AND MAN CREATED GOD?
KINGS, PRIESTS AND GODS
ON SASANIAN INVESTITURE RELIEFS

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Abstract: An inscription on the Naqsh-i Rustam I rock relief identifies the two protagonists in the investiture scene as Ardashir I and Ahura Mazda. All investing authorities on the royal Sasanian reliefs are therefore commonly identified as Ahura Mazda. In view of conflicting historic information and unexplained variations in the iconography of “Ahura Mazda”, a re-interpretation of the investiture reliefs is made. The inscription on Ahura Mazda’s horse at Naqsh-i Rustam appears to have been added at the end of Ardashir’s reign or early in Shapur I’s reign and the earliest reliefs are now considered to depict an investiture by a priest, instead of by Ahura Mazda. Once the inscription had been added to the Naqsh-i Rustam I rock relief, it changed from an investiture by a priest to one by a god, Ahura Mazda. Iconographic details that conflicted with this transformation (such as the barsum, attendant and possibly the “royal” tamga) were left out of the divine image in later representations of the investiture on horseback. The late Sasanian Taq-i Bustan III investiture on foot, up to now considered to be the investiture of Khusrow II by Ahura Mazda and Anahita, is equally interpreted as an investiture by clergy, in this case by representatives of the cults of these two gods, rather than by the gods themselves.

Keywords: Sasanian, investiture, Ardashir I, rock reliefs, Ahura Mazda, Anahita, barsum.

The investiture of Ardashir I at Naqsh-i Rustam I bears trilingual inscriptions on the horses that identify the protagonists as Ardashir I (on the left) and Ahura Mazda (on the right) (Pl. 2, 7-8). Ardashir’s horse tramples on

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the defeated Parthian king (generally identified as such because of the tamga on his headdress, identical to Ardashir’s opponent at the Firuzabad joust relief, see Pl. 12, combined with the diadem and the long crimped ties) while Ahura Mazda’s horse treads on a creature that is generally accepted to represent the evil Ahriman (wearing a diadem with entwined serpents and having feet in the shape of snakes) (Pl. 9). Behind Ardashir stands his page with a fly whisk. The 6.75 by 4.28 m large relief was mentioned and illustrated by many early travellers and explorers passing through Naqsh-i Rustam and has been commented on by archaeologists and art historians (Sarre & Herzfeld 1910: 67-71, fig. 24-26, Pl. V; Hinz 1969: 126-134, Pl. 60-68; Schmidt 1970: 125, Pl. 81-82). Although the significance of the investiture scene was not always understood, there could be no doubt about the identity of the figures. The trilingual inscription, which gave the 18th century scholar de Sazy the means to decipher the Pehlevi on Sasanian coins (de Sacy 1743), making him “the father of Sasanian numismatics” (Mordtmann 1880: 14), equated the Iranian god in the Greek version with the supreme Zeus (Back 1978: 282 ANRm-b).

Since the basic lay-out of the scene — a ritual on horseback involving a ring with ties — was repeated in the rock reliefs of Shapur I at Naqsh-i Radjab IV (Pl. 2), of Shapur I at Bishapur I (Pl. 3 top) and Bahram I at Bishapur V (Pl. 3 bottom), the identity of the investing figures on these reliefs was also considered to be self-evident. The presence of a mural crown, the fact that he was unarmed and held a ring, were all elements that were used to define Ahura Mazda on other post-Ardashir I reliefs such as Taq-i Bustan I (relief of Ardashir II, see Overlaet 2012) and Taq-i Bustan III (Pl. 4). Ardashir I’s reliefs at Firuzabad and Naqsh-i Rajab also depicted an investiture scene: a ritual with a beribboned ring that took place between the king and an unarmed man with a mural crown (Naqsh-i Rajab) and/or high headdress (Firuzabad) holding a barsum (Pl. 1). Looking at all these similarities, one could but conclude that also these reliefs showed the Sasanian king being invested by Ahura Mazda. The subject sparked a series of scholarly papers on the investiture, its significance and the dating of the individual reliefs (for a survey with extensive references, see Ghirshman 1975; Vanden Berghe 1988; von Gall 1990). The idea of the “divine investiture ring” had a number of consequences for the interpretation of other reliefs as well. Narseh’s representation at Naqsh-i Rustam VIII (Fig. 1) came to be seen as a divine investiture, rather than as it should be, a family scene with his wife and heir (first correctly identified as such by Mordtmann 1880: 41-43). The woman simply had to be a goddess and was
consequently identified by Friedrich Sarre as Anahita (Sarre & Herzfeld 1910, 84-88, Taf. IX). Sarre’s identification became, as Shahbazi put it (who convincingly disproved this identification), “a cornerstone of Sasanian iconography — indeed, history” (Shahbazi 1983: 255). This simplification of every “beribboned ring scene” to a divine investiture has in recent years been rightly contested. Various authors pointed out the confusion that exists (von Gall 1990; Kaim 2009). Rings with ribbons, others without ribbons and sometimes even diadems are described in literature as “investiture rings”. The ring can have various significances, among other things, it may also be a token of a mithra, a contract, covenant or pledge of allegiance (Kaim 2009: 407-408).

The short sentence that identified Ahura Mazda had an enormous influence on our ideas about the Sasanian iconography. The uniform interpretation of the “beribboned ring” scenes somewhat conveniently implied that we have a full understanding of the reliefs. Yet, when one looks at the iconographic details of the investiture scenes, there remain many differences that were left unexplained. In the present paper we will concentrate
on the eight Sasanian “investiture” reliefs with a male investing figure who is generally interpreted as Ahura Mazda:

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If one concentrates on the differences between these eight Sasanian investiture scenes, rather than on the similarities as has been done over the last century or so, it becomes obvious that a more complex and versatile interpretation is needed and that political and religious changes that took place in the empire must somehow be embedded in these representations.

