

# Reconsidering Rag-i Bibi: Authority and audience in the Sasanian East

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## ABSTRACT

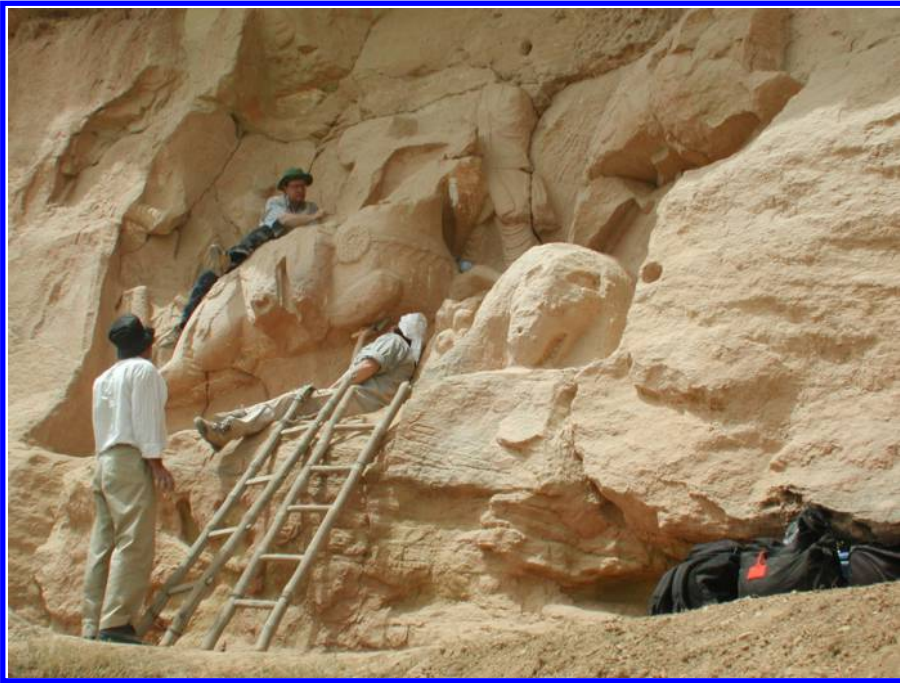
*The Sasanian rock-cut relief of Rag-i Bibi, located in northern Afghanistan, offers a unique opportunity to reconsider issues of audience, memory, and power in rupestral art. Found over 1,000 kilometers east of the nearest attested Sasanian rupestral relief, Rag-i Bibi is geographically and iconographically distinct, displaying elements of local subject matter, artistic style, and political symbolism. Through comparison to reliefs in the Sasanian west and local artistic traditions, the stylistics and location of Rag-i Bibi are mobilized to offer a perspective that characterizes this relief as the product of Sasanian Persia and the local artistic traditions of Bactria, actively designed to appeal to a diverse audience. This perspective builds upon previous readings of Rag-i Bibi as a conventional marker of political power, arguing instead for its role as mediating between local, regional, and international audiences.*

KEYWORDS: Rag-i Bibi, Rock Reliefs, Sasanian, Afghanistan, Audience

## INTRODUCTION: THE RELIEF OF BIBI FATIMA

Ten kilometers south of Pul-i Khumri, in Afghanistan's Baghlan Province, a large rock-cut relief looks out over the valley floor 100 meters below. Known locally as Rag-i Bibi, or *Veins of the Lady*, this relief served for decades as a prominent gathering place for women of the local community who had interpreted one

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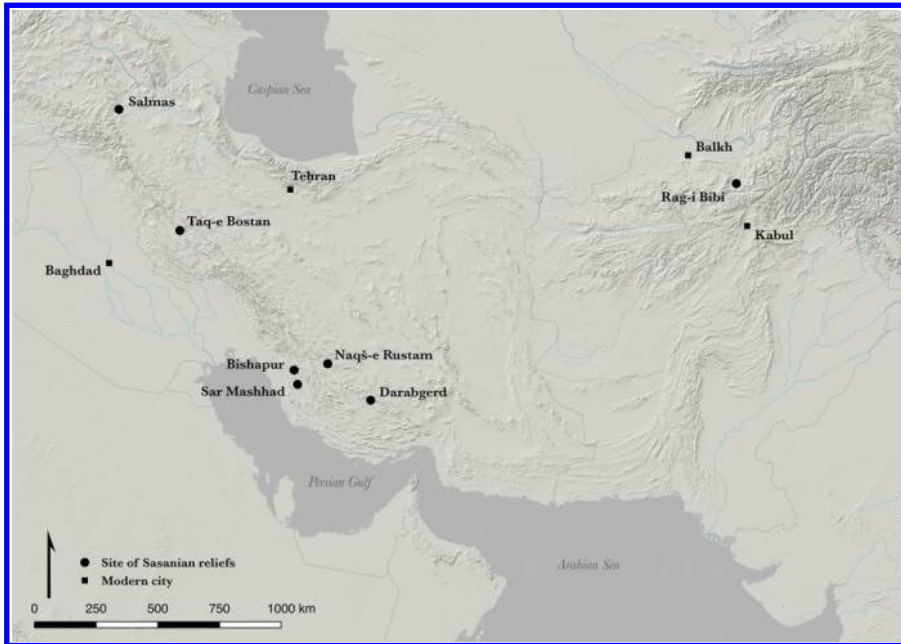
**Fig 1** Rag-i Bibi, with Grenet and his colleagues studying the relief (courtesy of F. Grenet).

of the figures as depicting Bibi Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> Local mullahs proscribed this practice, and, during the withdrawal of the Taliban in 2001–2002, militiamen who had been informed of idolatry at the site attempted to destroy the relief as part of their larger campaign of non-Islamic iconoclasm. The relief thus serves as one of many useful focal points for studying the conflict between local interpretation and practice, and broader political and institutionalized programs and agendas.

However, the intersection of Rag-i Bibi and these discussions has a far earlier history. While locally interpreted through the lens of Shia Islam today, the monument itself far predates the arrival of Islam to this region. Likely carved in the third century CE by the Sasanian king Shapur I,<sup>2</sup> Rag-i Bibi is one of the earliest and the most eastern documented Sasanian rupestal sculpture. With their heartland

<sup>1</sup> Lee (in Grenet et al. 2007: 244) outlines the process of contemporary pilgrimage to the site by the local female population, as well as its subsequent attempted destruction by local Taliban militiamen. The most recent update on the monument is that it is still believed to exist intact, due to its continued importance to local communities as a pilgrimage site (Grenet: personal communication).

<sup>2</sup> While Grenet (2005) and Grenet et al. (2007) identify the ruler depicted in the Rag-i Bibi relief as Shapur I, it is important to note that it is possible that the relief may instead depict the contemporary Kushanshah Peroz I (r. 246–285). However, without other monumental comparanda from the Kushano-Sasanian Kingdom or novel insight of the relief itself, we follow the identification of the monument with Shapur I, who undertook a lively



**Fig 2** Map of all known Sasanian rock reliefs

in the Iranian Plateau, the Sasanians were one in a long succession of powerful Persian empires that sought to expand influence and control over areas of the Mediterranean, Near East, and Central Asia. The practice of rock-cut relief carving has its origins in this context of conquest and expansion, dating at least as early as the Late Bronze Age when it became common practice for Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Anatolian dynasts (Börker-Klähn 1982). By the time that the relief at Rag-i Bibi was created, rock-cut relief carving had been employed by the political elite of the Near East for millennia, accruing a dense repertoire of iconography, referential comparanda, and ritual association.

