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# THE EFFECTS OF USING ISLAMIC HISTORIOGRAPHY IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDIES: THE CASE OF SASANIAN ROCK RELIEFS

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## ABSTRACT

Islamic historiography has long been identified as a secondary source (behind material culture) to study late antiquity and Medieval period in the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean cultures. But since recently, as the rate of archaeological findings in the region started to decelerate, the need to revisit these texts as primary sources of study arose. Moreover, the ability of Islamic history books to provide data on subjective aspects of the past societies, the sort of data which is probably not reflected through material culture solely, have also caused a growing interest in these evidence.

This study explores examples of Muslim historiography regarding the events depicted in Sasanian rock reliefs (224-651 A.D), and tries to show the effects of using Islamic histories in archaeological research particularly by addressing three main issues; First to show how accurate the data exploited from Islamic historiography could be, second, to what extent are Islamic texts capable of providing additional data to what material culture offers, and lastly, how these two sources of evidence (Material and texts) could be tested against each other to reveal validity of one another.

Moreover, with a careful scrutiny on the Islamic texts and rock reliefs, this study suggests that a methodical study of both textual and material data simultaneously could offer new insights into the political history of Sasanians.

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**KEYWORDS:** Islamic historiography, Muslim historians, Historical archaeology, Sasanian rock reliefs

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

There are 35 Sasanian rock reliefs discovered until today. Except for one, which is located in Afghanistan (Rage Bibi), all the other reliefs are located inside the political borders of today Iran. These reliefs are very significant in the study of the Sasanians because they encompass accurate data on Sasanian art, culture and religious and political ideologies. These reliefs also have been seen as the only strictly Iranian source to study Sasanian history. Amongst the sources that could potentially help get a much better understanding of these reliefs are the texts written by Muslim historians. These important texts which have already given us vast understandings on Sasanian history, often contain narratives which are most likely translations of the original Pahlavi texts written by Sasanian authors. Moreover, as both the Sasanian Empire and early Islamic dynasties included lands in the Eastern Mediterranean, Muslim narratives are also comprise important information about the history of this region.

Due to the lack of the evidence or the fact that the existing sources have not addressed the cognitive matters of the ancient Iranian societies, many questions on intellectual history of Iran in late antiquity are unanswered. Although, the number of archaeological findings in Iran is still growing, but the rate of excavations has fallen considerably and based on experience, the chances of discovering sources directly comprise the subjective data are very limited. Also, because the territories of the Sasanian Empire included lands and cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean, the study of the Sasanian rock reliefs could potentially disclose subjective aspects of the Eastern Mediterranean history and archaeology in late antiquity. Textual sources have been identified as the perfect pieces of evidence to study the ideas through history. Thus, it seems convincing for an archaeologist to revisit the Islamic textual sources which, compared to their significance have been overlooked. Historical archaeology represents practical methods to extract valuable data from historical narratives while avoiding the possible drawbacks that unsystematic usage of these sources could have on historical studies.

In this research, by choosing Sasanian rock reliefs as examples of the archaeological evidence and a selection of prominent Islamic history books as our textual data, we seek to address three main issues; First, in order to aid archaeological studies, how reliable Islamic histories could be? Second, to prove their important role in archaeological studies, in what extent are these texts capable of providing additional data, which are not reachable via material culture? And lastly, to present a more practical

method for employing Islamic historiography, we aim to show how it could be possible to test the textual evidence against the material culture to prove or disprove their credibility.

In addition, we also try to show that if textual and material data were to be employed together, a broader perspective would open to archaeological studies.

The aim of this study is to show how accredited and helpful are the Islamic history books in studying the late antique Persian World and the Eastern Mediterranean. It is important to consider that we do not intend to enter the ongoing debate over the real identity of the figures in the reliefs. For our purposes, and to draw our conclusions the real identity of each figure is relatively inconsequential.