Before suggesting an alternative interpretation of the investiture scenes, let us survey the main differences that need to be explained:

**The characteristics and regalia of Ahura Mazda**

There may have been a reluctance to depict Ahura Mazda in human form in Sasanian Iran since we have hardly any representations. Franz Grenet, referring to 18.1-5 of the *Dādestān ī dēnīg*, pointed out in his discussion on Mithra that Ahura Mazda was visible only through the powers of wisdom (Grenet 2006). This would mean that there may have been a *de facto* ban on the human representation of Ahura Mazda, something which would not be surprising since, apart from the rock reliefs, there are indeed no images of this god known. However, the *Dādestān ī dēnīg* was compiled in the 9th century and may thus also reflect ideas that are not necessarily fully applicable to the early Sasanian period when many of the official religious concepts and rituals were still in a phase of formation. The attitude towards divine representations may have changed considerably throughout the period. The question 18 of the *Dādestān ī dēnīg* that is referred to by Grenet, specifically asks whether it is possible for the soul, once it has entered the spiritual world, to see Ohrmazd and his evil counterpart Ahriman. The answer to it is clear; neither Ahriman nor Ahura
Mazda have a material existence and v. 18.3 states “Ohrmazd (is) also a spirit among spiritual beings (and is) worthy of praise both in the material and spiritual worlds. His form is not completely visible, but he is seen through wisdom and similar powers” (Jaafari-Dehaghi 1998: 73). Yet, the answers on question 30 provides an opening: (30.4) Ohrmazd, the beneficent creator is a spirit even among spirits, and the spiritual beings vision of him is (like) that which is manifest to the material beings through watching the spiritual beings. (30.5) But when through the great kindness of the Creator the spiritual beings put on worldly appearances, or moreover, when they give a spiritual sense of sight to the beings of the material world, then the consciousness can see the spiritual beings through a worldly sense in just such a way as when one sees bodies in which the soul is, or when one sees fire in which is Wahram, or when one sees water in which is its own spirit. (Jaafari-Dehaghi 1998: 93). The identifying text on the NRu I relief demonstrates that Ahura Mazda could be depicted with a human appearance, but the rarity of such depictions indicate that it certainly remained exceptional.

The NRu I relief of Ardashir I is the only relief with the name of Ahura Mazda inscribed on it, therefore it is evident that one has to start the survey with this relief. The Ahura Mazda on NRu I is a bearded figure who holds a barsum in his left hand, the beribboned ring in his right hand, who is (as opposed to the king) not armed and wears a mural crown through which a hair globe protrudes.

The older reliefs at Firuzabad and Naqsh-i Rajab differ mainly in the headdress / hairdo (Pl. 1). Although these two reliefs are less detailed, it is clear that the man at Firuzabad wears a cylindrical headdress, at NRj III with a mural crown indicated on the side and a hair globe mounted on top. The NRu I relief seems to have set the example for the canon of Ahura Mazda in the other investitures on horseback: apart from Bishapur I which is too damaged to distinguish all the details, the gods are very similar except for the absence of the barsum. The barsum also lacks in Ardashir II’s Taq-i Bustan I investiture (although there is one in the hands of Mithra) but probably re-appeared in the much later iwan of Taq-i Bustan III (Pl. 4). A perforation to fit something is clearly visible in the hand on Pl. 14 and in this particular context, a barsum seems by way the most likely item. The barsum is an object that is used in religious rituals and thus belongs in the hands of a priest or of lower spirits or divinities (but not as we shall argue infra, in those of the supreme god).
Identifying inscriptions on the reliefs (Pl. 3, 7-8)

The second element that has to be considered is the presence of texts on the Sasanian reliefs. There are inscriptions identifying the kings (Naqsh-i Rajab I, Naqsh-i Rustam I and VI, Bishapur V, Taq-i Bustan II and possibly at Barm-i Dilak I and II) and even the high priest Kartir (Sar Mashhad, Naqsh-i Rustam, Naqsh-i Rajab) (see Back 1978: 279-520; Gropp 1969: 256-257), but the god is only identified by a single phrase on Ardashir’s relief at Naqsh-i Rustam I. It is the first investiture scene on horseback and apparently for some reason a need was felt to identify both the king and the god by separate trilingual inscriptions that were placed on the breast of the respective horses. The inscription on Ardashir’s horse is written (top to bottom) in Parthian, Greek and Middle Persian. It reads “This is the image of his Zoroastrian Majesty Ardashir, King of Kings from Iran, whose appearance derives from the gods, the son of his majesty, King Papak” (Back 1978: 281; on the translation of kē čihr az yazdān as “whose appearance derives from the gods”, see Panaino 2007 and Gyselen 2009: 6-7, 14-15). On the opposite horse, the trilingual inscription reads “This is the image of the God Ahura Mazda/Zeus” (Back 1978: 282). This equation of Zeus (Greek text) and Ahura Mazda (Middle Persian and Parthian text) is not surprising. It follows the Seleucid and Parthian tradition in which Hellenistic religious iconography and identities were adopted in Zoroastrian iconography (Boyce 1979: 82; Sarkosh-Curtis 2007: 423). The inscription identifying Ahura Mazda is a surprisingly simple statement and lacks any protocol or extensive titles, something which remains to be explained (von Gall 1990: 102). It has been suggested that depicting Ahura Mazda was a novelty and an adapted terminology was lacking (Overlaet 2011: 334) and that the text was a later addition, possibly from the time of Shapur I (Canepa 2010: 576). In this regard, it must be noted that also the sequence of the three languages is different in this second inscription. The top language is now Middle Persian, followed by Parthian and finally by Greek, that has moved from the middle to the last place. This change in the sequence reflects the changed importance of the respective languages. By the time this inscription was added to the relief, Middle Persian had seemingly become the most important language.

