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Mydan Mishan: A Newly Found Parthian Bas-Relief in the Alvand Range, Hamadan, Western Iran

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ABSTRACT

Hamadan province in western Iran has always been of particular archaeological significance mainly because of its administrative centre Ecbatana, modern Hamadan. In 2005 a bas-relief dating to the Parthian period was found in the southern highlands of Alvand, in the Yakhchal valley. Recently, a second relief, very similar to the Yakhchal one, has been found at Mydan Mishan. This relief depicts a person lying on a *klinè* with his legs stretched out and resting his left elbow on a cushion. The figure holds a flowerlike object in his right hand and what looks like a goblet or a drinking bowl in his left hand. A comparison with other similar examples such as the relief of Heracles at Behistun and the Elymaean rock carvings of Tang-e Sarvak seems to suggest that the figure represented could be a Parthian high-ranking officer, a noble or a dignitary in a banqueting scene.

KEYWORDS

Iran; Hamadan; bas-relief; Mydan Mishan; parthians

Introduction

Hamadan province (Figure 1) in western Iran has always been of particular archaeological significance in different historical periods, because of its administrative centre. Ecbatana, modern Hamadan, was the name given to the Achaemenid residence and capital city in the region by the ancient Greeks.¹ The toponym continued to be used during the Arsacid period after Mithridates I's conquest of the city in the years following 147 BC. The region continued to enjoy noticeable importance during the period of Arsacid rule, while Ecbatana became first the summer residence of the Great Kings,² then the second most important city and mint of the empire.

Despite this, no figural rock carvings have been identified in this area until recent times when in 2005 a bas-relief was discovered in the Yakhchal valley, east of Hamadan city, in the southern Alvand highlands. Recently, a new relief, very similar to the Yakhchal one, has been found close to the Mishan Road, south-west of Hamadan (Figure 2), 12 Km from the Yakhchal relief.

Location

The newly discovered relief is located about 10 km south-west of Hamadan, 2 km northwest of the well-

known Ganjnameh inscriptions, and 500 metres from Ganjnameh Cable Car Station at Mishan plain, next to the Alvand mountain, which belongs to the homonymous mountain range. In order to reach the relief, it is necessary to cross the Ganjnameh Valley towards the Alvand range (Figures 2–5).

Description

The bas-relief was made within a 90×60×20 cm stone niche (Figures 6–8) carved in the roughly flat surface of a block of igneous rock. The boulder is about 350 cm wide and 150 cm high. The depiction is singularly placed at the corner of the block within an oval-shaped niche (Figures 6–9). A portion of the block is missing and, therefore, it is not clear what the original position of the niche was. In addition, it is difficult to assess whether the sculptor had shaped an arch shaped niche exploiting a natural fissure of the stone or started the relief from scratch. The carved figure itself is 60 cm wide, 50 cm high and 2–3 cm deep. The panel is carved at 40 cm from the bottom and 17 cm from the upper limit of the boulder.

The relief depicts a person lying on what seems to be the upper part of a *klinè* with his legs stretched out while resting his left elbow on a cushion. He holds what looks

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¹Herod., I. 98–99.

²Strabo, 11.13.1; 16.1.16; Curt. Rufus, 5.8.1; Tac., *Ann.*, 15.31; Chaumont, "Études d'histoire parthe II," 216–217; Sinisi, "Sources for the History," 10–11 and 21–22; Boillet, "Quantifying Monetary Production"; Sinisi, "Some Remarks," 479–484.

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Figure 1. Map showing the location of Hamadan in Western Iran.