Yet no Sasanian reliefs from this tradition have been found as far east as Rag-i Bibi (Figure 2). Sasanian authority was certainly a central component of the message being conveyed through this medium, and the few scholarly engagements with Rag-i Bibi have exclusively focused on situating the political implications of the relief in the broader context of Sasanian authority and royal iconography (Ball 2017: 159–160; Canepa 2013: 861 & 2018: 136–7; Grenet 2005: 129; Grenet et al. 2007: 260; Payne 2014: 284; Rezakhani 2017: 73; Sauer 2017: 159). We do not discount the importance of the political in what is an undeniably politicized monument—noting the inherent links between the exercise of power and places on a landscape (Smith 2003)—but we seek to nuance this interpretation by considering the communicative and receptive aspects of the monument as they relate to those

campaign of monumental relief carving in the central and western regions of the Sasanian Empire.

who would actually have seen it. From this perspective, a critical understanding of Rag-i Bibi requires a consideration of the legacies of the Mesopotamian and Iranian regions from which the Sasanian elite<sup>3</sup> drew inspiration as well as those of the western reaches of the Hindu Kush in which the relief was carved, perceived, and interpreted.

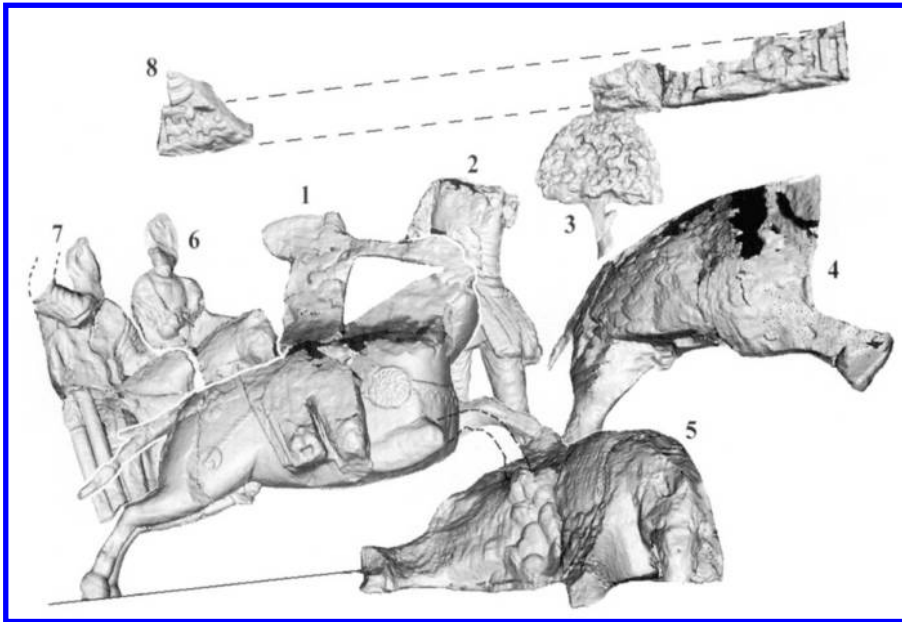
Toward this point, the use of local style and iconography in what has been interpreted as a symbol of Sasanian power and domination indicates an awareness of the cultural diversity of the local population and an interest in producing a particular iconography that considered the perspectives of the viewers. Acknowledging the diversity of the audience is critical given that explorations of Bactria in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE often regress toward traditional, monodirectional concepts of culture and influence (Dani & Litvinsky 1996). Just as Traina (2002: 22) has argued that the use of Greek in Parthian Nisa does not necessarily exhibit the wholehearted adoption of Hellenism, the viewership of Sasanian iconography may well mean something different in the eastern limits of the empire than it does in the Sasanian heartland. Such an interpretation nuances prior characterizations of Rag-i Bibi as a monodirectional symbol of power, reorienting attention to the audiences of the relief, who are no longer simply passive in their reception. Rather, in a sense they become active, though perhaps unwilling, participants in the creation of the relief.

#### THE RELIEF OF RAG-I BIBI

Rag-i Bibi first came to light for the broader scholastic community when, in 2002, Jonathan Lee was alerted to its existence by a local journalist, who thought it at risk (Grenet et al. 2007: 243–247). Lee was joined by Frantz Grenet and François Ory to create a full descriptive review of the monument, and Philippe Martinez created a 3D model (reproduced below, Figure 3) of the relief from data collected through laser scanning (Grenet et al. 2007). Considering that these studies resulted in thorough descriptions of the monument in French and English—the only focused publications of the monument to date—we limit ourselves to a brief review of the monument and the observations made by Grenet and his colleagues. This is done to highlight features of Rag-i Bibi that evoke specific cultural references, allowing these characteristics to be juxtaposed against the broader monumental genres with which this monument would have been in dialogue.

Rag-i Bibi is carved upon the natural face of a sandstone cliff, 100 meters above the Shamarq road that runs through the valley south from Pul-i Khumri. The relief is carved within a 4.90 meters by 6.50 meters frame, to a maximum depth of 2.50 meters. The scene exhibits a mounted Sasanian king in full gallop, identified by Grenet as Shapur I, hunting a pair of Indian rhinoceroses. One has been fatally struck by the arrows of the king, and lies dying, while the other attempts to flee the

<sup>3</sup> That Shapur I was involved in the commission of this relief can be assumed based on the strict control that the Sasanian court held over royal rupestrial carvings (Canepa 2014: 61–62), and we infer that he had some degree of supervision over its message and planning, if perhaps not the execution of the carving.

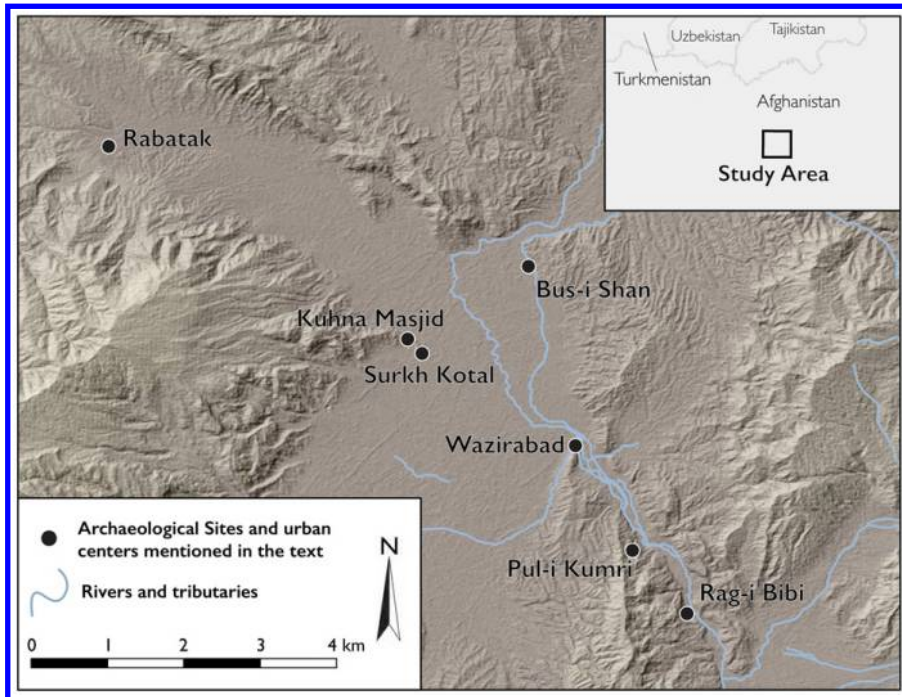


**Fig 3** Three-dimensional reconstruction of the features in relief from Rag-i Bibi (Grenet 2005, figure 4). The individual features highlighted by Grenet are as follows: 1. Equestrian figure of Shapur I; 2. Kushan figure; 3. Mango tree; 4. Rhino (fleeing); 5. Rhino (wounded); 6. & 7. Royal attendees; 8. Balustrade (courtesy of F. Grenet)

scene to the right.<sup>4</sup> Three additional figures accompany the king. Two are shown on horseback, riding behind the king at the left of the scene, while a third stands before him.