The absence of chiselled identifying texts on other reliefs should not necessarily be considered as an argumentum ex silentio to prove the absence of texts. The deterioration of the rock surface on many reliefs may
have caused the loss of inscriptions. At Naqsh-i Rustam VI, e.g., only part of a Greek text is preserved under the belly of the royal horse (Herrmann, Mackenzie & Howell Caldecott 1989: 16-17, Pl. 14a) whereas on other monuments of Shapur I, we always have the combination of Middle Persian, Parthian and Greek. Gropp suggested the Middle Persian and Parthian
version may have stood on the flaked horse’s breast (Gropp 1969: 256-257). If this were to be true, and it does seem probable, then the Greek version would have been placed at the lowest position, exactly as on the NRu I relief. This idea agrees with the placement of the inscriptions on Shapur’s Naqsh-i Radjab I relief (Fig. 2). Middle Persian is on the right, in front of the horses, while the Parthian is on the breast of the horse, above the Greek version². Since the reliefs are known to have been painted, the

² Note that this sequence is reversed on the drawing of the inscriptions by Flandin & Coste. The Greek version is erroneously placed above the Parthian (Flandin, Eug. & Coste, P., 1843-54: Pl. 190).
possibility exists that texts were also painted on rather than chiselled. On Bishapur V, however, there is a chiselled text that identified the king as Bahram I (the royal name was later replaced by that of Narseh, see MacKenzie 1981). In this case, one could expect that if there had been a text identifying the god, it would also have been chiselled rather than painted. Its absence suggests that there was apparently no need, the identity of the divine image must have been evident to the spectators.

The remainder of the inscriptions on Sasanian reliefs are in Middle Persian only. An inscription, possibly with the name “Bahram”, was once noticed at Barm-i Dilak II but due to rock deterioration, is now beyond recognition (Shahbazi 1998: 59-60). Another inscription at Barm-i Dilak I is too deteriorated to allow a reliable reading and has sparked the most diverse identifications (Shahbazi 1998: 60). Two extensive inscriptions naming Shapur II and III in the smaller grotto at Taq-i Bustan (Fig. 3; Pl. 13) were probably added to usurp the relief of Ardashir II who depicted himself next to Shapur II (Overlaet 2011).

An actual meeting between the king and a god (Ahura Mazda)?

Ardashir’s reliefs at Firuzabad and Naqsh-i Radjab depict an investiture that takes place in the presence of a large group of people (Pl. 1–2). Behind the king stands a servant holding a fly-whisk, a scene that recaptures the well known royal Achaemenid images at nearby Persepolis. Three more male adults are present at Firuzabad; two male adults, a child and two women (?) are present at Naqsh-i Radjab. Ardashir’s investiture on horseback at Naqsh-i Rustam seems to be a turning point. The only “bystander” that is kept in the scene is the servant holding the fly-whisk (Pl. 2). He is standing somewhat unconvincingly behind the hind-part of the royal horse while he holds the fly-whisk behind the king’s head. Clearly, at this point in time, the association with this in origin Achaemenid protocol was still considered to be an essential sign of the royal status. The defeated enemies under the horses (“Artaban and Ahriman”), like the defeated Roman emperors on later investiture scenes, can hardly be considered as actually “attending” the investiture. Their presence is obviously symbolic. Like the barsum, the servant disappears from the later investiture reliefs and none of these depict any additional courtiers or nobles. At Taq-i Bustan I, it is Mithra, another god that is present. He holds a barsum and acts as a witness to the oath of Ardashir II (on the mixture of the divine and royal
investiture of Ardashir II by Ahura Mazda / Shapur II, see Overlaet 2012). At Taq-i Bustan III there is a woman who is commonly considered to be the goddess Anahita. She pours a liquid (water or wine?) from a ewer while holding a second ring and is thus not a bystander but an essential part of the ongoing ritual. To summarize, it is only on the two earliest investiture reliefs, those of Ardashir I, that several “witnesses” seem to be present during the investiture ceremony. At the investiture on horseback at Naqsh-i Rustam I, this is reduced to the servant with a fly-whisk and on later reliefs there are no more bystanders attending the meeting between the human king and the divinity/divinities. The kneeling roman emperor on Bishapur I is a reference to an historic event that is different from the “investiture”.

The beribboned investiture ring: giving, accepting, holding or showing? (Pl. 5-6)

The centre of attention in an investiture scene is of course the beribboned ring, considered to represent the investing of the king with the royal khvarnah, the divine empowerment and good fortune. Distinctive variations
in the positioning of the rings must be of importance and as such do need to be explained. When placed in chronological order, there are four distinctive positions:

Ardashir I:

The king holds or touches the ring held by his protagonist while his left hand is in an attitude of respect/adoration (Pl. 5 top and centre).

