

A FORGOTTEN SASANIAN SCULPTURE.
THE FIFTH BUST OF NARSEH FROM THE MONUMENT OF PAIKULI *

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This paper aims to shed light on a specimen of Sasanian statuary that had been ignored for over a century and can now be considered from a more comprehensive perspective. Thanks to a new set of data collected by the MAIKI - Italian Archaeological Mission in Iraqi Kurdistan - during the documentation campaigns conducted at the Slemani Museum in the past years it was possible to analyse the fifth bust in the round belonging to the Paikuli monument, representing the Sasanian king Narseh. This piece prompts us to look further into the meaning of the figurative project accomplished by Narseh at Paikuli and the forms of the communicative strategy pursued by the Early Sasanian dynasts.

Keywords: Monument of Paikuli; Early Sasanian Archaeology; Sasanian Art; Sasanian Royal Ideology; Iranian epigraphy

Over ten years ago, in 2006, an Italian research team led by Carlo G. Cereti started collaboration with the Slemani Museum on study of the Sasanian monument of Paikuli and its epigraphic material.¹ Despite several external contingencies that hampered fieldwork over the years, researches have now converged within the field of the MAIKI activities.²

The Paikuli monument lies in the Qaradagh range, about 16 km west of the modern city of Darbandikhan (fig. 1). It was erected by the Sasanian king Narseh (293-302 CE) to celebrate his accession to the throne after a dynastic struggle.³ Narseh himself reported the events in a bilingual inscription (Middle Persian and Parthian) carved on the walls of the monument. The structure is situated next to the homonymous mountain pass and, according to the inscription, marks the spot where, on his march towards Ctesiphon, Narseh met the nobles and dignitaries of the kingdom gathered there to recognize him as legitimate sovereign.⁴ In Late Antiquity, this site was a natural gateway to the royal province of Asōristān, in which lay the capital city of the Ērānšahr, Ctesiphon. During the Sasanian dynasty Paikuli and, more generally speaking, the territory of present-day Iraqi Kurdistan

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¹ Cereti - Terribili 2012; 2014; Cereti - Terribili - Tilia 2015; Terribili - Tilia 2016; Terribili 2016.

² In the fall of 2012 MAIKI and the Department of Scienze dell'Antichità - Sapienza University of Rome, signed a new agreement with the Sulaimaniyah Antiquities Directorate for the study of the Paikuli Monument and its surrounding area (Bogdani - Colliva - Insom 2016). All the MAIKI activities are made possible thanks to the contribution of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Italian Development Cooperation, the continuous support of the Italian Embassy in Baghdad and the Italian Consulate of Erbil. We would also like to thank BraDypUS Communicating Cultural Heritage and BABUINO Unlimited S.R.L. for the fundamental sponsorship given to our activities. Deep gratitude is due to all the members of the MAIKI - Italian Archaeological Mission in Iraqi Kurdistan and particularly to the co-director Maria Vittoria Fontana and the senior advisor Carlo G. Cereti for their inestimable work. See also the site www.maiki.it.

³ For the historical events involving Narseh see Weber 2016, with references.

⁴ NPī §.32. The paragraph numbering of Paikuli (NPi) and Šābuhr I at Ka'ba-ye Zardošt (ŠKZ) inscriptions follows the edition of Humbach - Skjærvø 1978-1983, 3.1 and Huyse 1999, respectively.

were situated at the heart of a strategic road system connecting the urban settlements of Mesopotamia, the western frontier with the Roman Empire and the heart of the Iranian plateau.⁵

The renowned British Orientalist, Major Sir Henry Rawlinson, was the first scholar to visit the site of Paikuli in 1844;⁶ however, it was only several decades later that the German archaeologist Ernst Herzfeld undertook broader documentation campaigns, in 1911, 1913 and 1923. Herzfeld's attention was caught by the outstanding Narseh inscription, and his main work on Paikuli (1924) focuses primarily on philological reconstruction of its text, containing only scanty information on the architecture and its ornamented elements. The same lack of technical data characterizes both the two reports on his missions⁷ and his personal diaries, now held at the Freer and Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian Institute of Washington D.C.⁸ In 1997, due to serious risk of looting,⁹ about a hundred inscribed blocks, as well as five monumental busts of King Narseh, were moved to the Slemani Museum, ensuring their safekeeping; meanwhile in 2006 the Italian-Kurdish team recovered some more inscribed blocks as well as decorated pieces.¹⁰