### 1.1 Sasanian Rock Reliefs

Sasanians (224-651 A.D) ruled a vast territory stretched from The Eastern Mediterranean to the Central Asia. Sasanian reliefs which are particularly concentrated in the region of Fars (southwestern Iran) constitute undeniable evidence of the grandeur of Iran under Sasanian (Classen 2011: 29). These reliefs yield accurate linguistic, historical, social and religious information and often they include trilingual, bilingual and monolingual inscriptions in Middle Persian, Parthian and Greek (Davaran 2010: 57). The great majority of Sasanian rock reliefs carved during the first century of Sasanian rule- between A.D. 224 and 309 (Grossman 2008: 1077-1078). Reliefs of Ardashir I, Shapur I, Bahram II, Shapur III and Khosrow II are the most important of these governmental designs.

In choosing this medium for their glorification the Sasanian rulers were perpetuating an ancient Near Eastern tradition, the origin of which is undoubtedly to be identified in the Proto-historic and Early Dynastic stelae of Mesopotamia. It was under the Akkadians (c. 2334-c. 2154 B.C) that such memorial stelae first reached monumental proportions and it was evidently in imitation of these that the first great rock sculptures were carved (Ibid: 1078). This tradition lived on through the later centuries, as Darius the great (r. 522-486 B.C), the Achaemenid ruler depicted a historical relief at Bistun. Ardashir who overthrown the Parthians (247 B.C-224 A.D) and founded the Sasanians (224-651 A.D), commemorate this event in his first carving at Firuzabad. This carving is often compared with the earlier reliefs of the Parthians. (Ibid)

The subjects of these reliefs often contain political or religious concepts. For example, one common concept of Sasanian rock reliefs is investiture. In these reliefs, the God (Usually Ahura Mazda) is bestowing the kingship to the Sasanian king. These reliefs

are witnesses of how Sasanian kings sought to establish their legitimacy. Throughout the years, much research has been conducted to the rock reliefs, but there has been never-ending debates over both the identity of the figures, and the subject of the scenes. Josef Wiesehofer extends this dilemma to a third issue, as he puts it, "There have been disagreement about the purport of these works. Is there any unified objective for all the themes, or are some of them to be interpreted as idealized testimonies of historical events, others as royal figureheads with generally accepted truths?" (Wiesehofer 2001: 160)

In this research we have brought examples of Sasanian rock reliefs from Ardashir I (r. 224-241 A.D), Shapur I (r. 241-272 A.D), Bahram II (r. 276-293 A.D), Narseh (r. 293-303 A.D), and Shapur III (r. 383-388 A.D).

### 1.2 Textual Historical Archaeology

An important boundary in the field of archaeology runs between disciplines studying periods without writing and those studying the periods of human history which writing was invented. This boundary separates prehistoric archaeology from historical archaeology (Andren 1998: 1). In other words, the most prominent privilege of historical archaeology is the employment of texts and historical sources. Material and documentary resources represent independent lines of evidence (Leone & Potter 1988). Because historical archaeology uses textual and material evidence together, it is quite variable in its form and content and always have the freedom to define what counts as evidence and to weigh different kinds of evidence in constructing their accounts. (Hall, Silliman 2009: 42)

The question of the role of texts in archaeological work has been perceived in very different ways. Michel de Bouard (1975) believes that the starting point for archaeology is always questions formulated in history, And Jes Wienberg (1988) claims that there is no decisive difference between artifact and text, since both are at once remains from the past. Historical archaeologists have formed a sustained debate over the contributions of material evidence and textual evidence, both their proportional importance and which should dominate. Some have used material culture to confirm or test literary data and others have used textual evidence as commentary on material data (Hall, Silliman 2009: 42 & Broodbank 1993: 68). Yet other scholars have sought to use both kinds of evidence to construct a full and integrated account of lifeways, ethnicities, or even important events. (Hall, Silliman 2009: 42). Historical and archaeological evidence could be viewed as complementary features. Archaeology is able to explain aspects of a past society which have not been reflected through texts. These aspects might have

been perceived as incontrovertible or unimportant through the eyes of the elite (Which writers were a part of it). The reverse is also true, Textual evidence are able to explain issues which are unattainable through archaeology. This would be due to the inability of the material culture to describe subjective matters. Moreover, while material data demonstrate information on everyday life and the working class, the literary data could be a source to study the elite and noble. Regardless of the methods that a historical archaeologist chooses in order to employ texts and material culture in the study, it is very likely to face dissonance between the story a textual narrative tells and that of a material object. Hall suggests that careful attention to the differences between these two might reveal valuable data on lives and practices that have been historically invisible heretofore (Hall 1999). Galloway believes that this dissonances must first be recognized as arising from the separate production processes for the two forms of evidence (Galloway 2009: 43)