Shapur I & Bahram I/Narseh

The ring is held by the god while the ribbons are fluttering towards the open hand of the king. Both riders hold the reigns with their left hand (no gesture of respect/adoration). (note: most details are lost on Bishapur I). (Pl. 5 bottom, Pl. 6 top)

Ardashir II

Taq-i Bustan I: The king is in the act of taking hold of the ring while his left hand rests on his sword. The left hand of the protagonist rests on his belt. (Pl. 6 centre)

Khusrow II

Taq-i Bustan III: the king places the palm of his hand flat against the ring. The left hand rests on the grip of the sword. The king is clearly not receiving or taking the ring. The position of his hand seems rather to reflect an attitude of respect or recognition versus the ring, very much like one would do when taking an oath. The woman on his right holds an identical ring in exactly the same position. (Pl. 6 bottom)

The investiture reliefs: an alternative interpretation

Supposing that one did not have the inscription on the NRu I relief stating that the investing figure was Ahura Mazda/Zeus, then the most obvious interpretation of the Firuzabad and Naqš-i Radjab reliefs would have been as the representation of a ceremony in which the king is installed by the religious and/or political authority. Incidentally, this is exactly what must have happened if one believes the (limited) historic information that we
have on the rise to power of Ardashir I. The exact ascent to power and the family lineage of Ardashir are still a matter of controversy (see Daryaee 2010: 242-243). Ardashir was the son of Pabag and claims lineage from Sasan, who according to Tabari, was the father of Pabag and someone who held the office of head of the Anahita temple (Alram & Gyselen 2003: 21) (however, Sasan’s name may also refer to a protective deity, see Daryaee 2007: 16-17; 2010: 242-243). Tabari further informs us that Pabag, who was the local king of Cihr, a district of Istakhr, had inherited this position of high priest of the Anahita temple. It was Pabag who dethroned the king of Istakhr and presented his son Shapur (the brother of Ardashir I) as king to the Parthian overlord. Following the protests of Ardashir and the accidental death of Shapur, his brother Ardashir, eventually came to power. This event has to be dated somewhere between 205/206 and the Battle of Hormizdegan in 223/224 AD. Ardashir’s earliest coins from this era follow the concept of those of his brother Shapur; they bear the image of Pabag on one side and that of himself on the other (Alram & Gyselen 2003: 21-23, 117, Abb. 2, Phase 1). Alram considers the possibility that by the time these coins were minted, his father Pabag had actually died (Alram & Gyselen 2003: 22) but it may have been a way of emphasizing the royal lineage and/or the strong coalition that existed between the political and religious power.

The instalment of Ardashir as king of Persis is the subject of the relief at Naqsh-i Radjab. Such an official ceremony would normally be a fairly “public” event, hence the presence of courtiers, noblemen and/or family in the two reliefs. The presence of small (incense) altars (Firuzabad II) and/or statues (Heracles/Verethragna (?) at Naqsh-i Radjab II) and the fact that the investing figures hold a barsum, an instrument used by priests in religious rituals, testifies to this end. There is no reason why Ahura Mazda himself would need to hold a barsum; it is an instrument of adoration and as such, only makes sense in the hands of a priest (in Mithra’s hands at Taq-i Bustan I, it is used by Mithra in the oath taking ritual of Ardashir II vis a vis Ahura Mazda/Shapur II, see Overlaet 2012). If Pabag was still alive when Ardashir became king of Persis (which would be convincing in view of the earliest coins with the portrait of both men), it may be Pabag who is the priest that performs the ritual on the relief at Naqsh-i Radjab. The fact that the priest is wearing a mural crown agrees with the historical information that he was not only the high priest of the Anahita temple at Istakhr but also the local king of a Persis district.
The fact that the king is actually holding the beribboned ring in his hand together with the priest while paying homage with his left hand, are additional elements that turn it into a representation of an event that could physically have taken place. The presence of an audience is the ultimate proof. The meeting between a god and a human, be it a king, a saint or a prophet is never done in public. If a divine contact is thought to have taken place, it is always an ecstatic, individual event. History has ample examples of this. Moses was alone on Mount Sinai when he received the Ten Commandments and the Covenant and Muhammad had his visions and revelations during his lonely retreats in the cave of Hira. In any other situation, the credibility of the meeting is simply compromised. One needs only to remember the case of Bernadette of Soubirous who — on several occasions — saw and spoke with the Virgin Mary at Lourdes in the presence of a mass of spectators. Unfortunately, these crowds could not see or hear the Virgin and only saw a girl talking to thin air. Understandably, her Russell’s teapot brought her much disbelief and it took a long time before the Roman Catholic Church saw it fit to recognise this event as a genuine apparition, capitalizing on a growing popular devotion following inexplicable healings at the Lourdes cave. Depicting one’s meeting with the supreme god in the presence of high ranking courtiers and subjects (who could testify to or deny the event!), could easily backfire and would place the king in a vulnerable position.

An additional support for the idea that Ardashir I was crowned at the Anahita temple of Istakhr, is the presence of an architectural element behind Ardashir. A door opening is recognisable and two people are standing in what must be either the inside of a building or the outside of what could be an open air sanctuary. The site of Naqsh-i Radjab may have been such an open air sanctuary since traces of either a building (Bier 1983: 315) or a wall (Kleiss 1976: 139-140, Abb. 7, 11) closing off the entrance to the area are still visible (Pl. 10-11). The site has been put forward as the place where the coronation took place (Sarre & Herzfeld 1910: 98) or even as the possible location of the Anahita temple itself (Bier 1983: 315-316 / Kaim 2008). Other scholars place the temple within the confines of the walled city of Istakhr, however (Daryaee 2010: 245). Obviously, excavations at Naqsh-i Radjab are necessary to establish the true character of the site.

When interpreting the relief of Ardashir I at Firuzabad, one can follow the same reasoning. They are both holding the ring, there are spectators
and the investing figure is holding a barsum; all this suggests the king is facing a priest, rather than a god.