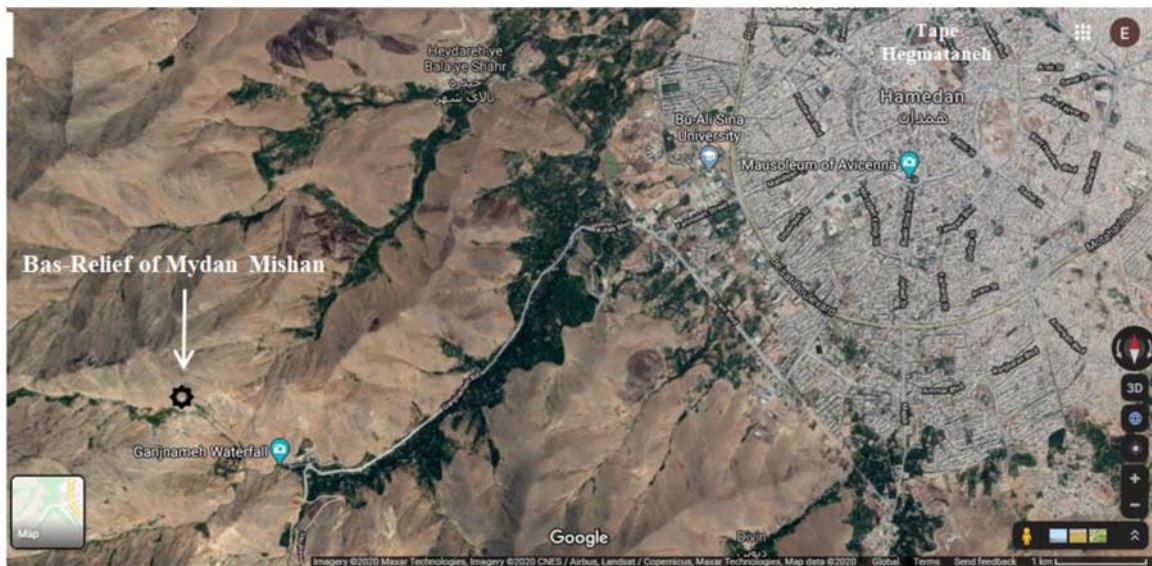


Figure 2. The relief's position, south-west of Hamadan.



Figure 3. Location of the Mydan Mishan relief in the Alvand.



Figure 4. Location of the Mydan Mishan bas-relief.



Figure 5. Location of the bas-relief, near the second climb station of Alvand.

like a goblet or a drinking bowl in the left hand, close to the chest. A series of four “flowerlike” elements are visible close to his raised right hand along with a possible second drinking vessel. On the left, a small globe could be interpreted as a celestial sign (Figure 9). These elements occupy the centre of the scene and therefore, had a special significance. Unfortunately, the condition of the stone does not allow us to establish with certainty the nature of the object/s associated with the right hand and which one, in case of more than one object, the person is effectively holding (Figures 10–14).

The recently discovered Yakhchal Valley bas-relief (Figure 15)³ can provide some useful elements to reconstruct the damaged parts of the scene. Despite evident differences in style and workmanship, the Yakhchal Valley relief, discovered not so far away from the Mydan

Mishan one and dated to the Parthian period,⁴ shares with it most of the composition elements, depicting a lying figure as well, with one stretched leg and the upper one bent. One arm is resting on a pillow and holding a drinking bowl, the other one is raised.⁵ There the object held by the raised arm appears like an oblong vessel, from which he seems to pour a liquid into the drinking bowl. It has been identified as a rhyton or a cornucopia,⁶ the latter would match with the “flowerlike” elements visible in the Mydan Mishan relief. The use of rhyta as drinking vessels during banquet ceremonies is attested in the Parthian world by the well-known findings from the Square House at Nisa, the first Parthian capital city, but also from some graves elsewhere.⁷

The cornucopia is also well attested in the “Parthian cultural Commonwealth”. Cornucopias are held by attendants standing close to a reclined main figure both in the ANa panel at Tang-e Sarvak (Figure 10)⁸ and in the Bard-e But relief (Figure 13)⁹ in the kingdom of Elymais, south-west Iran. Other examples of cornucopias, though not from banquet scenes, come from Edessa, Dura Europos and Hatra, in Parthian Mesopotamia and from the Elymaean sanctuaries of Masdjid-e Soleiman and Bard-e Neshandeh.¹⁰

The figure on the Mydan Mishan relief is wearing a conical hat like that on the Yakhchal Valley one (Figure 15) but without any decoration. Conical hats are common in the art of the Parthian empire.¹¹ The headgear has flaps hanging from each side, but the lack of detail makes it hard to establish whether it is a Scythian hat or a bashlyk, typical of early Arsacid representations on coins,¹² or even a rendering of the subjects’ hair.

The portrait presents the usual frontality frequently adopted in the artistic representations of the Parthian Empire. Due to the condition of the stone, the facial traits are vague: traces of the eyes, beard and possibly mouth or moustaches are visible. Eyes and nose are big and pronounced; the right eye seems to have been damaged by direct hard blows. The head is oversized. Probably the rendering of the face was similar

³Azandaryan et al., “A Newly Found Bas-Relief at Yakhchal.”

⁴Ibid., 363.

⁵Scenes of a banquet with the central figure laying on a klinè are known in the Near East since Assyrian times. The theme’s popularity is associated with the Seleucids and the spread of Greek culture in the area: Von Gall, “Das parthische Felsheiligtum,” 346–350.