Although the original form of the monument is still a matter of debate,¹¹ the decorated pieces within the Slemani Paikuli Collection cast some light on certain features of the structure. Stepped battlements, concave blocks and three-quarter columns with huge bell-shaped bases adorned both the walls and their tops. These components, including the busts and the inscription, emphatically assert the royal status of the monument, establishing a complex visual language.¹² Currently, documentation of the different typologies of elements kept in the Slemani Collection has been carried out in collaboration with Studio 3R, applying an integrated topographic and digital photogrammetric system that has enabled production of accurate 3D renderings.

Amongst the most noteworthy elements of the Slemani Museum Paikuli Collection are the five massive busts of Narseh, all bearing the commonest features of the Sasanian royal iconography. Four of them were sculpted in high relief projecting from a background slab

⁵ Cereti - Terribili - Tilia 2015.

⁶ Rawlinson 1868.

⁷ Herzfeld 1914; 1926.

⁸ Herzfeld's diaries of the 1911, 1913 and 1923 campaigns. Respectively archived with the abbreviation S7; S10; N83.

⁹ In fact, at the beginning of this century a well-preserved Middle Persian block (E1) appeared on the antiquity market (Skjærvø 2006).

¹⁰ In 2006 the Italian team, under the direction of Carlo G. Cereti (Head of the Mission) and Barbara Faticoni (Director of the Archaeological Excavation), started a limited stratigraphic excavation of the site. The campaign focused on the study of the stratigraphy of the external area of the monument and the search for possible foundation structures. In 2007 a second campaign aimed at verifying the stratigraphy in the remaining areas was prematurely interrupted for safety reasons. During the first campaign two trenches located near the SE corner of the monument were excavated, showing a preserved archaeological stratigraphy of a few centimetres above the natural soil. Surveys of the site and the activities at the Slemani Museum led to the identification of 19 new inscribed blocks (11 MP and 8 Pth.), see Cereti - Terribili 2014.

¹¹ Terribili - Tilia 2016, 419 ff.

¹² See below § 1 and 2. On the connection between stepped-crenelation decorations and royal authority see Anderson 2015, with previous references.

with an unworked back and, according to Herzfeld,¹³ they were modelled on one and the same template (figs. 2-3). As for their location within the structure, Herzfeld took them to have been embedded in the centre of each wall;¹⁴ however, such positioning is doubtful and raises many practical issues.¹⁵ Nevertheless, one of the most innovative results of the documentation campaign carried out by MAIKI concerns the fifth bust of Narseh.

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1. THE NARSEH BUST IN THE ROUND

During his campaigns, Herzfeld detected a huge fragment including part of a fifth monumental bust of Narseh located next to the northern wall of the monument.¹⁶ In his monograph on Paikuli, the German archaeologist dismissed it as a rejected piece abandoned on the spot,¹⁷ which is the main reason why this bust has not been taken into consideration by modern scholarship ever since, except for two mentions by the Italian archaeologist P. Callieri in his latest essays on Sasanian arts.¹⁸ According to the new collected data, however, Herzfeld's hypothesis needs revising.

The specimen consists in a fragment of an over twice life-size bust in the round of a male figure (fig. 3). Like all the other busts and blocks that covered the outer surfaces of the monument, the bust was carved in a local limestone. Even though badly damaged - the upper part of the face and the base are missing and almost all the surface is much abraded and chipped - traces of the garment and sumptuous hairstyle with a profusion of locks are still visible; on the back two wavy ribbons can also clearly be seen. The piece has a maximum preserved height of 113 cm; a maximum preserved width of 120 cm and a thickness between 41 and 67 cm.

The Paikuli Collection of the Slemani Museum preserves a further element that had never been examined before. This is a massive fragment of Narseh's crown and *korymbos*; *i.e.* the silk gauze that covered the Sasanian Kings' hair and topped their crowns (fig. 4). The specimen is fractured on one side but preserves its original shape intact, and part of the crown decoration is still visible. The fragment has a height of 54 cm and approximate maximum diameter of 40 cm.