The main figure is represented with the official trappings of Sasanian nobility during a hunt. Although the head and crown of this figure has been lost, Grenet identifies him as Shapur I, based on stylistic features (2005: 124–5; 2007: 258). The scene corresponds with other Sasanian depictions of the hunt, but the presence of rhinoceroses—rather than the more standard lion or game animal—offers a sense of locality in this relief with no comparanda from within the bounds of the Sasanian empire. Instead, this particular quarry more closely corresponds to hunting scenes from the Indian subcontinent. The animals themselves are carved with careful realism, clearly depicting *rhinoceros indicus*, and while the dying rhinoceros bares a set of exaggerated teeth, the placement and articulation of the joints of the animal in motion are realistic, lending evidence for a

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that Grenet et al. (2007: 257) interpret the relief to conform with the broader Sasanian iconographic practice of the hunt, which often represents the same animal twice: both alive and dead. However, unlike the only other example of a royal hunt in monumental relief—that of Bahram II at Sar Mashad which illustrates the king hunting lions, which are depicted sharing the same hindquarters (cf. Vanden Berghe 1984: 138)—both rhinoceroses are represented in full in this instance.



**Fig 4** Map of the urban centers and archaeological sites mentioned in the text in the immediate vicinity of Rag-i Bibi

close familiarity with the animal on the part of the commissioner or executor of the sculpture (Grenet et al. 2007: 248).

The iconography of the standing Kushan attendant corresponds in both stance and dress with sculptural representations of local nobility at nearby Surkh Kotal (Schlumberger 1959: 85, pl. XIIb).<sup>5</sup> The two mounted attendants, riding behind the king, are depicted with an iconographic variance that leads to their interpretation as a Sasanian and Kushan figure respectively. The dress, tackle, and equipment of each figure is rendered so as to minimize ambiguity and stimulate cultural recognition.

A mango tree rises above the scene—separating the king from his prey—with the distinctive leaves of the *mangifera indica*, native to western India. However, rather than five linear leaves, as found on the plant in nature, they are compressed to a single broad leaf. While this stylized depiction diverges from the realism witnessed elsewhere on the monument, it corresponds to local representations of mango trees and those from within India (Grenet 2005: 122). Finally, a section of

<sup>5</sup> The layering of the relief, with the horse of Shapur I presented in front of the Kushan figure, indicates that they were carved contemporaneously, rather the Sasanian sculptors incorporating a preexisting rupestral monument into a later composition. This technique is found elsewhere in the Sasanian world, notably with the Elamite figure incorporated within the audience of the relief of Bahram II at Naqš-i Rostam.

architectural balustrade is preserved in the upper-right hand corner of the relief. Imitating the built wooden form, this feature reflects more local artistic and architectural forms—represented on rock, stucco, and in more perishable media like wood and on wall paintings. Moreover, the balustrade preserves hints of painted plaster, indicating that the monument would have been richly colored, drawing attention and facilitating viewership by those traversing the road beneath it, despite its position high upon the rock face.

As with other pieces of rock art, the placement of Rag-i Bibi and its integration within the surrounding landscape is a key component of its composition (Figure 4). In addition to its imposing topographic location, Rag-i Bibi lies between the modern towns of Doshi and Pul-i Khumri. The latter is near the aforementioned site of Surkh Kotal, which served as a major Kushan political and religious center (Ball 2017: 159). At this site stood a massive temple complex, a lively epigraphic corpus alluding to frequent dedications and renovations, and the aforementioned program of elite Kushan sculptural representation. Near Surkh Kotal, archaeologists excavated a major Sasanian fortress, known as Kuhna Masjid (Dupree 1977: 372), which exhibits evidence of major occupation during the period within which Rag-i Bibi was likely commissioned.

In their interpretation of the monument, Grenet et al. (2007: 261) characterize the message of Rag-i Bibi as one of reconciliation rather than humiliation. This implies that the Sasanians saw the Kushan lands and their inhabitants as part of Iran, in contrast to their treatment of the distinctly un-Iranian Roman Empire, and marked this difference through the unique imagery, style, and composition. On the other hand, Canepa's (2013) treatment of Sasanian rock art draws a distinction between symbolic and overt depictions of power. Symbolic depictions, like at Naqš-i Rostam, serve to engage with existing *lieux de mémoires*, often through the carving of reliefs adjacent to earlier reliefs or at a place of cultural or social significance. This stands in contrast to overt depictions, the category wherein he places Rag-i Bibi, where rock reliefs “could serve as colonizing tools to establish the imperial presence in subjected regions” (Canepa 2013: 876).

Although outside the scope of his study, Grenet's interpretations make no mention of the depiction of Kushans at Bishapur, where they are represented bringing gifts and tribute to Shapur I alongside Romans.<sup>6</sup> If Rag-i Bibi was meant as a message of reconciliation, it would contrast sharply with other reliefs showing Kushans found elsewhere within the Sasanian Empire, where they appear as a conquered and clearly subordinate people. The argument may be made that the narrative put forth at Bishapur, in the heartland of the empire, was necessarily one of complete domination, while the narrative at Rag-i Bibi, on the fringes of the empire, was necessarily one of reconciliation. That these two narratives differ would then have less to do with realistic representation than with the practicalities of empire and consolidation of power. On the other hand, Canepa's identification of the relief as an overt depiction of power meant to establish imperial presence is also at odds with other reliefs found in such contested regions, which do not contain

<sup>6</sup> While there is some debate as to the identity of these figures (c.f. Overlaet 2009), we follow Herrmann (1998: 45–46), who advances a compelling argument for the identification of these figures as most likely Kushan delegates.

such overt examples of adopted local iconography, although they may represent local figures with easily identifiable garments or other features. In either case, the particular iconographic palette employed at Rag-i Bibi stands apart from reliefs found in both the core of the Sasanian empire and elsewhere in the periphery.

#### SASANIAN CONTEXT

Following Canepa (2009: 57), we recognize the limitations of simply identifying features of Sasanian reliefs that are Roman, Iranian, Bactrian, or Kushan in style or influence, and reject the assumption that similarities in style equate with similarities in expressive intent. Therefore, in evaluating if and how Rag-i Bibi deviates from contemporary Sasanian reliefs, we are careful to consider altogether their style, content, and location. The association of Rag-i Bibi with Shapur I places it firmly within the early Sasanian period, allowing for comparison to other reliefs carved at this time. We consider here whether the distinct imagery exhibited at Rag-i Bibi simply reflects its location and local influences—while remaining largely consistent with the overall narrative seen in other depictions of Shapur I and the early Sasanian kings—or whether its unique imagery is but one aspect of a much larger deviation from an otherwise uniform rupestal campaign.

Rock-cut reliefs have a particular association with early Sasanian statecraft, and the volume of reliefs carved during this period exceeds all other Iranian royal dynasties (Canepa 2013).<sup>7</sup> Study of these reliefs as a group offers insight into their role and function within programs of imperial legitimization and provides opportunity to tease apart the use of specific scenes, iconography, and artistic style. Several general observations about Sasanian rock reliefs can be made. With the single exception of the relief of Kartir, only Sasanian kings commissioned monumental rock reliefs, most depicting scenes of divine investiture or the subjugation of enemies (Canepa 2014: 62, de Waele 1989: 811). These reliefs were often situated near major cities or “naturally wondrous” places like rivers, mountains, or springs (*sensu* Harmanşah 2014). Others were located adjacent to Achaemenid reliefs or tombs, as part of a concerted campaign of linking Sasanian identity and statehood to memories of Achaemenid Persia (Canepa 2010b).