It thus seems reasonable to conclude that the two earliest investiture reliefs are best explained as the representation of an actual ceremony lead by a high priest, in the case of Naqsh-i Radjab, of the temple at Istakhr. With the location of Naqsh-i Radjab, at the edge of Istakhr itself, a different explanation would in itself be remarkable. The relief at Firuzabad may be the older of the two. Daryaee suggested that it was sculpted at the foundation of Firuzabad, a city that based its concept on Darabgird, and may date as early as 205-206 AD. The ceremony could then have been performed by the priesthood attached to a temple at either Darabgird or at the newly founded city of Firuzabad itself (Daryaee 2007: 17). The Naqsh-i Radjab relief may commemorate his following rise to power as king of Persis, prior to the confrontation with Artaban in 224 AD (Daryaee 2010: 251).

At this point, it must be mentioned that there is no general agreement on the dating of the first three reliefs of Ardashir I. In the present reasoning we consider the Firuzabad and Naqsh-i Radjab investitures, because of the differences in style and their technical execution, as clearly pre-dating the highly polished Naqsh-i Rustam relief. Numismatic evidence has been cited to oppose this idea, however. Alram pointed out that the royal korymbos is present only on Ardashir’s coins that were minted after his victory on Artaban, in phase 3 of his chronology (228/229 or 229/230 to 238/239) and consequently dates all three reliefs to this phase (Alram & Gyselen 2003: 148). The use on these coins of the phrase kē čihr az yazdān, “whose appearance derives from the gods”, a phrase which is also present in the royal titles of Ardashir at NRu I, belongs to the same phase 3 (Alram & Gyselen 2003: 143). However, we know hardly anything about the reasons behind the change of crowns and headdresses and it is very well imaginable that the korymbos had been in use in Fars long before this headdress was used on coins.

Ardashir’s third relief, the investiture at Naqsh-i Rustam, changes the whole picture by using a markedly different concept. The investiture now takes place on horseback and only the fly-whisk bearer is still present; he stands next to Ardashir’s horse and is partially obscured by the horse’s hind part. The addition of defeated enemies, the Parthian king and “Ahriman”, under the feet of the horses raises the representation to a more symbolic level. This is no longer an actual event with its specific details
that is depicted. The presence of the Parthian king provides a date for the creation of the relief, the battle of Hormizdegan in 224-225 AD (depicted on the Firuzabad II relief, see Fig. 6) is a terminus post quem.

Fig. 5. The royal servant/fly-whisk bearer on the Firuzabad I investiture (top left), Naqsh-i Radjab III (top right), Naqsh-i Rustam I (bottom left) and the Firuzabad II battle scene (bottom right).
The proposed sequence and dating of the reliefs is also supported by the change in size and by the headdress of the royal servant (Fig. 5, 6). If we accept the idea that the same person is represented on four reliefs because of his function and/or flower shaped symbol (Firuzabad I and II, Naqsh-i Radjab III and Naqsh-i Rustam I), then there must be several years separating the Firuzabad from the Naqsh-i Radjab investiture because on the first relief he is still portrayed as a child and on the second he is fully grown. In both reliefs he wears the same type of hat with a curled top, whereas in the two reliefs that postdate 224 AD, he wears a hat with a simple rounded top.

The principal question that remains is whether the text that identifies Ahura Mazda/Zeus is part of the original concept (and thus Ahura Mazda was represented from the start) or whether it could be a later addition. If we consider this last option, the relief may have represented a priest as on the earlier reliefs. By adding the text, the image was then transformed into the representation of Ahura Mazda. If this is correct, the why and when needs to be explained.

Arguments for and against these two different interpretations, priest or god, can be advanced. It is imaginable that the investiture on horseback simply represents the more exalted installation of the king which went with the higher status after the collapse of the Parthian power while the two earlier reliefs merely represent his crowning as a local king. There are several arguments in favour of the hypothesis that it represents a priest and that the relief was later re-interpreted to represent Ahura Mazda. There is the similar outlook of the horseman and the priests on the two earlier reliefs (beard, mural crown, hair globe), the presence of the barsum (a priestly utensil) and finally there is the presence of a spectator, the valet with the fly-whisk.
Another but much more problematic detail that could be seen as referring to a priest-king of Istakhr is the “tamga” on the horse’s tail wrapping (Pl. 12). This symbol is also known from other horse representations on the Sasanian reliefs and is sometimes considered to be the royal symbol par excellence (Gyselen 2011: 8). It decorates the caparison of Ardashir’s horse in the battle representation at Firuzabad (Vanden Berghe & Smekens 1984: 62-63, Fig. 8, 12) and it is used on the thigh and on the saddle strap of the steed in the Taq-i Bustan iwan (Fukai & Horiuchi 1972: Pl. LV-LVI) (Pl. 12). As such it has been defined as the frawahr or fravashi, a protective spirit of royalty.

The significance of symbols is difficult to establish without written evidence, however, and possibly it could be interpreted in various manners, depending on its context. It is also found on Sasanian coins (Alram & Gyselen 2003: 256-258) and recently it was even interpreted as the symbol of Apam-Napat. This last interpretation does not convince, however, its argumentation being merely that the sign is supposed to mimic an Eros figure who is in turn associated with Apam-Napat (Soudavar 2009: 426-427). Nevertheless, even if this were to be correct, it need not conflict with the symbol’s use on the reliefs since this water deity is associated with horses. Yasna 65.12, to Ardvi Sura Anahita and the waters, mentions “the swift horses” of Apam-Napat (Darmesteter 1960: 406). In Yt. 19.52 dedicated to Apam-Napat himself, it says “We worship the High Lord (bōrzantam ahurām), kingly, shining, Son of the Waters, who has swift horses, the hero who gives help when called upon. (It is) he who created men, he who shaped men, the god amid the waters, who being prayed to is swiftest of all to hear” (Boyce 1986: 148). The water aspect has led to associations of Apam-Napat with Anahita while the creative element that is ascribed to Apam-Napat in the above mentioned Yt. 19.52 also leads to the association with Ahura Mazda (Boyce 1986). It goes to show that with the little we know of the early Sasanian religion, almost any identification can be proposed. Formally, the most convincing idea remains to see it as a combination of a ring and a ribbon tied with a bowtie and two ends hanging down. Signs like the “fravashi” may thus in reality have harbored very different associations depending on the context they were used in.