With 3D rendering the contour of the leaf decoration of Narseh's crown could be detected on both the presumable right side and the front of the crown. This latter detail fits perfectly with the evidence of Narseh Type I coinage, which shows a leaf on each side of the crown.¹⁹

¹³ Herzfeld 1924, 8.

¹⁴ Herzfeld 1924, 3.

¹⁵ Terribili - Tilia 2016, 422.

¹⁶ Herzfeld 1914, 24; 1924, 2.

¹⁷ Herzfeld 1924, 3.

¹⁸ Callieri 2014, 116; 2016, 17, 21. A preliminary presentation of the sculpture was provided by Terribili - Tilia 2016, 423; Bogdani - Colliva forthcoming (Activities of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Iraqi Kurdistan (MAIKI): in Proceedings of the Eighth European Conference of Iranian Studies. St. Petersburg 15-19.09.2015, St Petersburg).

¹⁹ Alram 2012, 295-300. According to the numismatic evidence, Narseh was the first Sasanian king to adopt two crowns; the chronological order between the two typologies has recently been established by Alram (2012) following internal criteria based on the portrayal styles of the Narseh's coinage. The earlier crown has been

When Herzfeld surveyed the site, the fifth bust was already in a fragmentary state and apparently the second element escaped his attention. Be that as it may, it is quite likely that this fragment fell away from the fifth bust since no other compatible evidence has ever been found on the site and conversely the two pieces are matching. In the 3D reconstruction the two fragments were combined, conveying a fairly accurate impression of the true dimensions of the whole piece although the king's face and forehead are missing (fig. 5). The bottom of the bust is broken off, so the original sculpture should have exceeded in height the about 180 cm roughly measured after the 3D reconstruction.²⁰

Furthermore, the most distinctive feature of both fragments is that they were conceived and sculpted in the round; in fact, the care with which even the back of the bust was carved is striking. This is a key point which highlights the remarkable position this forgotten sculpture actually attained within the corpus of Sasanian art.

On the back of the lower fragment, the sophisticated hairstyle falling behind Narseh's shoulders and ending in well-carved curls is still in fair condition. A third and smaller fragment representing a curl was found on Paikuli in the 2006 campaign and seems to match, both in shape and dimensions, with Narseh's hairstyle. The fragment has a preserved height of almost 24 cm and a maximum preserved width of almost 10 cm.

Presumably, on the evidence of both its orientation and the turn of the twirls engraved on it, this fragment belonged to one of the broken long locks falling over the right shoulder of the sculpture, where several braids are now missing. The rendering of this type of hairstyle finds many parallels within Sasanian monumental art, as in the case of the portrait of the relief of the high priest Kerdīr at Naqš-e Rostam and of some dignitaries in the Wahrām II relief at Naqš-e Rostam.²¹ Closer comparison can also be made with some high-relief male busts found in the Sasanian manor house at Hājīābād, dated to the mid-4th century CE.²² Evidently, therefore, it was quite a common feature of Early Sasanian fashion as well as a well-known stylistic feature in the production of the Sasanian stonemasons' workshops.

The two ribbons tying the royal diadem (fig. 5), which fall down the centre of the King's back in the main fragment, are fashioned in horizontal folds. The way the curls and ribbons are engraved recalls, albeit somewhat more coarsely, the approach adopted for the back of the statue of Šābuhr I at the cave of Bīšāpūr. A further element of the fifth Paikuli bust reminiscent of the statue of Šābuhr are the folds in the garment, still detectable on Narseh's right shoulder and rendered with a "wet-cloth" style. They belong to the royal robe or possibly to the royal cloak, a feature widely represented on the Sasanian monumental reliefs. The similarities with the statue of Bīšāpūr cave are not merely a matter of the Sasanian craft tradition, but are probably also part of the propaganda promoted by

identified as Type I "palmette" crown (Aram 2012, 281-287). The decoration, barely visible on the other busts from Paikuli (Terribili - Tilia 2016, 422-423), possibly alludes to the goddess Anāhīd (Göbl 1971, 7 and 45; Aram 2012, 287, with references).

²⁰ Even if the comparison with the other busts from Paikuli and the volumes of the main fragment suggest a bust type for this sculpture, we cannot completely exclude, due to the lack of the bottom, a different reconstruction.