Geographically, the majority of Sasanian reliefs, from all periods, are found in western Iran with the region of Pars remaining, as it was during previous periods, the locale for the majority of rock reliefs. A smaller group of monuments, within which Rag-i Bibi has been classified, appear to have been placed symbolically at the frontiers of Sasanian influence or within the territories of conquered regions (Canepa 2013: 866, 876). The small size of this latter category limits the interpretation that can be gleaned from exploring their contexts on their own, but the stylistics of their composition offer a good deal of insight. The Salmas relief

<sup>7</sup> Despite inherent difficulties with accurately dating rock art, it appears that the majority of Sasanian reliefs date to the first two centuries of the empire, after which this mode of representation appears to have generally fallen out of favor. Canepa 2013 (tables 45.1 and 45.2) provides an up-to-date and complete inventory of all known Sasanian reliefs carved on natural rock.





**Fig 5** The relief of Ardashir I at Salmas (Image distributed under a CC-BY 2.0 license)

(Figure 5) is the western- and northern-most relief carved by the Sasanians, and, besides Rag-i Bibi, the only other relief considered to be on the edges of the empire (Canepa 2013: 876). Found just south of the modern town of Salmas in northwestern Iran, the relief depicts two kings, each on horseback, grasping a man before them. This scene is similar to reliefs at Bishapur and Naqš-i Rostam, thought to represent the subjugation and investiture of an Armenian king (Vanden Berghe 1984: 67). The style of their crowns marks the mounted figures as Ardashir I and Shapur I and dates this relief to 240–242 AD, a brief period when both figures ruled jointly. Given this chronology and the location of the relief, the two captured men are likely King Khusrau of Armenia and his vizier, who were defeated by the Sasanians around the time of Shapur I's succession in 240 AD.<sup>8</sup> The distinct imagery of this relief dictates an interpretation of this monument as emblematic of conquest.

The size of the Salmas relief (10 by 3.50 meters)—almost twice as large as any other investiture relief carved by Ardashir I or Shapur I (Canepa 2013: 858)—suggests that its visibility from the wide fertile plain beneath it was an important consideration in its creation. Moreover, the detail with which the figures were carved, particularly the captives, suggests that the monument was not only meant to be seen, but also understood. This perspective is not at odds with Hinz (1969: 115–143), Canepa (2013: 873), or Rezakhani (2017: 228) who all

<sup>8</sup> Dio Cassius (LXXX 3.3).



**Fig 6a** Victory relief of Shapur I at Naqš-i Rostam (Image distributed under a CC-BY 2.0 license)

remark that the shallow carving of the relief and rather simple stylistics of the composition indicate that its execution was carried out by an inexperienced local sculptor or workshop. In spite of this, both the Sasanian and local figures are accompanied by easily identifiable characteristics that would have facilitated interpretation. However, unlike Rag-i Bibi, no additional features (vegetation, architecture, etc.) allude to the distinct context within which the relief was placed. Given the location of the relief, this legibility is presumably directed at a non-Sasanian audience, yet the similarities in composition and legibility to Shapur I's reliefs at Bishapur and Naqš-i Rostam—comparanda from within the heartland of the Sasanian empire—downplays the distinctiveness with which the Salmas relief conveys messages of conquest.

Deliberately positioned between the imposing cruciform tombs of the Achaemenid kings Darius I the Great and Artaxerxes I, the relief of Shapur I at Naqš-i Rostam depicts a scene of victory over Roman foes (Figure 6a). The provocative nature of the relief is immediately discernible: a mounted Shapur I, placed in the center of the scene, and his pedestrian companion stand before the Roman emperors Philip the Arab (r. 244–249 CE) and Valerian (r. 253–260 CE). The former had treated for peace with Shapur I in 244 CE to conclude the First Romano-Sasanian War, while Shapur had defeated and captured the latter during the Second Roman-Sasanian War in 260 CE. Shapur I's victory over Valerian and the emperor's subsequent imprisonment is captured on the relief with the king gripping



**Fig 6b** Victory relief of Shapur I at Bishapur (Bishapur II, image distributed under a CC-BY 2.0 license)

Valerian by the arm, similar to the Salmas relief.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Philip the Arab's treaty and indemnity to the Sasanians is represented through his kneeling posture (Canepa 2009: 62–68). These two victories, occurring over a wide chronological gap, were unquestionably formative events in the development of Sasanian identity and the solidification of Sasanian statehood (Daryaei 2009: 8). Their simultaneous representation flattens chronology to unquestioningly exhibit Sasanian domination over their powerful western neighbors for anyone who viewed of the monument.

In this same relief, Shapur I is accompanied by the Zoroastrian high-priest Kartir, who served as an important advisor to the king and his successors and was responsible for establishing Zoroastrianism as the state-religion of the Sasanian empire. The inclusion of this figure links the relief to its location. This takes into consideration that opposite this relief, carved upon the Ka'bah-i Zardusht lies an inscription describing Shapur I's victory over the Romans in detail. This, the so-called *Res Gestae Divi Saporis*, lies alongside an inscription by Kartir that

<sup>9</sup> In addition to monumental rock reliefs, this same event was depicted in other Sasanian media, including a notable sardonyx cameo upon which Shapur I and Valerian are shown galloping toward one another (camée.360, Bibliothèque nationale de France). Like the depictions in relief, Shapur I grips the forearm of the emperor, signaling his capture. Caldwell (2017) focuses on these and other compositions and literary attestations of the capture of Valerian to explore the multitude of ways that this event was mobilized by the Sasanians and Romans alike.

outlines proper Zoroastrian religious practice at the site and lends itself to continuous interaction and performance (Canepa 2015b). Thus, the victory relief of Shapur I at Naqš-i Rostam is shown to be in direct engagement with its Achaemenid predecessors on a number of levels, while also engaging with themes of conquest and political legitimization that are more closely tied to contemporary events.

These scenes are also present at Bishapur, albeit with a more complex semantic agenda. Bishapur was an important city founded by Shapur I, meant from its onset to serve as a major urban center and said to have been built by Roman prisoners of war. The Bishapur I relief (Herrmann 1983; 1998) depicts the investiture of Shapur I in an almost identical manner to the investiture relief of Ardashir I at Naqš-i Rostam. The figures in Bishapur I are clearly identifiable as the Roman emperors Gordian III and Philip the Arab (McDermot 1954), with Gordian III shown being trampled by the horse of Shapur I and Philip the Arab kneeling in defeat.

Like Bishapur I, Bishapur II again shows the trampling of Gordian III and the sparing of Philip the Arab, but includes the capture of Valerian (See Figure 6b). In addition to these defeated Roman emperors, Bishapur II expands the narrative program from that at Naqš-i Rostam by including two troops of cavalry and five groups of infantry that surround the central scene and salute Shapur I. Many of these figures are depicted similarly to figures in contemporary Kushan sculptures (Canepa 2013: 866), indicating that the wars with Rome were not the only conflicts to which Shapur I wished to draw attention. Bishapur III repeats this narrative further, featuring the same Roman emperors, but including additional registers of troops and tribute-bearing emissaries. Detailed carving allows figures from the eastern parts of the empire to be discerned by their dress and hairstyles, as well as by the presence of an elephant that they bring as tribute, however all of this continues to be represented through a recognizably Sasanian artistic style (Herrmann 1998: 45–46). Similar scenes are also found at Darabgerd, another relief site in the heartland of the Sasanian Empire (Herrmann 1969).

Rendering Roman emperors at Naqš-i Rostam, Bishapur, and Darabgerd can be characterized as “symbolic appendages” to Shapur I rather than stand-alone figures (Canepa 2009: 58). As such, the attention to detail in the depiction of these figures is not inconsequential, instead reflecting careful attention to viewership and guiding an audience through the identification of figures, events, and implications. That similar attention to detail is found at Naqš-i Rostam, Bishapur, and Darabgerd, makes clear that legibility through accurate depiction was essential to the monument regardless of location, and that it could extend to both the conqueror and the conquered.