⁶Azandaryan et al., “A Newly Found Bas-Relief at Yakhchal,” 364.

⁷Masson and Pugačenkova, *The Parthian Rhytons of Nisa*; Manassero, “Riflessioni su un Rhyton”; Manassero, “New Light on the Rhyta”; Ne’mati and Sadraie, “Parthian Rhytons from Veliran”; Pappalardo, *Nisa Partica*; Ne’mati et al., “Parthian Burial.”

⁸Debevoise, “The Rock Reliefs of Ancient Iran,” 109; Henning, “The Monuments and Inscriptions,” 166; Seyrig, “Antiquités syriennes,” 114–16; Hansman, “The Great Gods of Elymais,” 237; Mathiesen, “The Rock Reliefs,” 158; Haerinck, “Again on Tang-I Sarvak II,” 222.

⁹Vanden Berghe and Schippmann, *Les Reliefs Rupestres*, 55–56, pl. 18–19; Messina, “I rilievi rupestri d’Elimaide,” 129.

¹⁰Mathiesen, “The Rock Reliefs,” 161 n. 52; Haerinck, “Again on Tang-I Sarvak II,” 222 with bibliography.

¹¹For example, the monarch in ANW and AWb-β panels at Tang-e Sarvak: Von Gall, “Das parthische Felsheiligtum,” 327–28). In general, Yatsenko, *Costume of the Ancient Eurasia*, pl. 64, 2–10 with bibliography.

¹²Sarkohsh Curtis, “Parthian Costume,” 61–62.



Figure 6. General view of the Mydan Mishan relief.



Figure 7. An other view of the Yakhchal Valley relief.



Figure 8. An image of the Mydan Mishan relief.

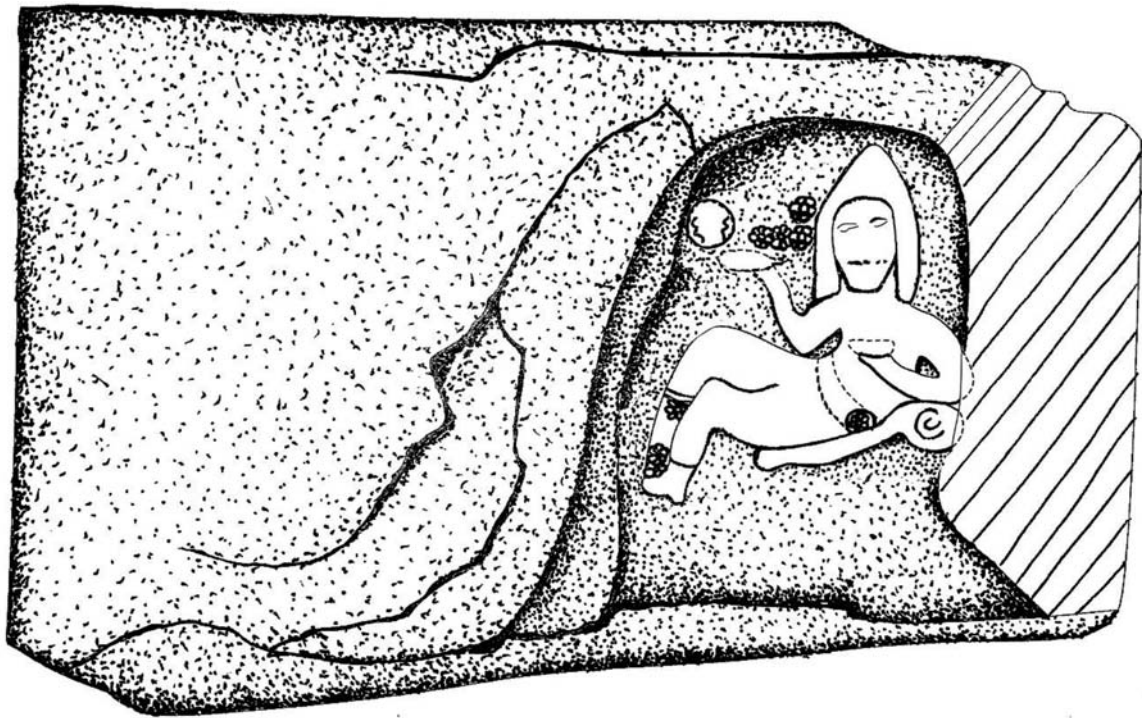


Figure 9. Drawing of the Mydan Mishan relief.