3 Usually referred to as a “brand”, the sign stands out in high relief on the horse’s flank. The mark was thus neither branded nor shaven but was formed by the hair left standing when clipping the horse.
At this point, it must be mentioned that the famous Anahita temple of Istakhr may have harbored more than just the cult of the goddess Anahita. We simply do not know enough on the formation of the Mazdaean religion and the symbiosis of the various divine beings in the early Sasanian period. Chaumont emphasized the bloody and military character of the early Anahita cult (Ardashir I and Shapur II both send heads of enemies to be exposed in the temple) and suggested that also the yazatan (particularly Ahura Mazda) of the Mazdaean clergy were venerated at the same temple (Chaumont 1958: 158-161). Such a symbiosis seems very plausible and would explain several of the seeming contradictions: how a Mazdaean priest (Kartir) could eventually become the head of the Anahita temple; why Ardashir I, who must have inherited the priestly function of his father (see Chaumont 1958: 166-169), calls himself on his earliest coins nevertheless a Mazda-worshipper; and finally why Shapur I’s investiture with Ahura Mazda is located at Naqsh-i Radjab, a location that is linked with Istakhr… Whatever the exact significance of the tamga is, it is not repeated on the following investitures on horseback where we do believe Ahura Mazda was depicted. It seems therefore that is not to be considered as a symbol that is specifically linked to this god.

Even if one considers the relief scene to represent a high priest (and thus considering the inscription to be a later addition), one can not deny the symbolic elements that are present in the scene. The “Artaban” and the “Ahriman” underneath the horses were obviously not part of the actual ceremony but are symbolic representations of defeated enemies. Their identification provides another argument against the Ahura Mazda interpretation. De Jong pointed out that the Avesta never mentioned the image of Ahura Mazda on horseback and that although Ardashir had clearly defeated Artaban, one could not say that Ahura Mazda had ever defeated Ahriman (De Jong 2006: 238). It was an ongoing but yet undecided battle but the “Ahriman” on the relief does not seem to be alive and struggling! He is shown with closed eyes and seems as dead as Artaban is. However, if we identify the rider as a high priest, then we must also reconsider the identity of “Ahriman”.Someone wearing a diadem with snakes and who has snake shaped feet and pointed ears could simply be a local idol or god. Such an interpretation can be supported by elements from e.g. the Letter of Tansar. Although this document is highly disputed and certainly is not to be taken as an accurate depiction of 3rd century events, it is acceptable that the core of this document is a genuine letter by a high ranking priest (Boyce
1984: 109), a man who could be ascribed as the religious counterpart of Ardashir I. However, whether the Mazdaean clergy was as institutionalised as suggested by the letter of Tansar is doubtful. Nevertheless, the letter testifies to the importance of the religious reformation that went parallel with Ardashir’s conquests. De Jong emphasized the importance of these. The destruction of sanctuaries and the confiscation of their treasures provided Ardashir with the wealth he needed to realise his political ambitions (De Jong 2006: 233). De Jong pointed out that the reorganisation of temples and their priesthooods is also reflected in the legends that surround Ardashir’s exploits. He fought kings and queens that were depicted as self-styled gods or demons living in wealth, see e.g. his killing of the Worm in the Book of Deeds of Ardashir, son of Pabag (De Jong 2006: 235). That the aggressive attitude versus idolatry and the strive to unification of religion and priesthood instigated under Ardashir continued under the reign of his son Shapur and his successors is apparent from Kartir’s inscription. He stated that during the reign of Bahram II: …from province to province, place to place, throughout the empire the rites of Ohrmezd and the gods became more important and the Mazdayasnian religion and magians were greatly honoured in the empire and great satisfaction befell the gods and water and fire and beneficent creatures, and great blows and torments befell Ahreman and the demons, and the heresy of Ahreman and the demons departed and was routed from the empire. And Jews and Buddhists and Hindus and Nazarenes and Christians and Baptists and Manichaeans were smitten in the empire, and idols were destroyed and the abodes of the demons disrupted and made into the thrones and seats of the gods” (KNRm VI, §11, Herrmann, Mackenzie & Howell Caldecott 1989: 58). The naked creature with wide open mouth under the hooves of Ahura Mazda in the investiture of Shapur I at Bishapur I (see Herrmann, Mackenzie & Howell 1983: 8, fig. 1, Pl. 1-4) is similarly to be regarded as an idol or demon rather than as Ahriman himself. If there are no snakes in his hair or snake-shaped feet, then the creature would definitely be a different idol or demon than the one depicted at Naqsh-i Rustam, but the rock is too deteriorated to ascertain this (Pl. 15). In a way, the integration process of the Anahita temple in the Mazdaean beliefs reached an apex during the reign of Bahram II when the great Anahita temple at Istakhr is finally placed under the authority of Kartir. From then on, the Anahita temple and its priesthood resorted under the Mazdaean administration. The statement about his battle against idols may reflect an iconoclasm that explains why
we have no investiture relief of Bahram II and Ahura Mazda, although this
ing left many other reliefs in Fars province.