That this legibility was no more important on the frontiers of the empire than it was in the center is evident with the colossal statue of Shapur I, which is found within a large system of caves in the hills east of the city (Figure 7). Much like other depictions of the king, this statue makes use of living stone, with the 6.7-meter statue carved *in situ* from a natural column in the center of the main gallery of the cavern, and the modification of some aspects of Sasanian iconography were required to accommodate sculpture in the round. As in the case of the broader corpus of reliefs depicting Shapur I, the rigidity of Sasanian royal iconography allows for the identification of the king, despite the lack of associated epigraphy



**Fig 7** The colossal statue of Shapur I viewed from the entrance of the cave. The smoothed walls of the cave—prepared for the display of accompanying imagery—are visible to the left and right of the statue. (Image distributed under a CC-BY 2.0 license)

(Canepa 2013: 874; Garosi 2012). Much like the rupestral examples of Sasanian royal representation, the importance of being depicted in the midst of a retinue of attendants is seen in this case with the walls of the cave prepared for the representation of additional subjects.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, while there are minor differences in local context that imply the consideration of a variety of factors when choosing sites for the carving of reliefs (Canepa 2014: 62), all are related to narratives of conquest and subjugation, employ similar iconography, and convey an interest in legibility that suggests an awareness and consideration of audience, encouraged by proximity to population centers. This calls into question the extent to which the Salmas relief meaningfully differs from other reliefs carved during the reign of Shapur I in the core of the Sasanian empire, if the only real distinction is its location *vis-à-vis* local population. While Canepa (2009: 58) views the reliefs found within the Sasanian homeland as symbolic and the examples of Rag-i Bibi and Salmas as imperialistic, their characteristics push back against the utility of such a distinction. The preoccupation

<sup>10</sup> Ghirshman (1971) makes the claim that the walls surrounding the statue had been prepared for bas-relief sculptural accompaniment, so that while other attestations of the king show him accompanied by a retinue of attendants in the same artistic medium as the king himself, in this case, it seems that this function was fulfilled by the described, yet non-extant painted portraiture which has since deteriorated from the wall of the cave. See Lee & Grenet (1998) for a more complete exploration of Sasanian paintings in cave contexts, focusing on a votive image found near Ghulbiyan, Faryab province in Northwestern Afghanistan, which is painted on a hardened mud that was used to prepare the face of the cave wall, displaying a series of figures who make offerings to a seated deity.

with Roman subjugation at Bishapur, Naqš-i Rostam, and Darabgerd conveys clearly imperialistic anxieties and concerns that are similarly reflected on the borders.

Canepa (2009: 59) explains the detailed attention given to accurately portraying Roman emperors as a reflection of the importance they had to contemporary Sasanian politics and narratives. By this logic, the same attention to detail given to depictions of Kushan figures at Taq-i Bostan, Bishapur, and Rag-i Bibi, must reflect a similar position. This is further supported by the Bishapur III relief, where figures from Bactria and neighboring regions occupy three registers while the Romans occupy two. Both groups bear gifts to Shapur I, but those from the east are noticeably more detailed and varied (Canepa 2009: 73). If attention to detail can serve as an index of importance, then it appears that Kushans occupied a similar space as Romans in Sasanian political thought. Why then would conquest and imperium be depicted at Rag-i Bibi so differently than at Bishapur, Naqš-i Rostam, or even Salmas? Reliefs of Sasanian victory over Roman foes developed into something of an artistic and propagandistic trope, featuring regularly in Sasanian royal art, but this genre is not even referenced at Rag-i Bibi. If the Kushans were central to this narrative of power, as suggested by the Bishapur III relief, we might expect similar depictions of Shapur I trampling his enemies, receiving tribute, or a scene depicting the investiture of local rulers in clearly Sasanian style, such as at Salmas.

With this in mind, we turn to the subject that *is* featured at Rag-i Bibi: the royal hunt. Hunting scenes in general have a long-established presence in Iranian royal iconography and narrative. It is in this context that Rag-i Bibi appears as the earliest Sasanian depiction of a hunting scene in the medium of rock-cut reliefs, with later examples present at Sar Mashhad and Taq-i Bostan. The former relief is attributed to the reign of Bahram II (r. 274–293 CE) showing the king defending his wife and two attendants from two lions, one of which has already been slain. The Sar Mashhad relief also depicts Kartir, the same figure found on Shapur I's relief at Naqš-i Rostam. The unique dynamism of this scene and the presence of the various subjects leads Vanden Berghe (1984: 81) to question the classification of this as a proper hunting scene, instead arguing that it represents a historical event, while others have adopted a more metaphorical interpretation for this relief, symbolizing the conquest of Zoroastrianism over Christianity and Manichaeism (Tanabe 1990). There is no such ambiguity in the much later reliefs at Taq-i Bostan where elaborate hunting scenes were carved within an *iwan* on opposing walls, on either side of an investiture relief of Khusrau II (r. 590–628 CE). On one side stands a relief showing the king hunting wild boars from a boat while dozens of attendants ride elephants nearby. On the other, Khusrau II is depicted hunting stags from horseback. Both ends of the Sasanian empire are alluded to in this relief, with elephants and royal regalia referencing the eastern stretches of the empire and two unmistakably Greco-Roman Victories adorning the outside of the *iwan*.

Although they remain rare in rupestral art, hunting scenes in other media became far more common during the reign of Shapur II, notably on silver bowls that were often sent as diplomatic gifts abroad (Harper & Meyers 1981). Moreover, Ammianus Marcellinus (24.5.2; 24.6.3) describes the abundance of hunting scenes depicted in aristocratic houses. Evidence is also found in the east, where

stucco fragments depicting battle and hunting scenes have been recovered at the fire temple of Bandiyan (Rahbar 2004). In all these media, while the quarry of the king varies between lions, stags, boars, and other animals, the king is never depicted hunting in armor (Canepa 2013: 868), suggesting a consistent iconographic program in place.

Nevertheless, regardless of date, medium, or location, there are no other examples of hunting scenes featuring rhinoceroses, which is striking given that Rag-i Bibi seems to be the first example of any hunting scene in Sasanian rupestal art. That no examples of this particular prey existed in other media indicates that there is more to explore at Rag-i Bibi than the rhinoceros alone. Interpretations of the relief as indicative of Sasanian views on the Kushans as part of Iran, and therefore deserving of reconciliation, is not reflected in their presence as a tributary nation on the Bishapur III relief (Herrmann 1980), where they are paired with the Romans. Likewise, there is little about Rag-i Bibi that suggests imperialist narratives of conquest, especially given the full range of imagery and compositions developed during the reign of Shapur I and deployed at places like Salmas. Later reliefs depicting the royal hunt are found in either religiously symbolic places (Sar Mashhad) or royal shrines (Taq-i Bostan). The depiction of the royal hunt on silver bowls sent abroad as diplomatic gifts could characterize the Rag-i Bibi relief as a rupestal version of such a practice, yet its isolation from other Sasanian reliefs or conventional places of memory demands an examination of local allusions and points of contact.

#### THE LOCAL CONTEXT OF RAG-I BIBI

The material record left by the successive foreign and local political powers that served to form the multicultural koine of Bactria provides a framework to further unpack select features of Rag-i Bibi, offering a contextually inclusive interpretation of the monument. As above, rather than parsing out Iranian elements from Central or South Asian characteristics, the intent is to consider how the relief as a whole may have been received by audiences who were familiar with the art of this region. This consideration provides insight into questions of what audiences were intended in commissioning this relief, what messages were meant, and how they may have been received.

Although not the first imperial power to leave their influence on Bactria, Sasanian engagement and evocation of Achaemenid legacies, explored by Canepa (2010a), marks the period of Achaemenid presence in the region as an appropriate starting point. The Achaemenids conquered the region of Bactria during the reign of Cyrus the Great (r. 559–530 BC),<sup>11</sup> yet they left little in the way of royal or monumental construction in comparison to other parts of their empire.<sup>12</sup> The arrival

<sup>11</sup> Herodotus (1.153.4) makes note that this event occurred during the reign of Cyrus. However, the first Persian mention of Bactria as an Achaemenid satrapy is seen on the Behistun inscription of Darius I ca. 520 BC.

