts. One arm appears bent while the other was extended forward. The head and neck are completely destroyed. Behind the rider, a well-preserved figure of the goddess Nike is visible, appearing slightly brighter against the soot-blackened background. She wears a long skirt, with her right leg emerging from beneath it. Two wings sprout from her shoulders - the wing feathers rendered in a scale-like pattern and the arm feathers in linear designs, similar to depictions of Nike at Hatra (Fig. 18) (Al-Salihi, 2023: 19). The head remains discernible in its general outline. The left arm is bent while the right arm extends forward. In her right hand, she holds a well-preserved victory wreath. Two ribbons hung from the wreath - one remains clearly visible while only the end of the other survives. Victory

wreaths with hanging ribbons are known from Parthian period coins (Sarfaraz & Avarzamani, 2010: 41-42) and the Gotarzes relief at Bisotun (Mohammadifar, 2010: 192). The arched niche created for this relief is comparable in depth and scale to the Taq-e Bostan arch.



◀ Fig. 18: Relief of the goddess Nike at Hatra, Mrī period (Al-Salihi, 2023: 19).

Gali Zardak Relief (Mathiesen No. 139 / Boehmer No. 5)

The relief frame is square-shaped, similar to the frame of Relief No. 2. The relief itself has been completely destroyed. No dimensions are available, and no further information about it exists.

▲ Fig. 19: Remains of Relief No. 6 by Boehmer at Gali Zardak.

Gali Zardak Relief (Mathiesen No. 140 / Boehmer No. 6)

This relief is set within a rectangular frame measuring 0.74 meters in width. The visible portion of the relief shows part of a head surrounded by a circular halo (Fig. 19), similar to depictions of various deities at Hatra. On the left side of the relief, the beginnings of two strong, rigid rays are visible. Between them lies a thin, flaming ray, above which a horizontal line curves vertically upward. Boehmer suggests this may represent a type of horn and compares it to depictions of the god Nergal at Hatra (Fig. 20) (Al-Salihi, 2023: 101). However, at Hatra, horns always project vertically from the forehead, unlike the angled orientation seen in the Gali Zardak relief.

The Gali Zardak relief (Mathiesen No. 141/Boehmer No. 7) features a rock-cut niche with a rounded top at the center of the complex, now severely damaged. It depicts a standing male figure (Fig. 16f) with the head missing and the body, particularly the legs, heavily eroded. The dimensions are: height (from left shoulder) 1.80 m; width (at waist) 0.57 m; thickness 0.33 m; niche depth 0.34 m; niche base width 1.75 m. The broad-shouldered figure narrows at the waist. The right arm remains intact to the elbow, likely bent in a raised greeting gesture commonly seen in Hatra sculptures. The left hand probably grasped a sword hilt. As was typical for Hatra's kings (Safar & Mustafa, 1997: Nos. 197-199-212), the

▲ Fig. 20: The god Nergal at Hatra (Al-Salihi, 2023: 101).

▲ **Fig. 21: Rabana rock relief (Khounani & Mohammadifar, 2018: 53).**

Gali Zardak figure appears to have carried a dagger on his right side, as suggested by the stone's thickness at that point.

The rock reliefs of Pir Magrun (Rabana-Merquly)

The Parthian fortress of Rabana-Merquly is located on Mount Pir Magrun, approximately 43 km northwest of Sulaymaniyah city. The main settlement was concentrated at Rabana. At this site, a small altar (fire altar?) is carved into a nearly rectangular niche on a flat section of the mountain slope near a waterfall. Excavations in 2017 near this altar relief uncovered Parthian pottery and spearheads (Brown *et al*., 2022: 65, 70 & 73). Two nearly identical rock reliefs are carved into the cliff face at Rabana-Merquly on its western slope, likely associated with two gate entrances to the fortress. The two reliefs are situated about 4 kilometers apart. The following description is based on drawings, photographs, and publications by Brown *et al.* (2022: 930-931), Khounani and Mohammadifar (2018: 51-52), and Delshad Aziz Marf Zamua (2011: 230-235). Both reliefs portray bearded figures in right profile, each wearing long garments with belts, their right hands raised with palms facing inward, all set within irregular rectangular frames and executed in similar styles.