In the light of all this, it seems plausible to see the Naqsh-i Rustam
relief as a double — political and religious — statement of power; Ardashir
with his political foe under the hooves of his horse is invested by the Chief
Priest, whose horse treads on a fallen idol. Its position next to an Elamite
relief seems also to be significant. Although it is now largely destroyed by
the relief of Bahram, we know it depicted gods on snake thrones, possibly
even holding snakes in their hands (compare e.g. Kurangun: Vanden
Berghe & Smekens 1984: 28-29, fig. 2; Vanden Berghe 1986: fig. 1-2;
Seidl 1986) (Pl. 9). The trampled idol with its snake shaped feet and the
snake diadem may very well have been a direct reference to the Sasanian
religious dominance over ancient Elamite beliefs, possibly even referring
to the destruction of some specific Elamite sanctuary.

The position and influence of the Anahita cult (but not the temple!)
must already effectively have waned during the reign of Shapur I, since
Anahita is not even mentioned in his inscription on the Kaba at Naqsh-i
Rustam (Trever 1967: 124-125). It seems likely that an inscription that
changed the identity of a priest into that of Ahura Mazda (and in this way
set the canon for the investiture scenes of Shapur himself) was added dur-
ing Shapur’s reign. It is not until the reign of Narseh that Anahita would
again surface as an important deity in stately matters (conf. the Paikuli
inscription).

If one was to speculate about the timing of the inscriptions and the iden-
tity of the priest on the Naqsh-i Rustam relief, several scenarios are pos-
sible:

If it is indeed a priest attached to the Anahita temple, it is imaginable
that the inscription on Ardashir’s horse, stating that he was a Zoroastrian
king, was a first stage in promoting the Mazdaean element at the site.
“This is the image of his Zoroastrian Majesty Ardashir, King of Kings
from Iran, whose appearance derives from the gods, the son of his majesty,
King Papak” gives an indication as to when the text may have been writ-
ten. Ardashir’s coinage identifies him as a Mazda worshipper from phase
2 onwards, i.e. from 223/224 AD (Alram & Gyselen 2003: 142-143) but
it is only in phase 3 (from 226/227 or 227/228 AD onwards) that the phrase
kē čihr az yazdān, “whose appearance derives from the gods”, is added
(phase III, see Alram SNS 2003: 108, 143-148). It is also present on the
rock relief. Another blow to the dominance of the Anahita cult would have
been when the second text was added (in the course of which a significant change in the sequence of the three languages took place). The “Ahura Mazda” text would then most likely have been added in the reign of Shapur. The bilingual inscription of Shapur in Tang-e Boraq also places the Middle Persian version above the Parthian (Gropp 1969: 234). On his relief at Naqsh-i Radjab Shapur placed Middle Persian and Parthian text next to one another and the Greek version below the Parthian (Back 1978: 499 note 145). The same order must have been used on NRu VI where only some lines of Greek are preserved on the lower part while the two other languages must have been higher up on the eroded surface (see supra). The sequence of the languages on Ahura Mazda’s horse (Middle Persian — Parthian — Greek) is thus in line with known inscriptions from the time of Shapur I and reflect the growing importance of Middle Persian at the cost of Parthian and Greek.

Yet, it can not be excluded either that from the beginning it was meant to represent Ahura Mazda. Although this is very unlikely, it can not be excluded that this was a first attempt at creating the divine image, an attempt that came with iconographic mistakes that were to be filtered out in later representations. The mere fact that at some later point it was deemed necessary to add the Ahura Mazda identification would certainly indicate that not everybody understood this figure to be the representation of the supreme god…

The changes in the iconography

Once the representation under Ardashir’s reign had changed from an actual ceremony that took place in the company of courtiers and priests (Firuzabad and Naqsh-i Radjab) into the more symbolic event with the addition of the presence of the foes (Naqsh-i Rustam I), and once this was (re-)interpreted as the representation of Ahura Mazda bestowing the khvar-nah upon the king, it is easy to explain why certain details had to change in the later reliefs. Elements that conflicted with the representation of Ahura Mazda, the highest divinity, had to be removed, hence the disappearance of the barsum, the valet, possibly the tamga on the horse’s tail cloth and above all, the physical contact between the king and the god. It had become a symbolic representation instead of a real event at a specific moment in time. This also explains why the king no longer needs to keep his left hand in a gesture of respect. The ring held by the god was no longer
touched by the king either, since there was no physical transfer of an investiture ring. In the three investitures on horseback that follow Ardashir’s Naqsh-i Rustam I, the king no longer holds or touches the investment ring. It are merely the ribbons that are blown in his direction and seem to brush against his outstretched open hand. This may be a way of emphasizing the distance between the spiritual and physical world. All these changes were completed by the time Ardashir’s successor, Shapur I, had his investitures sculpted at Naqsh-i Radjab and Bishapur.

Since the change in the iconography was established by the time the next investiture relief was made, that of Shapur I at Naqsh-i Rajab, the shift towards Ahura Mazda as the main deity (at the cost of Anahita) must have taken place during Ardashir’s reign or at the latest during the reign of Shapur I, when the Mobed Kartir was first promoted. Such a change must be the outcome of a real power struggle between the various cults at the royal court. It must have culminated in, and ended with the appointment of the Mazdaean Kartir as high priest of the Anahita temple at Istakhr. He himself mentions this event during the reign of Bahram II: …and he made me Mobed and judge of the whole empire. And he made me director and authority over the fire of Anahid-Ardashir and Anahid the Lady (in) Stakhr. And he named me “Kerdir, soul-saver of Bahram, Mobed of Ohrmezd” (KNRm VI, §10, Herrmann, Mackenzie & Howell Caldecott 1989: 58).