<sup>12</sup> Ball (2019) provides an inventory of Achaemenid sites in the region. Mairs (2015) offers a compelling argument for Achaemenid antecedents at Ai Khanoum and charts the transition from Achaemenid to Hellenistic administration in the region (2014: 27–56).

of Alexander the Great in 329 BC, the contested annexation of the region by the Seleucid Empire (control of area in flux from 323-ca. 250 BC), and independent Greco-Bactrian kingdom (ca. 250 BC-ca. 80 BC) resulted in new urban foundations (Cohen 2013) and the injection of Hellenistic Mediterranean cultural traditions into the already culturally complex milieu of the region (Hoo 2018). However, as with their Achaemenid antecedents, this resulted in little royal or monumental construction in areas outside of major population centers (Canepa 2010a).

The rise of the Maurya empire (326 BC–180 BC) on the borders of the Hindu Kush placed these Hellenic kingdoms squarely within the Indian geopolitical sphere (Cribb 2017; Mairs 2008: 31). The Edicts of the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka are particularly relevant, both for their flexibility in the use of language and script, as well as for their inscription on living rock (Lahiri 2015). Ashoka commissioned a vast number of edicts after his conversion to Buddhism, outlining a complex narrative of his life, beliefs, legal and religious frameworks, and instructions for local governmental administration which were carved, primarily, upon natural rock faces (Kosmin 2014: 54; Baums 2019). Lahiri (2015: 126) argues that the local variation witnessed within this corpus reveals that these texts were aimed at both local administrators and the broader populace of these regions.

This local accommodation is unmistakable in the Kandahar bilingual edict (commissioned ca. 258 BCE by Ashoka, *SEG* 20.326), which features a dual inscription in Greek and Aramaic, the political *linguae francae* of the region since the Achaemenid period (Mairs 2008). Carved upon a natural rock face, textual variance is even witnessed within the inscription itself. The texts are not precise translations from one language to the other, and the Aramaic is shown to conform more fully to the broad theoretical precepts that Ashoka intended to disseminate while the Greek language required some instances of imperfect thematic refitting (Lahiri 2015: 171).<sup>13</sup> The multilingual nature of these Edicts parallels the use of Greek, Parthian, and Middle Persian on the relief of the Investiture of Ardashir I at Naqš-i Rostam (Back 1978: 281–282). Both cases demonstrate an awareness of a multi-cultural audience and interest in facilitating interaction. While the edicts of Ashoka predate Shapur I by approximately 400 years, these rupestral monuments would have remained visible at the time of the Sasanian conquest.

Locally oriented epigraphy continued during the Kushan Empire, coming to power in 30 CE. In much closer spatial proximity to Rag-i Bibi, the Kushan king Kanishka I carved several inscriptions at Rabatak and at nearby Surkh Kotal. The texts are written in Greek script but record the Indo-Iranian language of the local Kushano-Bactrian population. This choice in language is explicit in the Rabatak inscription of ca. 133/2 CE (Sims-Williams 2012: 76), where, within a genealogical excursus on the development of the Kushan royal family and a broad review of the territory of the empire of Kanishka, the Great King remarks that he shifted the

<sup>13</sup> Maniscalco (2018: 242) attributes this to the literary flexibility of the Greek inscriber of the texts, who had access to the original but had no local precedent to draw from. A second edict of Ashoka, the so-called Kandahar edict (*SEG* 33.1246), was likely architectural and may have contained facsimiles of 12 of Ashoka's major edicts, all of which were rewritten in Greek (Schlumberger 1964).



*lingua franca* of the region from the distinctly external *Yona* (Ionian, i.e. Greek) to the local Bactrian language, known as *Arya* (ln. 3–4).<sup>14</sup> The same Graeco-Bactrian script is employed in the fragmentary monumental Surkh Kotal inscription (SEG 52.1526) and three copies from the same site. This text outlines the large monumental agenda undertaken at the site by Kanishka I, and its intended importance as a religious center for visitors and local magistrates alike (Davary 1982: 53–64; Lazard et al. 1984: 226–230; Sims-Williams 2012: 78–79).

Epigraphic attestation of the local Kushan language persisted into the fourth century and the period of Sasanian regional control, although it was by no means the only attested language or script in the region.<sup>15</sup> It was within this distinctly multilingual, culturally complex, and politically charged landscape that Rag-i Bibi was commissioned. In this regard, striking iconographic parallels to the Kushan figures featured on Rag-i Bibi are found within the sculptural corpus of the Sanctuary of the Victorious Kanishka (*Kanesko-oanindo-bagolaggo*), at the aforementioned site of Surkh Kotal. This religious complex was built by Kanishka I between 128–132 CE and consists of a series of temples, courtyards, and turrets atop a terraced hill (Canepa 2015a: 86–88). Originally thought to hold the key to understanding Hellenism in the east, the site instead presents a much more culturally complex signature (Schlumberger 1953: 232–234). The architecture of the temple complex and associated earthworks draws from both western and eastern influences alongside the integration of local Kushan forms. The urban plan of the site pushes against early interpretations (e.g. Schlumberger 1953: 237) as “purely Greco-Iranian, with no Indian admixture whatsoever,” referencing local Buddhist places of worship.

Epigraphic evidence at the site alludes to the veneration of Kushan monarchs, if not their outright divinity, as well as paying homage to frequent renovations of the temple and its temenos (Canepa 2015a: 91; Rezakhani 2017: 159). Within the temple, cult statues made of clay were placed within indented niches, whose form is not unlike the earlier temple at Ai Khanoum. In addition, three examples of life-size statues of Kushan rulers were found at Surkh Kotal, whose form—as has been noted—closely parallels the representation of the standing figure in the Rag-I Bibi relief. These statues follow a specific typology, shown head-on with wide-spaced feet, in a specific costume with particular jewelry and associated equipment (Pandey 2004). This representative form is seen in other media, including coins, wall-paintings, and relief art.

That a figure with this recognizable costume and stance—a composition that would have resonated with viewers as a powerful statement of resolute local authority—was reproduced at Rag-i Bibi alongside the Sasanian king offers insight into understanding the relief in the context of the broader genre of Sasanian rock art. This is especially striking when compared to other depictions of Kushan figures and the representation of other cultural groups on Sasanian rock reliefs, namely

<sup>14</sup> See Sims-Williams (2008) and Sims-Williams & Cribb (1996) for thoughtful editions of the text and complete commentaries, note Fussmann’s 1998 rereading of the text.

<sup>15</sup> See the robust corpus of documentary and legal texts from Balkh, known as the Bactrian economic documents for a particularly rich example of the linguistic and textual variance in the region during the first millennium CE (Rezākhāni 2010).

figures of Roman authority. In reliefs like those at Bishapur, figures associated with the Kushans are identified primarily by their clothing and associated tributes but are otherwise not marked in any way as to distinguish their status from other subjugated groups.<sup>16</sup> Yet Grenet (2005: 130) identifies the Kushan figure before Shapur I as representing a Kushan king or a local noble, and describes him as “submissive, but apparently not as humiliated as the Roman emperors are on the carved proclamations in the western regions of the empire.” That Kushans would be depicted differently at Rag-i Bibi than at sites further west is not particularly surprising given the location of the relief. However, this distinction alone indicates a clear interest in appealing to local audiences and artistic traditions that is not found within the messages sent from any other Sasanian reliefs.