²¹ Hinz 1969, 191, 200; Schmidt 1970, pls. 86-88, 96, 98. See also the relief of Narseh at Naqš-e Rostam and in particular the details of the crown and the hairstyle of the male character behind the sovereign (Schmidt 1970, pl. 90).

²² See *infra* and Azarnoush 1994, 105-106, 110-113.

Narseh himself. Seeking to assert full legitimacy after a severe dynastic challenge, Narseh claimed his own connection with the supreme authority of his father, the great Šābuhr I, also by adopting royal iconography and visual allusions.

Some examples of royal statuary in the round are known to us especially belonging to the Seleucid and Arsacid periods.²³ In the adjacent area of northern Mesopotamia, besides the extraordinary evidence of Hatra,²⁴ two more free-standing sculpture representing enthroned royal persons, fashioned in a Parthian style and arguably belonging to the Late Arsacid era, were found outside an archaeological context and have since, unfortunately, been lost. Of both the sculptures only fragments of the bottom half were known of; the first was found at Rās al-‘ain next to the Khabur River during an archaeological campaign led by the Baron Max Oppenheim, but it had already disappeared before Herzfeld visited the area.²⁵ Of the second sculpture, all that is left to us today is a sketch.²⁶ The French archaeologist Henri Seyrig was informed of the existence of this piece by an Iraqi colleague when it had already been smuggled out of the country.²⁷ Both the *specimena* seem to reflect the local sculptural craftsmanship of the 2nd-3rd centuries CE.²⁸ This kind of royal representation, developed in areas influenced by both Hellenistic and Iranian cultures, also finds some parallels at the easternmost fringe of the Iranian world. Here the Kushan and perhaps also the Indo-Parthian kings adopted a multifaceted visual language, showing that throughout a vast territory a set of common features was exploited for the enhancement of royal ideologies.²⁹

In 3rd-century Iran the rise of the Sasanians marked a sharp political change; the ideology they fostered showed various innovative departures as well as many elements of continuity with the previous Arsacid tradition. The first monarchs of this dynasty developed a broad figurative program mostly based on monumental rock reliefs, with the clear intention to affirm their legitimation in exerting supreme authority over the Iranian kingdom, resorting to a tradition which in Iran went back at least to the Elamite period.³⁰

In the region of Fars, which was the epicentre of the Early Sasanian ideological program, two monumental sculptures in the round have been found in addition to Šābuhr’s statue at the cave of Bīšāpūr.

²³ See e.g. Kawami 1987, 51 ff.; Vanden Berge 1993, with references; Callieri 2016, with references.

²⁴ See Dirven 2008, with references.

²⁵ Herzfeld 1920, 55, pl. XXV.

²⁶ Seyrig 1939, 182.

²⁷ Seyrig 1939, 183.

²⁸ Levit-Tawil 1983, 61-62. Cf. Herzfeld 1920, 56-57 for an earlier dating to the 1st century CE.

²⁹ The evidence from Surkh Kotal and Māṭ (Verardi 1983, 229), as well as the clay sculptures from Khalchayan (Northern Bactria; Santoro 1995, with references) and the Bactrian inscription of Rabatak (Sims-Williams 1998) attest to the relevance of statuary associated with “royal” monumental contexts; a feature able to express in various forms the political ideology of these kings (see also Canepa 2015b). Possibly also in the Apsidal Temple of Taxila we may find, as early as the Indo-Parthian period, uncertain traces of royal statuary in a context connected with a possible “royal sanctuary” (Colliva 2007). Cf. also the western regions linked to the Iranian milieu, e.g. Commagene. The association between statues of gods and ancestors is also attested by literary sources in royal sanctuaries built by the Parthian rulers of Armenia, see e.g. Moses Khorenats’i II.8, II.40, II.49 (Thomson 1978, 143, 182, 190); see also Canepa 2013, 346.

³⁰ Vanden Berghe 1983.

One, representing a male head with a high headdress similar to a “Royal Arsacid miter”,³¹ was discovered at the site of Qal’ a-ye Now (near Malyan);³² it dates to the Early Sasanian or, more likely, to the Late Arsacid period.³³

The second, representing a male bust in the round carved in local limestone, was found at Tomb-e Bot, in Lamerd Valley, Southern Fars. The bust is in a bad state of preservation, but traces of an elaborate headdress and a possible diadem are still visible. The bust shows some similarities with the one from Qal’ a-ye Now and has been tentatively dated to the Late Arsacid or Early Sasanian period.³⁴

The two busts witness a remarkable statuary tradition for royal/dynastic imagery even in the heartland of the Sasanian’s dominions, while also showing how the local authorities exploited this craft in commissioning figurative programs.