Inquiry of literary data should be with great care. Because historical texts may be accurate, distorted, fictional or a mixture. A historical archaeologist should always be prepared to face each of these variants and as Davies (2011: 332) noted "all ancient historiographical narratives must be treated a priori as evidence of what the authors believed, wished or imaginatively reconstructed, but not as an accurate recollection of what actually transpired".

### 1.3 Islamic Historiography

By Islamic historiography we mean the history books which have been written in the Islamic period of the Near East, North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean, either in Arabic or Persian. The Islamic conquests of the early seventh century ushered in a quiet exceptional period of cultural synthesis and experimentations. In the course of this synthesis, Arabic established itself as the administrative and literary language of the Islamic Near East, and forms of Arabic oral culture (poetry and storytelling) were given literary forms such as historiography (Robinson and Crone 2003: 18). One should also consider the role of the Near Eastern pre-Islamic traditions in accelerating these breakthroughs. Apparently Sasanian historiography was translated from Pahlavi into Arabic. Although none of the Pahlavi originals nor any of these translations is extant, it seems from Hamza al-Isfahani's introduction to his *Tarikh sini muluk al-ard Wa'l-anbiya* that several Arabic versions were available to him when he composed his history in 961 A.D. (Marlow 2002: 72-73). Gibb believes that the ordering of history by the reigns of rulers seems to have been a pre-Islamic Persian historiographical tradition, imported into Arabic via translations of

Sasanian historical works (Gibb 1982: 117). These facts lead us to one probable conclusion; that the Islamic narratives about Sasanians, are very likely translations of the original Pahlavi histories written in the pre-Islam Iran. Later in this article, this hypotheses will help reach one of the objectives of the research.

There are various considerations to take when reading Islamic historiography, and regarding the present paper, we should recognize a few of them. For one, Robinson and Crone (2003: 18) believe that the early Islamic historians followed the model engineered by the people of hadith and they collected narratives rather than composing them. This would explain why Islamic historical texts have so many contradictory reports on crucial religious and political matters. Noth (1973) first presented this thesis. Likewise, he believes that early Muslim historians were collectors and not composers.

One other consideration of a great importance is the mixture of facts and fictions in Islamic historiography. Robinson points out that the Islamic historiography should be categorized as narrative history, as tradition and techniques of storytelling are frequently put to use in this method of history-telling (Robinson 2003: 13). Meisami puts it this way that "Medieval historian's primary interest lay less in recording the facts of history than in the construction of a meaningful narrative" (Meisami 1999: 3). Although we do not own any concrete criteria for dividing facts from fictions in a historical narrative, but there are some methods to extract factual data from Islamic historiography. The most common would be to test texts with material culture. Thus, for example a discovered archaeological object could be used to verify the validity of a particular narrative.

One should consider that these texts are mediums in which authors have expressed ideas. Therefore, the credit for these evidence are not limited to the facts which could be extracted from them. Gennet and Porter believe that "there is no such thing as pure fiction and no such thing as history so rigorous that it abjures the techniques of fiction. The two regimes are not as far apart and not as homogeneous as one might suppose following the convention" (Gennet & Porter 1993: 82). Hexter also noted that "rhetoric in historiography are not merely decorative but have true Noetic value... it affects not merely the outward appearance of history, its delights and seemliness, but its inward character, its essential function, its capacity to convey knowledge of the past as it actually was" (Hexter 1967).

## 2. MIXTURE OF FICTION AND FACT

This issue may have its roots in Persian traditions, as the authors had an interest to link the great kings

to fables and give them a mythological facet. The fictions could be seen as a genius product of the imperial authors who intended to give their sovereign a sacred display (Rezaee Raad 2000: 349).