For all the attention given to the alleged Kushan attendants on the Rag-i Bibi relief, other elements reference different regional traditions which are neither Kushan nor Sasanian. The presence of dual rhinoceroses has already been discussed as foreign to Sasanian art, but it is all the more striking given that the *rhinoceros unicornis* was foreign to Bactria as well. While Grenet et al. (2007: 259) note that Rag-i Bibi marks the absolute western-most reach of the distribution of the rhinoceros; the site actually falls outside that distribution. Even at its greatest extent, the habitat of the Indian rhinoceros is not believed to have extended beyond the Hindu Kush (Corbet and Hill 1992: 241–242; Bose 2014). The choice to depict rhinoceroses is explained by Grenet et al. (2007: 260) by the role of these animals as royal game in India, interpreting Rag-i Bibi as signifying that the Sasanian empire now reached to the lands where rhinoceroses were hunted, and that Shapur I was capable of ruling India.

Both points of this interpretation revolve around expansionist narratives concerned with the size of the Sasanian Empire and its ability to take new lands. While a tradition exists of carving rock-cut reliefs at remote, yet symbolic places that were emblematic of expansionist conquest,<sup>17</sup> Shapur I and the Sasanians do not seem to have participated in this practice, with reliefs more commonly found within the Iranian heartland itself and near centers of population. If Rag-i Bibi was meant instead to be a more practical means of communication with a local audience, then proclaiming the extent of the Sasanian Empire as the border with India, at the border with India, makes little sense. The effect of such a proclamation on local populations would be fairly limited. Likewise, the scant evidence of any substantial attempts at conquest beyond the Hindu Kush call an interpretation of expansionist rhetoric into question. Later Sasanian kings maintained the status quo, and even allowed the region to achieve some degree of autonomy as a Kushano-Sasanian state, which itself did briefly expand into the Gandhara region (Sims-Williams 2014: 90).

An alternative interpretation lies in the fact that the connotations of hunting rhinoceroses would have been legible to local groups and travelers from

<sup>16</sup> The same is true for Salmas, where the local kings are depicted as easily recognizable based on costume, but no additional aspects of sculptural style, recognizable stance, or other attributes associated with local artistic production are represented.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, the Assyrian reliefs at the Tigris Tunnel and Mt. Lebanon (Harmanşah 2007).

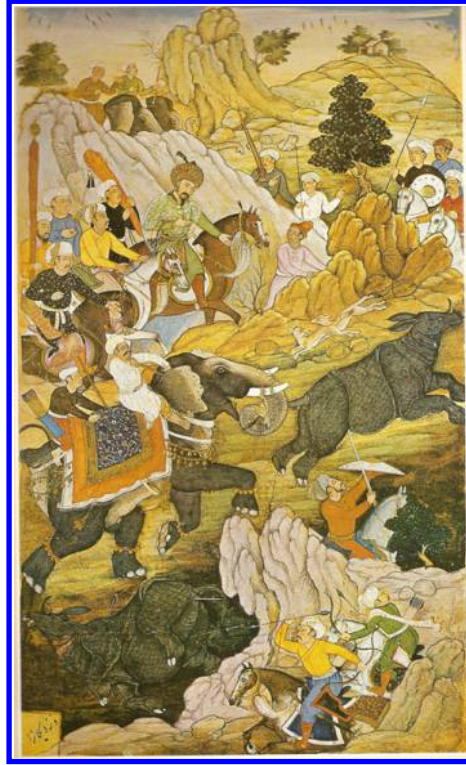


**Fig 8** Obverse image of a gold dinar of Kumaragupta, minted ca. 415-455 CE. The king is shown hunting a rhinoceros from horseback (Image distributed under a CC-BY 2.0 license)

further east. Depictions of the rhinoceros in Indian art have a rich history, and depictions of the animal are found in the seals and figurines of the Harappan culture (ca. 3300–1700 BCE, Bose 2014: 71–72). By the first millennium BCE, portrayals of rhinoceroses decrease with the elephant and the horse becoming more popular subjects (Bose 2014: 73, Manuel 2008: 35). Rhinoceroses are found in Mauryan art, but these are scarce and scattered. More prevalent is the depiction of rhinoceroses in Buddhist and Jain art from this period, though it remains a rare motif in these contexts as well (Manuel 2008: 35–36). The use of rhinoceroses on royal iconography returns briefly with the coinage of the Gupta emperor Kumaragupta I (r. 414–455 CE), where he is shown slaying a rhinoceros with a sword (Bose 2014: 73, see Figure 8).

Grenet et al. (2007: 260) reference this numismatic evidence as comparanda for the Rag-i Bibi relief, but direct correlation should be questioned as the Kumaragupta I coins were minted almost two hundred years after the carving of the relief, and were themselves unique for the period (Manuel 2008: 34). Even then, the rhinoceros-hunting scene (*khadgatrata*) was less common than the tiger-hunting (*vyaghraparakramah*) or lion-hunting (*simhavikramah*) scenes (Bose 2014: 73). It was not until the Mughal Empire (1555–1857 CE), more than 1000 years later, that the rhinoceros was again depicted frequently, at this point becoming closely associated with hunting by elite and resulting in the near extinction of the species (Manuel 2008: 36; Bose 2014: 79–90). The presence of a rhinoceros at Rag-i Bibi remains, then, an enigmatic choice, without strong connections to a clearly local audience.

The mango tree in the background of the scene follows a similar pattern, given that, like the rhinoceros, the *mangifera indicus* is not found in northern Afghanistan (Mukherjee 1953). Like the rhinoceros, depictions of the mango tree feature heavily in Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu art, due to the importance of the tree and its fruit in each respective religion. In Buddhism, the mango tree is associated with Sikhī Buddha, the twenty-third Buddha who is said to have achieved enlightenment beneath its leaves. In Hinduism, the god Ganesha is often depicted dancing beneath



**Fig 9** Painting of the Mughal emperor Babur hunting a pair of rhinoceroses from the *Babur Nama*, ca. 1530 CE (Image distributed under a CC-BY 2.0 license)

a mango tree and its leaves are still found in many ritual practices, while in Jainism the goddess Ambika has the mango as one of her attributes and is also often represented beneath a mango tree (Pal et al. 2016: 50 fn.2). Given the frequency with which the mango tree features in the artistic traditions of this region, firmly identifying it with Buddhism alone based on the impressionistic style of the leaves allows little room for the cross-cultural associations of the tree to present themselves. While later scenes of rhinoceros hunts, such as the Mughal miniature of Babur cited by Grenet et al. (2005: 248), do feature a tree in the background, it is not explicitly a mango tree (cf. Figure 9). The implications of this specific pairing—the rhinoceros and the mango tree—remain enigmatic and without earlier or later comparanda. The relative rarity of depictions of the rhinoceros, the unclear connection to the mango tree, and the absence of both from the region around Rag-i Bibi, calls into question whether specific cultural semiotic forms were being actively chosen for this relief, as argued by Grenet (2005), or instead, whether inspiration for components of Rag-i Bibi were instead drawn from a broad range of more general artistic traditions from the surrounding region, creating new forms of expression in the process.