The Rabana Rock Relief

The Rabana rock relief (Fig. 21) is damaged, making it difficult to discern its details clearly. The relief is framed within an irregularly proportioned arched border. The frame itself measures 188 cm in height, 80 cm in width, and 13 cm in depth. The carved scene depicts a bearded male figure shown in right profile. The figure wears a conical headdress adorned with a diadem at its base, from which a hanging ribbon extends downward. His garment consists of a long robe that falls to just below the knees, featuring two parallel lines across the chest area that likely represent either decorative elements or the fastenings of a cloak. Notably, instead of the typical loose or pleated trousers (shalvar) commonly seen in Parthian period art, the figure appears to be wearing either boots or close-fitting leggings that extend beneath the robe - an unusual stylistic feature for the era. Other distinctive elements include a long waist belt with hanging ends, a beaded necklace around the neck, and the right hand raised with the palm facing inward and fingers slightly spread apart.

The Margoli Rock Relief

The Margoli rock relief (Fig. 22) also features an arched frame. The frame measures 203 cm in height, 90 cm in width, and 13 cm in depth. The surfaces of the relief are not smooth but instead exhibit a uniformly rough texture. The depicted figure has a rectangular beard and wears a tall, domed headdress. The base of the headdress is encircled by a diadem. The figure is clad in a long garment that reaches below the knees; however, due to the stone's surface condition, it is impossible to determine whether this is simply a tunic or a tunic with a cloak. Nevertheless, two short, wavy vertical lines are visible on the chest, possibly representing the fastenings of a cloak. A belt with long hanging ends is clearly discernible at the waist—the straps of Margoli's belt are longer than those of Rabana. A plain, undecorated ring encircles the man's neck. Similar to the Rabana figure, the Margoli relief also depicts the individual wearing trousers.

The striking similarities between the Rabana and Margoli reliefs suggest they were carved either contemporaneously or within a short time span of each other. However, several distinct differences are evident:

• Headdress: The Margoli figure wears a domed hat (Parthian tiara), while the Rabana figure has a conical headdress.

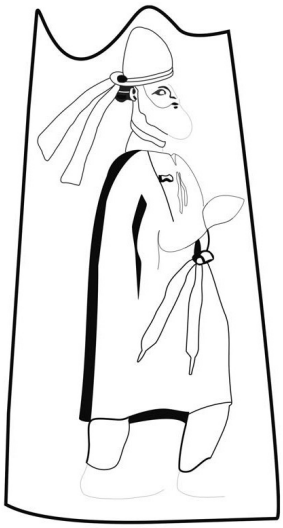
• Necklace: Margoli's plain neck ring (goshtāvar) contrasts with Rabana's beaded necklace.

• Beard: Margoli's beard appears fuller and longer, whereas Rabana's is more finely detailed and less dense.

• Eye Rendering: While both depict the right eye in profile, Margoli's is incomplete, while Rabana's is shorter and more naturalistic.

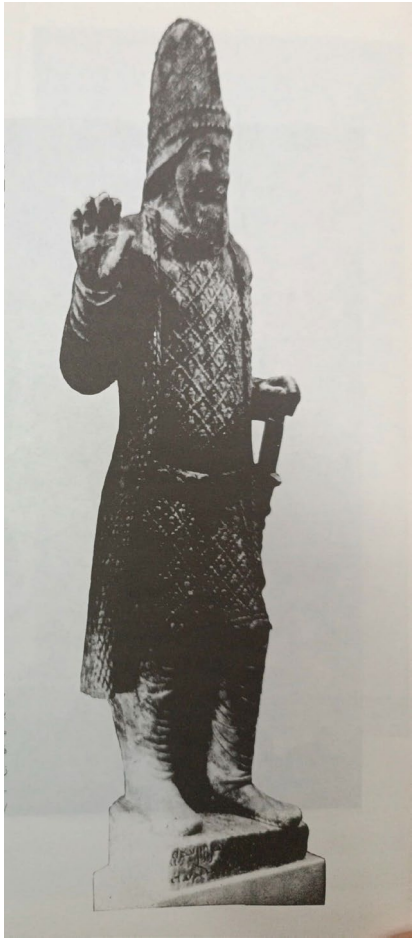
These stylistic variations may reflect either chronological differences or distinct regional workshops within the Parthian artistic tradition.