A possible - albeit indirect - match for the Paikuli in-the-round piece may have been the sculpture of Šābuhr I, now lost, which originally adorned a celebrative, double-column monument in the city of Bīšāpūr. It was erected in 266 by a high functionary, a secretary (MP. *dibīr*), in the centre of the city where two main streets met and had a honorary function in perpetuating the memory of the great king; however the presence of other elements connected to the effigy may indicate a broader significance of this monument as a whole, either symbolically or at a practical level. Although we have no knowledge of the actual form of this royal image or its specific positioning, we are aware of its existence from the bilingual Middle Persian and Parthian inscription³⁵ carved on the shaft of one of the two columns flanking a three-stepped podium. Beside the podium, two smaller plinths,

³¹ Kawami 1987, 222; Callieri 2016, 20.

³² Two Parthian stone heads from Susa offer a parallel in the nearby province of Khuzistan (Kawami 1987, 138).

³³ Kawami 1987, 138-139, figs. 31-32; Sarkhosh-Curtis 1998, 65; Harper 2008, 77; Callieri 2016, 20. This head is more than twice life-size (Harper 2008, 77; Callieri 2016, 20); a dimension comparable to the similar proportion dominating Paikuli royal imagery.

³⁴ Askari-Chaverdi 2002, 277-278; 2013, 166-167; Callieri 2016, 20-21.

³⁵ Ghirshman 1936; Nyberg 1964-1974 I, 124; Back 1978, 378-383. The inscription states: MP. *pahikar ēn mazdēs̄n bay šābuh̄r...*, “this (is) the image of the Mazdean Majesty Šābuhr...” (ŠVŠ 3-4). The last paragraph of the inscription records King Šābuhr’s appreciation and the rewards he paid to the monument builder. The following statement highlights the central role the statue had in the structure, MP. *ud kū šāhān šāh ēn pahikar dād u-š dād afsā ī dibīr zarrēn ud asēmēn bandag ud kanīzag bāg ud xwāstag*, “and when the King of Kings saw this image then He gave to Afsā the scribe gold and silver, slaves and maids, a garden and a landed property” (ŠVŠ 14-15). The term *pahikar* (picture, image) was commonly used in both Arsacid and Sasanian epigraphy to introduce the figures carved in the monumental reliefs or other sculptural representations (Gignoux 1972, 32, 61). It is in fact an element of continuity with the Achaemenid tradition, where the OP *patikara-* is used in indicating the figurative components of the royal monuments, e.g. in the Darius inscriptions at Bisotun and Naqš-e Rostam; for the occurrences, Schmitt 2014. In the Old Persian version of the four-language inscription engraved upon the Egyptian statue of Darius found at Susa, the same term refers specifically to this free standing royal effigy (DSab §.2; Schmitt 2009, 146). The same association of the term with a sculpture in the round is detectable in the Parthian inscription of the so-called Heracles of Seleucia (2nd century CE; Lipiński 1993, 128-129). A particularly interesting evidence related to the same term comes from the eastern Iranian world where, in the Bactrian inscription of Rabatak (II.11-12; Sims-Williams 1998, 82), the Kushan king Kaniška orders the production of images/statues (πιδογυρβο) of gods and ancestors for his royal sanctuary (βαγολαγγο). Moreover, several royal statues of this dynasty bear an epigraphic label carved on the base of the sculpture (Sims-Williams - Falk 2014).

which might be taken to be two altars, suggest that some kind of ritual or reverential practices could also have been associated with this complex.³⁶

As a whole, the imposing, statuary programme deployed by Narseh at Paikuli also finds formal correspondence with the evidence from the manor house of Hājīābād. Here, amid a variety of stucco décor, we find two male high-relief stucco busts depicting the Sasanian King Šābuhr II.³⁷ According to the Iranian archaeologist M. Azarnoush, the two high-reliefs were located in a portico facing an *ayvān* structure (L. 149) and surmounted other busts, two of which (nos. 18 and 19), identified as the owner and his heir, were set on engaged semi-columns.³⁸ The frontal representation of all these specimens is intended as a recognizable sign of authority, while the presence of royal images must be considered part of the ideological message conveyed by this kind of structure. Here was not only stressed the majesty of the king and his figure but also the presence of the sovereign's effigy symbolised the ties between the highest authority of the kingdom and the individuals exerting power at the local level.