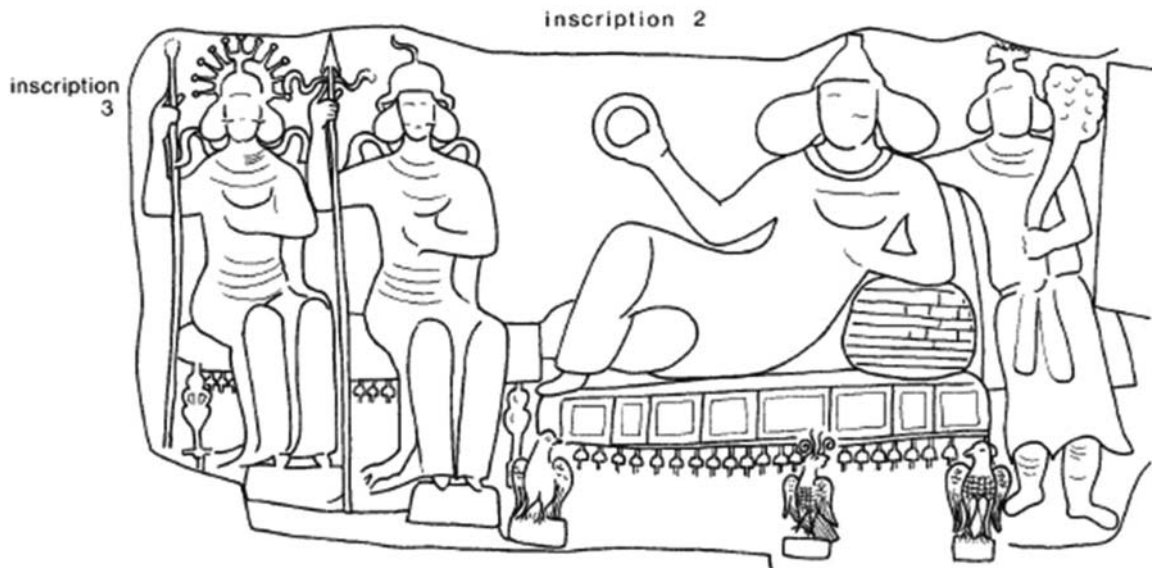


Figure 10. Tang-e Sarvak, Ana (I) panel, drawing by Erik Smekens, 1975 (Vanden Berghe and Schippmann 1985, 69, fig. 9).

to that of the Yakhchal relief (Figure 15). Differently from the latter, there is no trace of necklace or ornaments. The figure has wide shoulders and chest and a thin waist.

The reclined man rests his bent right leg over the left one. This posture is very common in Parthian representations of the same type. It is visible in the above-mentioned Yakhchal, Bard-e But reliefs (Figures

13 and 15) and the ANa panel at Tang-e Sarvak (Figure 10). These are all examples of banqueting figures represented in a similar way: stretched legs, the left arm on a cushion holding a drinking bowl while the right one is raised holding an object (a drinking vessel or a ring).

The same position of the legs is also shared by the famous Heracles of Bisotun in present-day Kermanshah

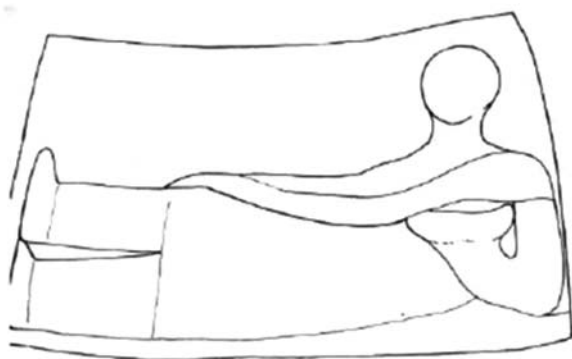


Figure 11. CE relief at Tang-e Sarvak (III) (Vanden Berghe and Schippmann 1985).

Province, dated by an inscription to the last years of Seleucid rule in Media (June/July 148 BC).¹³ The right hand¹⁴ in this case is placed along the body on the upper leg, a posture also frequent in many representations of banqueting men from Elymais like in the CE panel at Tang-e Sarvak (Figure 10)¹⁵ and the Andyka relief (Figure 14).¹⁶

This pose is also often used for small terracotta figures found in Parthian Mesopotamia (Figure 16).¹⁷ It is worth noting that a variation of this banquet pose with the lower leg bent as well, the right arm resting on the right leg, the left one holding a drinking cup, is a typical feature of the Palmyrene funerary banquet



Figure 13. The bas-relief of Bard-e But (Vanden Berghe and Schippmann 1985, 55–57).

scenes. In the 1st-3rd century AD at Palmyra, the wealthy deceased were shown banqueting with close members of their families on funerary sarcophagi that were collocated in rich graves. In most of these representations, the Palmyrene wear elaborately decorated Parthian costumes with tunics, trousers and boots; this would suggest that banquet scenes in Palmyra were influenced by the Hellenistic tradition east of the Euphrates as well.¹⁸



Figure 12. The bas-relief of Murd-e Tang-e Zir (Mehr Kian 2001, 296: Pl. 3).