The Rabana and Margoli rock reliefs share common features with other Parthian-era artworks while also exhibiting certain regional distinctions. These two reliefs employ a framing style similar to Parthian Assyrian columns (dated to 12-3 BCE), which depict standing figures within arched niches (Mathiesen, 1992: 191). The headdresses with their diadems and hanging ribbons closely resemble those seen in the relief of (Mohammadifar, 2010: 196). This stylistic continuity suggests these reliefs belong to the broader Parthian artistic tradition, while their unique characteristics may reflect local variations in craftsmanship or chronological developments within the period. The beards of both figures can be compared to depictions



▲ Fig. 22: Merquly rock relief (Khounani & Mohammadifar, 2018: 51).

of Parthian and Elymaean men in Mesopotamia, such as the slave reliefs (1st century CE), the carvings at Masjed-e Soleiman (late 2nd to early 3rd century CE) (Kawami, 2013: 162-165), and various sculptures from Hatra (2nd century CE). Their raised hands, which may represent prayer or power, have roots in ancient Near Eastern art. The closest parallel to the Rabana-Margoli reliefs is the marble statue of tlw, King of Adiabene, from Temple III at Hatra (Fig. 23) (Safar and Mustafa, 1997: 250). The Rabana and Margoli reliefs are depicted in three-quarter view, a rare feature in Parthian art that was likely influenced by Hellenistic traditions (Khounani and Mohammadifar, 2018: 54). Their standing posture is also unusual, with slightly bent knees that suggest movement. The headdress worn by the Margoli figure resembles the Parthian tiara (Parthian tiara) but lacks the characteristic ear flaps. The closest parallels to Margoli's headdress appear in several Parthian-era depictions: a standing male figure (2nd century CE), a male head in a relief from Masjed-e Soleiman (50-150 CE), and a gift-bearer in the slave relief (first half of 1st century CE) (Kawami, 2013: 148-165). Significantly, all these sculptures portray political figures who may have also held religious authority, suggesting Margoli's headdress might similarly indicate a person of dual status. Mathiesen suggests that religious dedicators during what he terms the Middle Parthian phase (1-150 CE) wore long, pointed headdresses (Mathiesen, 1992: 28). Indeed, the priests of Hatra wore similar long headdresses lacking ear flaps. Furthermore, principal figures in the Dura-Europos wall paintings depicted wearing comparable headgear (Mathiesen 1992: 196, fig. 50). The three-quarter view likely reflects Hellenistic artistic influence, as this perspective became widespread following the Parthian conquest of Mesopotamia (Khounani & Mohammadifar, 2018: 54). This hybrid style ultimately became predominant in Parthian imperial art, blending Hellenistic techniques with local traditions. The adoption of the three-quarter view in the Rabana and Margoli reliefs thus represents a significant artistic development during this transitional period in Parthian visual culture.



▲ **Fig. 23: Marble statue of Tlw, king of Adiabene, from Temple III at Hatra (Safar & Mustafa, 1997: 250).**

Conclusion

The rock reliefs of the borderland province of Adiabene during the Parthian period reflect the profound influence of Parthian culture in this region of the Parthian Empire. This study, by examining thirteen rock reliefs across five areas (Herir, Amadiya, Khanes, Gali Zardak, and Pir Magrun), demonstrates that from an artistic and technical perspective,

these works exhibit not only Parthian stylistic and symbolic elements but also discernible Hellenistic stylistic influences and Mesopotamian motifs. Parthian elements like diadems, tall hats, hanging ribbons, rings of power, pleated garments, weapons, body proportions, standing postures, and expressive movements highlight Adiabene's cultural ties to the Parthian sphere, especially Hatra. Mesopotamian elements such as the presence of the god Nergal and the framing of reliefs reflect local influences in the Adiabene reliefs. The three-quarter view, the goddess Nike, and the dynamism are influenced by the Hellenistic style.

As mentioned in the political history section, Adiabene was under Parthian influence. This can be inferred from an examination of Adiabene's rock reliefs. The dating of these reliefs—with the exception of the "Bats-Herir" relief—goes back to the first and second centuries CE, coinciding with the peak of Parthian dominance over the region. Among the reasons for this attribution are the presence of Parthian artistic elements and the absence of the dynamic Roman style in Adiabene's reliefs, unlike similar examples in Hatra and Commagene, which were influenced by Roman art. Additionally, these reliefs show no signs of religious shifts (such as a turn toward Judaism or Christianity, as suggested by historical sources) during the Parthian period, though Christian traces (from the 3rd century CE onward) can be identified in the "Khanes" relief and the "Gali Zardak" complex. Another difference between Adiabene's reliefs and Parthian reliefs is the absence of "reclining figure" scenes, which were common in Hatra and other Parthian works. Instead, religious and political themes form the core of Adiabene's reliefs. Particularly in the "Gali Zardak" complex—which holds special significance due to its relatively hidden geographical location—depictions of the gods Nergal, Beital, and the goddess Nike with a ribboned ring (a ring of power) emphasize the region's religious importance. Furthermore, the portrayal of a horseman alongside Nike and the ring of power, as well as images of men with raised hands, likely reflect the political-religious function of these works. The rock reliefs of Khanes-Bavian, Rabana, Merquli, Amadiya, and Bats-Herir, considering their form, geographical location, and positioning, indicate objectives of political propaganda. The reliefs of Adiabene reflect the strategies of the Parthian Empire and local Adiabene rulers in identity construction. Their stylistic and thematic similarities to Parthian reliefs may signify Parthian dominance over Adiabene, the loyalty of Adiabene's rulers to the Parthians, and the consolidation of local legitimacy.