However, the level of this mixture is not the same regarding different periods and rulers. For example the amount of fictions around kings like Khosrow I or Khosrow II is relatively higher than the other Sasanian monarchs. In the following lines, by bringing one example, we will try to test the authenticity of the Islamic historiography.

Equestrian victory relief located at Firuzabad is a memorial artwork regarding the Hormozdgan battle; the defeat of the Parthians and the Foundation of the Sasanian dynasty (224 A.D) (Picture 1).



*Picture 1: Equestrian victory relief in Firuzabad*

In this relief we could recognize three Sasanian cavalry attacking their Parthian rivals. The first two horsemen assault the rivals with a spear, while the third cavalry have thrown his rival off its horse and is wrestling with him. Archaeologists have identified the figures in this relief. They believe the first duo are Ardashir I (r. 224-241 A.D), and Artabanus V (r. 216 - 224 A.D); the first king of the Sasanians and the last king of the Parthians and the second duo are Shapur I, the oldest son of Ardashir, and the grand Vizier of Parthians. It seems that the whole relief is a summary of important events of the battlefield (Herman 1977).

Most Islamic historians tell a narrative in which, Shapur I is the offspring of Ardashir I and Artabanus V's daughter (Look at: Dinvari 1992: 69-71; Tabari 1996: 586-589; Ibn Athir 1992: 206-210). In this story, Ardashir who defeated Artabanus would go to bed with Artabanus's daughter without knowing who she is. Then, when they inform Ardashir of the girl's real identity, he orders her to be killed. The girl, who at the time was pregnant of Shapur, faithfully escapes death, and the following chain of events continue in the way of other similar tales: She gives birth to Shapur, he grows and becomes an adult and then, they inform Ardashir of his existence, and the king who curiously had no other male offspring would make him his crown prince. But despite this and with reference to the Firuzabad relief we now know that one of the figures depicted in the combat relief is Shapur I the eldest son of Ardashir I.

Based on this, it would be rather troubling to accept that Shapur was born after the Hormozdgan battle.

Tabari was amongst the historians who told the story above and this was written in his volume II of *Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk* (1996). But in the first volume of the same book (Volume I: 583-584) we will find not only an apparent instance of contradictory reports in Islamic historiography, but unlike the later story, it seems that this one is analogous to the real events: "And Artabanus came, and the armies queued to start the battle, and Shapur, son of Ardashir moved toward Artabanus, he got involved in the combat, and Darbandaz, Artabanus's vizier, was killed by Shapur, and then Ardashir attacked Artabanus and he killed him, and many of Artabanus's troops were killed and the others escaped". When we compare this story to the reliefs, it turns out it would be very close to the accepted historical facts about this certain event. The relief in Firuzabad seems to be the image of this narrative. It also fully denies the tale which Tabari himself tells further in his book. We will revisit this relief from a new perspective further in this article.

### 3. ADDITIONAL DATA

Tayob (1999: 209) has shown that a methodical reading of the Islamic historiography would disclose data on aspects which are not reflected in other sources of historical information (e.g. Material culture). In this condition, texts could be seen as complementary sources to the archaeological data.

An example of this role, in this essay, is the investiture relief of Narseh in Naqshe Rostam. Archaeologists believe that unlike all the other Zoroastrian Sasanian kings who were assuming the kingship from Ahura Mazda, Narseh (r. 293-303 A.D) in this relief, depicted Anahita (Mousavi Haji and Mehrafarin 2009) as the deity who is bestowing the kingship to him (Picture 2).



Picture 2: investiture relief of Narseh in Naqshe Rostam

The question will immediately arise that on what ideological or religious basis Narseh did this design?

A narrative from Al-Tha`alibi (2005: 242) could bear explanation: "Narseh had never gone to fire temple and when they asked him on this matter, he replied: praying the true god leaves me no time to worship the fire". Certainly it would be very hard to accept this narrative in this form as a historical fact, but this text, which is probably a translation of an earlier Pahlavi narrative, could demonstrate Narseh's different religious beliefs.