This leads, finally, to the presence of the architectural balustrade and the style of high relief with which the relief was carved, characteristics that seem to take their



**Fig 10** Relief sculpture of Maitreya Buddha with local Kushan devotees. Gandhara style: 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE (Tokyo National Museum, image distributed under a CC-BY 2.0 license)

inspiration from the quite local Gandharan sculptural tradition. While the balustrade and its Gandharan roots are noted by Grenet et al. (2007: 249, 257), little interpretation is provided regarding the rationale for its inclusion. In comparison to the broader corpus of Sasanian reliefs, this representation of an architectural form—in apparent reference to another medium, wood—is exceptional for the genre. Moreover, while balustrades are common within the corpora of both Gandharan architecture and artistic representations of that architecture (Behrendt 2004), and they often feature in relief sculpture, balustrades are never represented on natural rock faces elsewhere (cf. Figure 10, a second century Graeco-Buddhist relief sculpture of Maitreya Buddha with a group of local Kushan devotees.). The same can be said for the depth with which the relief was carved upon the face of the cliff, where, in comparison to the comparatively shallow relief of royal art in the Sasanian west, the high (up to 2.50 meters) relief of Rag-i Bibi provides an avenue for the depiction of a level of intense kinetic activity that is unique within this corpus.<sup>18</sup> These Gandharan parallels are pressing, considering that the relief appears to have been carved not with local stoneworking methods but with the

<sup>18</sup> Vanleene (2019) explores the increasing use of very high relief in Gandharan monumental sculpture from Afghanistan. It is this depth of cutting that allows for Grenet (2005: 120) to remark that “*l’ensemble de la composition, d’un grand dynamisme, est affecté d’un mouvement tournant qu’on trouve aussi.*” This stands in contrast to the more conservative compositions found in western Iran, the dynamism of which has been explored by Thompson (2008).

distinctly Sasanian tool assemblage of the five-tooth chisel and the gouge (Grenet 2005: 120). Taken comprehensively, the local styles witnessed with the Rag-i Bibi relief seems to place it in dialogue with the standing artistic traditions of the region and lend themselves to an argument for pragmatic local engagement, foregoing—at several distinct points—imperial language in favor of a more local dialect.

#### DISCUSSION: BIBI FATIMA REVISITED

This overview of Sasanian, Kushan, and Indian artistic traditions aimed to expand upon the classifications offered by Grenet et al. (2005; 2007) for the various stylistic elements and traditions represented at Rag-i Bibi. This affords the opportunity to treat the relief as a truly multivalent composition, rather than “the sort of generic stylistic mishmash scholars usually associate with the region’s art” (Ahuja 2016: 248). The iconographic choice of the rhinoceros is not easily explained by later examples from the Gupta and Mughal empires, leaving doubt toward precise motivations and artistic references that were made during the commission of this relief. While it is not outside the realm of possibility that Shapur I hunted a rhinoceros during his campaigns in the east, as Babur would centuries later (Bose 2014: 78), the standard representation of this scene (i.e. one dead rhinoceros and one rhinoceros being chased), suggests such an explanation is unnecessary. Why, then, did Shapur I choose the rhinoceros as his prey in this relief? Likewise, that a mango tree is depicted on the relief in a style that references Buddhist artistic style warrants further exploration, given the geographic location of the relief. While mangoes are indeed prevalent in the artistic traditions of the broader region, as much in Buddhist art as in Hindu or Jain, such an explanation is not particularly insightful. Considering the likelihood that these were conscious and deliberate choices, reflecting a particular message and targeted audience, the presence of this particular tree and its pairing with the rhinoceros remains puzzling.

Grenet (2005: 133) argues that, while Sasanian officials or sculptors were likely responsible for the overall program of the relief, local artisans were responsible for the actual execution of the relief. The typical imperial Sasanian forms (e.g. horse’s tail, seal, and belt buckle) and compositions, paired with detailed representation of the rhinoceros, balustrade, and other Gandharan influences, can thus be explained by this partnership. Just as with the reliefs of Bishapur and their contingent of Roman prisoners, the use of foreign craftsmen for the creation of reliefs remains possible. An argument that the relief clearly shows the participation of craftsmen intimately familiar with the iconographic traditions of the Sasanians as well as those of India and Bactria seems likely. Evidence of the use at Rag-i Bibi of a five-toothed chisel, which is well attested at other Sasanian reliefs (Herrmann 1981), confirms the presence of at least some element of Sasanian sculptural methodology (Grenet et al. 2007: 248). However, the level of Sasanian intervention remains difficult to determine, and may hint only toward technological familiarity.

Yet the presence of local sculptors also does not adequately explain the iconography in use, especially if they were working under the direction of Sasanian

officials. The proximity of the Rag-i Bibi relief to Kushan sites like Surkh Kotal and the nearby Sasanian fortress of Kuhna Masjid helps to explain the presence of Kushan figures on the relief in seemingly participatory roles. Furthermore, proximity to these sites places the relief into a similar context as is seen in western Iran, that is in association with places of memory (Canepa 2010). The Sasanian reliefs at Naqš-i Rostam are very much dependent on the presence of earlier Achaemenid reliefs, but were also only twelve kilometers northwest of Persepolis, and even closer to Istakhr, which briefly served as the first Sasanian capital during the reign of Ardashir I. Taq-i Bostan is a large complex on the outskirts of Kermanshah, a major city founded by the Sasanians. Behistun, famous for its Achaemenid, Hellenistic, and Parthian reliefs, is also only some forty kilometers to the east, which places Taq-i Bostan within a similar *lieu de mémoire* as Naqš-i Rostam. It is certainly possible then that similar considerations factored into the placement of Rag-i Bibi, and that, by capitalizing on the nearby Kushan legacy, Shapur I signaled referential succession of Kushan rule that was as much physical and political as it was cultural.

While it is certainly reasonable to assume that Shapur I may have had desires to expand further east, the traditional imperialistic and political interpretation of Rag-i Bibi can be pushed further, arguing that the relief was intended to simultaneously engage with various communities on this eastern frontier, as well as the populations from beyond this frontier who moved within this region. This engagement was, in part, one of power, demonstrated by the legible narrative of the royal hunt, the attendance of the Kushan figures, and the kingly iconography. Yet this engagement was also one of dialogue, employing an assortment of artistic and cultural traditions that notably diverted from traditional Sasanian forms to pursue local discourse.

In so doing, Rag-i Bibi was intended to be an active part of the landscape, physically and culturally, rather than simply serving as an invasive stamp of power. It did so through the intersection of local, Sasanian, and Indian forms, resulting in iconography that is inherently plural and cannot comfortably be classified within any single cultural group. Why the rhinoceroses were paired with the mango tree, and why either appear on this relief, are then perhaps the wrong questions. They appear because they are relatable but not assertive points of contact, open for cross-cultural dialogue and indicative of Sasanian art being drawn into the culturally complex Bactrian milieu. Their presence at Rag-i Bibi demonstrates the creation of new artistic forms resulting from interaction within this unique zone of cultural interaction.

Rag-i Bibi does not, therefore, fit within traditional classifications of symbolic or overt display, nor can it be employed to determine whether the Kushan territories were genuinely conceived of as part of Iran or not. According to Kartir's inscriptions, the region around Rag-i Bibi was likely considered to be part of Iran, which may be due to the preexistence of Zoroastrian influences in local religions (Daryaee 2009: 5), and the Bactrian documents refer to the region as Kadagstan, with a local commander who appears to have some autonomy (Gyselen 2002: 222–223). Nevertheless, regardless of religious affiliations or local politics, these territories were treated as conquered lands elsewhere in Sasanian art. Grenet's interpretation of the relief as signaling reconciliation is difficult to

resolve with the reliefs at Bishapur, but the intent of Rag-i Bibi does appear to be one of soft power rather than total subjugation, as we see at Salmas. A hunting scene may then have been most appropriate for the narrative that Shapur I aimed to convey.

While the use of the various iconographic elements at Rag-i Bibi distinguishes this relief from all others commissioned during the reign of Shapur I, it does not require a radically different intent. It does, however, signal awareness of the audience who would see this relief, and sheds light on the active decisions that went into making it legible to a culturally diverse population. Furthermore, such a style allows for direct royal iconography to coexist alongside local traditions. However, whatever the *raison d'être* for Rag-i Bibi, its interpretation was outside the control of Shapur I or any other figure. In the centuries after the carving of the relief, we may only guess at how it came to be interpreted and reinterpreted by the myriad groups that swept through Afghanistan, comprising many religions, cultures, and origins. That it is known today by a name that references local Islamic traditions underscores the fluidity with which rock monuments are engaged by local communities. It is fitting then, that this relief—more than any other carved by Shapur I—should be so intimately re-appropriated and reinterpreted by local communities over time.

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