Endnote

It should be noted that Josephus Flavius's text contains inaccuracies and problems when compared to the Talmud and certain historical records. In the case of Izates II, he employs symbolic numbers—such as a 24-year reign, 24 daughters, and 24 sons (Josephus & Feldman, 1965: 437)—which hold importance in sacred texts. Moreover, Josephus's account of the Dahae and Scythians invading the eastern Parthian territories finds no mention in other sources, though two approximate parallels can be noted: the Hyrcanian tribal revolt of 57 CE and the Hyrcanian-Dahae alliance during the Parthian civil wars (the conflict between Gotarzes and Vardanes).

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Observation Contribution

All authors have equal contribution as the main contributors in this paper.

Conflict of Interest

The authors, while declaring compliance with publication ethics in references, declare the existence of any conflict of interest with a person or government agency.

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نقش‌برجسته‌های غرب شاهنشاهی اشکانی با تمرکز بر ایالت آدیابن

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چکیده

نقش‌برجسته، یکی از مهم‌ترین داده‌های باستان‌شناسی و هنری در دوران مختلف است. اشکانیان، به‌عنوان یکی از مهم‌ترین شاهنشاهی‌های دوران باستان، دارای جنبه‌های ناشناختهٔ هنری و تاریخی، به‌ویژه در زمینهٔ نقوش برجسته است. پارتیان با شیوه‌ای خاص حکومت می‌کردند و برخی از ایالت‌های آن، مانند آدیابن، از استقلال نسبی برخوردار بودند. آدیابن، در غرب این شاهنشاهی، به‌دلیل موقعیت استراتژیک خود در مرز بین دو امپراتوری اشکانی و روم، نقش مهمی در تحولات سیاسی، نظامی و فرهنگی منطقه ایفا می‌کرد. پژوهش حاضر به بررسی نقش‌برجسته‌های باقی‌مانده از ایالت آدیابن در دورهٔ اشکانی می‌پردازد. هدف اصلی این پژوهش، تحلیل جایگاه آدیابن در دورهٔ اشکانی و بررسی نقوش برجستهٔ این منطقه به‌منظور درک بهتر هویت پارتی و تأثیرات فرهنگی، سیاسی و مذهبی آن است. پژوهش با رویکرد توصیفی، تحلیلی-تطبیقی و به روش کتابخانه‌ای، با استفاده از داده‌های تاریخی، جغرافیایی و باستان‌شناسی انجام شده است. پرسش اصلی پژوهش این است که کدام‌یک از نقش‌برجسته‌ها در محدودهٔ ایالت آدیابن ازنظر سبکی می‌تواند در بازهٔ زمانی حکومت اشکانیان قرار گیرد؟ هم‌چنین، نقوش‌برجستهٔ آدیابن چه ارتباطی با هنر دوره‌های مختلف دارد و چه تفاوت‌ها و شباهت‌هایی با دیگر مناطق تحت نفوذ اشکانیان دارد؟ نتایج مطالعات نشان می‌دهد که درمجموع ۱۳ نقش‌برجسته در مناطق: باتس-حریر، آمدیه، خنس-باویان، گلی زردک و ربانا-مرقولی در محدودهٔ آدیابن دورهٔ اشکانی قابل‌بررسی است. این نقوش تلفیقی از هنر پارتی با عناصر محلی (به‌ویژه هترا) و هلنیستی است و بازتاب‌دهندهٔ هویت فرهنگی و سیاسی حاکمان این منطقه است. هم‌چنین، این نقوش نشان‌دهندهٔ اهمیت آدیابن به‌عنوان یک منطقهٔ مرزی کلیدی در دورهٔ اشکانی و تأثیرات متقابل هنری بین اشکانیان، روم و فرهنگ‌های محلی منطقه است. در نقوش برجستهٔ آدیابن، نقوش افراد لمیده و هم‌چنین نشانی از تغییرات مذهبی به یهودیت و مسیحیت مشاهده نمی‌شود، بلکه سنت‌های پارتی و منطقه‌ای که در حوزهٔ وسیعی از مناطق اشکانی وجود دارند، نمایش داده شده‌اند.

کلیدواژگان: آدیابن، نقش‌برجسته، اشکانی، هترا، هلنیستی.

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