One other example of the unique nature of data derived from works of Muslim historians, is the case of Bahram II (r. 276-293 A.D) reliefs. One of the unique features of Bahram II reliefs is that Mowbadan Mowbad (high priest of Sasanians), Kartir, is present in almost all of his designs. For example, he is depicted between the king and his wife in Sar Mashhad relief (Picture 3). The occasional presence of Kartir in Bahram's reliefs raises questions about the quality of the relationship between Bahram II and his high priest. We now know that Kartir was a powerful and inspiring figure in Bahram II reign, and for example, it is believed that executing Mani was under his advice. But is there any signs of this relationship in the Islamic sources? Al-Muqaddasi (1982: 512-513) brings a narrative in his book which more resembles a fable than history, but it could bear some distorted reality; "He (Bahram II) was an angry and rough man and he did not care for his people and he humiliated them. Eventually people turned to Mowbadan Mowbad. He told them: at tomorrow morning, no one comes out of their house and no one goes to him, even if you see him standing at the door. He also ordered servants not to serve him; and if he calls for someone, they were advised not to answer him nor to obey his orders. They did so. Bahram spent his days sitting on the throne with the same temper. He did not see any of his servants and slaves and he looked at the council of vizier and authors and he did not find anyone there. He called his confidante, but heard no answer. He called the slaves, they did not answer too. He got scared and was wondering what was going on in his court. He was in his thoughts when Mowbadan Mowbad came to him. He was delighted to see him and asked about this. Mowbadan Mowbad said: you know that you are a king who is not being obeyed, your people will not take your orders unless with kindness and peace. Bahram learned, and he abandoned anger and became benevolent and soft." (Al-Tha`alibi 2005: 239-241)

Although this narrative is probably not historically authentic, but with a closer look, it turns out to be a very important text. If we suppose that this text is an altered translation from the original Pahlavi histories, then it was probably what the Sasanian court wanted to exhibit, just like what was the intentions

behind making those rock reliefs; Bahram's court wanted to show that the king has the support of the most powerful Mowbad of the empire. This was possibly a two way trend in which Bahram was gaining religious legitimacy and Kartir, an important role in the decision making. With this picture, it is plausible to think that every rock relief was just a part of a bigger propagandistic package, which copies of official imperial stories (Which we find in Islamic historiography) were also part of it.



Picture 3: Kartir, Bahram II and his wife in Sar Mashahad

This also is applicable to the case of Firuzabad relief. The perfect analogy between the story that the relief exhibits with the one which Tabari brings in his second Volume of *Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk*, could have one plausible explanation; that the original source which Tabari referred to in his book was probably an state narrative from the Sasanian court which together with the rock relief, were meant to transmit the same idea; the state approved account of Hormozdgan battle.

#### 4. EMPLOYING TEXTS TO CONFIRM ARCHAEOLOGICAL HYPOTHESES

Textual data can serve as a gauge of the reliability of the information that we extract from material culture. We will try to study this theory in detail with two examples from Sasanian rock reliefs.



Picture 4: Ardashir I and Shapur I in Salamas

The first one is the relief of Ardashir I and Shapur I in Salmas (Canepa 2013) (Picture 4). Archaeologists believe that in this relief, Ardashir I is depicted with

his son and successor, Shapur I (r. 241-272 A.D), while both are bestowing the kingship to the king of Armenia (Mousavi and Sarfaraz 2016). This relief is politically important because it is showing that Ardashir have associated kingship with his son. To confirm this theory, we should look for evidence in textual sources. Even though the texts are not very clear on this matter, but they provide us with enough evidence: "Then he (Ardashir) returned to Al-Mada'in and sent his son, Shapur to other territories, Shapur was always victorious and he made kings obey him" (Ibn Khaldun 1984: Vol 1: 193). Al-Masudi describes how Shapur became king: "(Ardashir) ruled for 10 years and a couple of months, then he lost his interest in kingship and bestowed it to his son; Shapur" (Al-Masudi 1995: 93). Al-Ya'qubi also describes the last days of Ardashir rule: "So he (Ardashir) went to Khurasan and captured a number of cities there and after suppressing cities he chose his son, Shapur, as the next king and crowned him and called him Shah (king). Ardashir died after 14 years as a ruler" (Al-Ya'qubi 1992, Vol 1: 195). The second example is Shapur II (r. 309-379 A.D) and Shapur III Shapur III (r. 383-388 A.D). rock relief in Taq Bostan (Picture 5).