A similar context with royal sculptures in stucco is attested for two other structures at Tell Dahab, in the vicinity of Ctesiphon³⁹ and Kish. Here, too, the images of the Sasanian King were set into the wall and, at least in the case of Kish, possibly rested on semi-columns.⁴⁰ According to J. Kröger and other scholars, the recurrent presence of royal effigies suggests a connection of these places with some sort of ancestor honour/cult and implies "dynastic celebrations".⁴¹ Be that as it may, whatever specific function these places had or actual activities took place therein, it is clear that within their spaces a broad range of cumulative concepts were conflated, all revolving around the extraordinary status of the Iranian king and his royal household.⁴²

The original position of the in-the-round bust from Paikuli remains at the moment uncertain, given also the uncertainty about the overall form of the monument, while investigation into its possible connection with the main monument or other possible structures is impracticable on account of the missing lower part. Nevertheless, hypothesising a position on top of the monument⁴³ hardly seems justifiable as in that position, also considering the location of the monument and the presence of a battlements around its

³⁶ The typology of the Bīšāpūr monument was inspired by Roman models well attested in Syria province, but also reveals the addition of native, Iranian elements (Ghirshman 1962, 171). In the first study, Salles and Ghirshman (1936) advanced three different hypothesis on the position of the statue of Šābuhr: 1) on the lintel joining the two columns; 2) on the columns themselves, serving as pedestals; 3) on corbels on column shafts. In his essay on Iranian Pre-Islamic art, Ghirshman (1962, 151) asserted that the king's statue was set on the central plinth between the two columns and flanked by the two smaller altars.

³⁷ Azarnoush 1994, 105-110, figs. 80, 89; Callieri 2014, 106.

³⁸ Azarnoush 1994, 136-137, 153 and figs. 143, 155; Callieri 2014, 115-116, with references. The bell-shaped bases of the semi-columns recall the profile of those found at the corners of the Paikuli monument (Terribili - Tilia 2016, 420-421).

³⁹ Kröger 1982, 40-45; 1993a, with references; Callieri 2014, 117.

⁴⁰ Callieri 2014, 106, 116-117, with references; 2016, 18-19.

⁴¹ Kröger 1982, 265; 1993b, 63; Callieri 2014, 69-70, 115; Canepa 2015a.

⁴² See also below § 2.

⁴³ Cereti - Terribili 2012, 85.

top,⁴⁴ the bust would be hardly visible, and only from a considerable distance; in these conditions, it would be not easily appreciable or even recognisable.

Recently P. Callieri proposed the existence, during the Arsacid and at least Early Sasanian periods, of a monumental type called “bust-pillar” in which a bust or head of a sovereign or high dignitary was «set on the upper scape of pilasters or semi-columns»; the existence of this type suggests an intriguing hypothesis, although at present not demonstrable, also in the case of the bust in the round from Paikuli.⁴⁵ Even taking this hypothesis to be true, it would remain to be understood where this “bust-pillar” was originally positioned in relation to the main monument.

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2. PAIKULI IMAGERY WITHIN ITS CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

During his relatively brief rule, Narseh established an imposing monumental programme involving both major royal sites, as in the case of Naqš-e Rostam and Bīšāpūr,⁴⁶ and new spots relevant to his career, as in the case of Paikuli. After a disputed succession, Narseh endeavoured to fabricate a new memory of the Sasanian royal history, also associating himself with sites, which in various ways commemorated the extraordinary deeds of former monarchs. In fact, gravitating around spaces like these a complex of ritual-ceremonial activities focused on the dynastic identity,⁴⁷ which should have included the extremely intricate etiquette associated with public display of the royal persona. Since the Achaemenid period and throughout the history of Pre-Islamic Iran, the ceremonies that centred on the royal persona and its visual manifestation developed into a highly codified and sophisticated system.⁴⁸ Likewise, the Sasanian sovereigns received forms of ritual deference (*namāz burdan*)⁴⁹ that required specific spaces for their fulfilment, while on certain occasions and in particular places the reverential treatment usually reserved for the living king or his ancestors could have extended to royal images.⁵⁰ As explicitly attested in

⁴⁴ A study of the architectural elements stored at the Slemani Museum confirms the presence of a crenelation consisting of a cornice pierced by circular holes with stepped pyramidal battlements on top (Herzfeld 1924, 3-8; Bogdani - Colliva forthcoming (Activities of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Iraqī Kurdistan (MAIKI): in Proceedings of the Eighth European Conference of Iranian Studies. St. Petersburg 15-19.09.2015, St Petersburg).