¹³Kleiss, "Zur Topographie," 144–46; Luschey, "Die seleukidische Heraklesfigur."

¹⁴An interesting variation is at Murd-e Tang-e Zir, Elymais (Fig. 12). Here four men are portrayed banqueting, and each one puts his right hand on the shoulder of the man on his right. Mehr Kian, "Trois Bas-Reliefs Parthes," 294–95.

¹⁵Henning, "The Monuments and Inscriptions," 161; Vanden Berghe and Schippmann, *Les Reliefs Rupestres*, 84 pl. 51; Mathiesen, "The Rock Reliefs," 160–61; Von Gall, "Das parthische Felsheiligtum," 338–39.

¹⁶Mohamadifar et al., "A Study on the Festive Scene," 247, figs 4 and 5; Farrokh et al., "Preliminary Reports of the Late Parthian."

¹⁷Among the many examples Henning von der Osten, "Seven Parthian Statuettes," 173, fig 7; Karvonen-Kannas, *The Seleucid and Parthian Terracotta*; Sarkhosh Curtis, "Parthian Belts," 317; Menegazzi, *Seleucia al Tigri*, from Seleucia on the Tigris; Langin-Hopper, "Seleucid-Parthian Figurines," from Babylon.

¹⁸Heyn, "Sacerdotal Activities," 181–83; Long, "The Use of Parthian Costume," 77–82.



Figure 14. The bas-relief of Sang-e Mahi Andyka in Masjedsoleyman (Mohamadifar et al 2013) 247.

The male figure in the Mydan Mishan relief wears a belt with traces of a floral motive (Figures 7–9), possibly what is left of a belt made of plaques¹⁹ similar to that

worn by Vologases on the Bisotun so-called “Parthian Stone”.²⁰ He wears a pair of riding boots, also typical of the Parthian costume. The feet are stylised, and only the left foot is recognisable, but it seems that at least the foot part of the boot on the right leg is decorated with a floral motive similar to that on the belt.²¹

Conclusions

There is no trace of inscriptions on the relief, and there are no findings nearby that could help to contextualise the item. Therefore it is hard to draw any conclusion concerning its date and function. The most similar item is the geographically close Yakhchal relief, about which we are no better informed, even though between the two, some relevant differences are evident concerning style, technique and status of preservation. Both are rather small representations carved in remote locations probably visited for some cultic or ceremonial purposes or for leisure.

As noted, there are many common elements with the Tang-e Sarvak rock carvings, depicting high dignitaries of the late 2nd and early 3rd-century Elymaean society.



Figure 15. The bas-relief at Yakhchal Valley in Hamadan, Western Iran (Hemati Azandaryani et al, 2017, Pl. 4).

¹⁹Type 4 in Sarkohsh Curtis “Parthian Belts,” 301–02.

²⁰Gropp and Nadjmabadi, “Bericht über eine Reise,” 200–02, fig. 14, pl. 101.

²¹Yatsenko, *Costume of the Ancient Eurasia*, pl. 64, 77–79).



Figure 16. Terracotta figurine from Mesopotamia in the British Museum (Sarkhosh Curtis 2001, 317: Pl. IV).

These similarities, in addition to the decorated Parthian costume, the banqueting practice and pose²² and the absence of any distinguishable reference to a political authority, would lead us to think to a wealthy person or some kind of dignitary as the subject of the relief. On the other hand, the low quality of the relief would suggest that the man portrayed was not a prominent figure in Arsacid Hamadan, perhaps a member of the “middle-class” who wanted to be portrayed in a leisure activity.

Under these circumstances, it is impossible to determine a precise date for the bas-relief: it certainly belongs to the Arsacid period. The similarities with Tang-e Sarvak would suggest a Late Parthian date, 2nd – early 3rd century AD, but a more general date after 141 BC would be more cautious.

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²²On Banqueting at the Arsacid court: Lerouge, “Les banquets des Arsacides”; Lippolis, “Il banchetto di Mitridate”; Gregoratti, “I want to see the King!”

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