Picture 5: Shapur II and Shapur III rock relief in Taq Bostan

This relief, which is constructed in the reign of Shapur III, shows Shapur III with his father Shapur II and contains Pahlavi inscriptions which are still readable and leaves no doubt about the identity of the figures. In this unique relief the two kings are standing and facing each other, and both of them have put their hands on their long swords. After the death of Shapur II, his son, Shapur III, did not succeed him, but it was Shapur II's brother, Ardashir II who became king. But Ardashir reign was short, and he was dismissed by Sasanian nobles and then Shapur III took the throne. Some archaeologists created hypotheses to justify the intention of Shapur III to design this unparalleled relief. Edith Porada believes that Shapur III depicted himself beside Shapur II to prove his legitimation to take the throne (Pora-

da 1965) and (Mousavi Haji and Sarfaraz 2016). Islamic historiography provides supporting evidence: "When Ardashir (II) became king, and he settled his rule, he turned from nobles and killed many of them. Therefore, people dismissed him from the kingship in his fourth year at the throne" (Ibn Athir 1992, Vol 4: 260-261). And Shapur III became king, "He was son of Shapur II, son of Hormoz, son of Narseh. People were happy that the kingship of his father was returned to his rightful heir. He was kind to people, he ordered his agents to be nice to people." (Tabari 1996, Vol 2, 607).

Here again like what we suggested earlier about the reliefs of Bahram II and Ardashir I, if one carefully observe the text, it would seem analogous with its related rock relief. This was most probably what the court of Shapur III was trying to advertise in the state propaganda; "The kingship of Shapur II was returned to his "rightful heir", Shapur III.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this article we sought to show how a methodical investigation of Islamic historiography could further our knowledge of the Sasanian Iran. In particular, we addressed three main issues regarding the effects of employing Islamic texts in archaeological studies:

- Generally, it is a challenging job to approve or reject the validity of Islamic histories, as fictions are common features of Islamic historiography, and there are no concrete criteria to separate the fictions from facts. But as we have shown in this study with a careful reading of these narratives and testing them against other sources of evidence, one would be able to prove or disprove their reliability.
- As this study suggests, Islamic history books are capable of providing additional data to what material culture offers. These additional data are mostly dealing with subjective and ideological aspects which are likely unattainable through artifacts. Consequently, employing Islamic texts in future studies could potentially

extend our knowledge of the cultural and intellectual history of late antique and early Medieval Iran.

- As it has been suggested in historical archaeology, different sorts of evidence could be tested against each other to prove or disprove the credibility of one another. The Islamic historical sources are not exceptions in this manner and by bringing examples of Sasanian rock reliefs, we have shown that it could be possible to prove archaeological hypotheses with the aid of the Islamic historical narratives. Definitely, the reverse is also true and material culture could be used to verify historical hypotheses raised from the textual sources.

This study illustrated that the data extracted from Islamic historiography could be seen as archaeological evidence and therefore, employed in the archaeological studies in the region (Near East and Eastern Mediterranean). But like all other textual sources, there are certain considerations to take when reading an Islamic history book. And because these considerations could be very diverse in character in the case of Islamic historiography, extracting the needed information from these sources should be with great care.

Moreover, we tried to demonstrate that if the Islamic texts and Sasanian rock reliefs were to be looked at the same time, it would bring a new dimension in studying the political intentions of the Sasanian court. However, in this way it is necessary to fully understand how Muslim historians had gathered their histories.

Although it is advisable to employ Islamic historiography in future archaeological and historical studies of the late antique and Medieval Near East and Eastern Mediterranean, but in order to improve the prospects of employing Islamic texts in the archaeological studies, we urgently need fresh in-depth studies on the texts themselves to further our knowledge about the structure of the texts and the exact methods by which the Muslim writers gathered the historical information.

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