The iconography of the investiture reliefs changes again in the reliefs of Ardashir II (379-383) and of Khusrow II (591-628) at Taq-i Bustan. The barsum re-appears in the scene and the rings are touched again by the kings. These are important changes that need to be explained. In fact, it is merely the return to elements that are part of actual ceremonies. In the case of Taq-i Bustan I, the relief depicts Ardashir II who had been invested as a regent by Shapur II himself on the condition to pass the throne on to Shapur III when he came of age. Mithra’s function in the event is that of divine guardian of the oath, hence his presence with barsum. The Taq-i Bustan I relief deliberately mixes the images of Ahura Mazda with that of Shapur II and thus depicts a mixture of an actual and a symbolic event (see Overlaet 2012). In this respect the touching of the investiture ring is again possible. The scene of Taq-i Bustan III need not to conflict with this view either. Instead of considering it as an investiture by Ahura Mazda and Anahita, we may have to see the relief as depicting an actual ceremony in which the king pledges his allegiance, with a mithra, in the presence of a high priest of Ahura Mazda and a high priestess of Anahita. There are
several arguments that can be advanced in favor of this interpretation. First of all it would be very strange, in fact possibly even regarded as blasphemous, to depict the king larger than the two gods (von Gall 1990: 100 is of the opinion that because of this, it can not be an investiture scene. Soudavar does not agree on this: Soudavar 2009: 418-419). The argument that this is possible because in view of the low podiums they stand on, these are statues rather than the actual divine beings, is hardly convincing. On the contrary, the king is standing on an identical podium that is, however, nearly double in height of those of the two “gods”. Secondly, it would be strange if the ring stood for the *khvarnah* because “Anahita” is holding exactly the same type of ring as “Ahura Mazda”. Would this mean that both of them had to bestow the *khvarnah* upon the king? That the *khvarnah* was, in other words, something that was not unique but that could be fractioned? As von Gall noted, this hardly seems possible (von Gall 1990: 100). The two royal companions are (or were) holding attributes or performing a ritual that referred to their function or identity. The woman is ostensibly pouring a liquid from a ewer and thus performing a libation. The object the man was holding has disappeared but it is likely to have been a barsum, judging from the position and perforation of the hand (see reconstruction on Pl. 14). The performing of a ritual libation seems to point to a priestess, rather than to Anahita, just like the use of a barsum points to a priest rather than to Ahura Mazda.

Finally, the king is clearly not “accepting” or taking a ring which is being given to him. The palm of his open hand merely touches the ring in a way that is more in accordance with making an oath or pledging loyalty than with *receiving* something. It is thus a completely different image than on the earlier investiture reliefs.

**Final remarks**

The current interpretation of the investing figure on the royal Sasanian investiture scenes as Ahura Mazda was based exclusively on the short trilingual phrase that is found on the relief of Ardashir I at Naqš-i Rustam. This identification fails to explain the many differences between the reliefs, elements like the presence of bystanders, the presence of a barsum, the way the investiture ring is positioned, etc. If one rejects this automatic equation of all the investing figures with Ahura Mazda, however, a more versatile interpretation can be advanced that makes it possible to explain
most of these iconographic variations. These interpretations are certainly very speculative and most of them can neither be proven nor disproven, but they can be linked to the few historic (unfortunately often corrupted) sources we have at our disposal. Its principal arguments are mainly the results of an iconographic analysis within a very limited group of monuments. At the moment, these ideas are simply offering an alternative but in the end, more discoveries of religious monuments and documents are needed to gain a more reliable insight in the iconographic evolution. Whether the present alternative interpretations are acceptable are not, the differences that have been pointed out will always need to be explained.

References


SASANIAN INVESTITURE RELIEFS


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Pl. 1. The reliefs of Ardashir I at Firuzabad (top) and Naqsh-i Radjab (drawings E. Smekens, Ghent University).
Pl. 2. Top: relief of Ardashir I at Naqsh-i Rustam (Drawing Rosalind Howell Caldecott, courtesy G. Herrmann); bottom: relief of Shapur I at Naqsh-i Radjab (Drawing E. Smekens, Ghent University).
Pl. 3. Top: Bishapur I relief of Shapur I (Drawing Herrmann, Mackenzie & Howell Caldecott, 1983: fig 1); bottom: Bishapur V relief of Bahram I (Drawings Herrmann & Howell 1981: fig. 2).
Pl. 4. Top: drawing of the Taq-i Bustan I relief; bottom: drawing of the upper part of the large iwan at Taq-i Bustan III. (after Fukai, Sugiyama, Kimata & Tanabe 1983, Pl. 6 & 26).
Pl. 5. The position of the investiture rings on the reliefs of Ardashir I (top and middle) and Shapur I (bottom).
(top left photo E. Smekens, Ghent University; drawings see Pl. 1-2).
Pl. 6. The position of the investiture rings on the reliefs of Shapur I (top: Bishapur photo E. Smekens, Ghent University), Ardashir II (middle: Taq-i Bustan I, drawing see Pl. 4) and Khusrow II (bottom: Taq-i Bustan III, drawing see Pl. 4).
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Pl. 13. Top & centre: The Taq-i Bustan reliefs as seen in 1840 by P. Coste (after Flandin & Coste 1843-54: Pl. 2-3); bottom: photo of Taq-i Bustan reliefs in the 1960’s (photo L.Vanden Berghe)
Pl. 14. The Taq-i Bustan III investiture: reconstruction with the barsum and detail of the hand with the cavity for the barsum (photos by the author, 2006).
Pl. 15. The demon underneath the horse of Ahura Mazda on the Bishapur I relief of Shapur I (photos courtesy G. Herrmann).