⁴⁵ Callieri 2016, 21-23.

⁴⁶ See the relief at Naqš-e Rostam (NRu VIII), the appropriation of Wahrām I's relief (Bi V) and perhaps the unfinished one at Bīšāpūr (Bi VI). On the disputed attribution of the latter, see Callieri 2014, 149-152, with references.

⁴⁷ Canepa 2010; 2013.

⁴⁸ For the Achaemenid royal court ceremonial, see e.g. Brosius 2007 and Wieshöfer 2014, with references.

⁴⁹ Lit. “to pay homage”, the expression refers to a codified protocol describing acts of respect towards superiors, e.g. kings and gods (Nyberg 1964-1974 II, 135; Canepa 2009, 64 and n. 41, with references). The recently found evidence of *namāz* (**SGDE**) in the Narseh inscription (Cereti - Terribili 2014, 379) occurs in a large lacuna (NPI §.75); the context alludes to the homage paid by the dignitaries towards the new King and the recognition of his royal *xwarrah*. For gesture codes in Iranian royal etiquette, see Canepa 2009, 151, with references.

⁵⁰ Canepa 2014, 64. On the Achaemenid and Seleucid legacy related to “Middle Iranian” royal spaces housing statues or images of living kings and their ancestors, see Canepa 2009, 15-17; 2015b, 72 ff. On court ceremonials in late-antique Iran, see more recently de Jong 2004; Wieshöfer 2007; Canepa 2009; Dąbrowa 2014; Panaino 2014.

the Šābuhr I' inscription at the Ka'ba-ye Zardošt,⁵¹ sacrifices in favour of the souls (i.e. *pad ruwān* rituals) and sacred fires were in fact instituted for both the departed and the living royal-clan members.⁵²

Within the religious literary context, the Avestan blessing (*āfrīn*) addressed by Zarathustra to king Wištāspa (Yt. 24. 1-12)⁵³ offered a model for popular and widespread devotional deference addressed to those who held the highest authority in the material world. Moreover, in the Zoroastrian tradition the so-called and much-observed “outer” rituals included blessing formulas addressed to the living sovereign, as in the case of the *Āfrīnagān* liturgies.⁵⁴ Discursive and liturgical performances like these contributed to define the awareness the common believer had of the royal status and the behavioural approach he was to adopt. A late Paharvi text, the *Dēnkard III*, tells us about the appropriate attitude the subject had to have towards his king, projecting the obedience and reverential devotion paid to the sovereign into the sphere of a cosmic requirement.⁵⁵ In this work the Middle Persian term *tarsagāyīh*, “reverence, respect”, literally denoting the state of a respectful or tremulous awe,⁵⁶ expresses the deferential feeling of the pious subject (MP. *bandag*). It is an attitude that, on a different but related level, marks both the relationship between the god Ohrmazd and his spiritual creations and that of the believers towards the gods.⁵⁷ In this respect the massive frontal and hieratic effigies of the Sasanian king at Paikuli might have aimed to inspire this emotional state and related behaviours in the visitors.

In a society where sight of the king was restricted to few individuals and precluded by protocol and strict regulations,⁵⁸ the epiphany of the royal persona whether actual or mediated through figurative representations must have been perceived as something exceptional, exerting a deep impact upon the sensibility of the commoners. Some evidence may even suggest observances performed before royal effigies. A cuneiform tablet from the archive of the Ebabbar temple of Sippar attests to the fact that in the Early Achaemenid

⁵¹ ŠKZ §.33 ff. compare also with the inscription of the high priest Kerdīr (KKZ 2-3).

⁵² See Panaino 2005; 2014, 332. Similarly, the figurative evidence, both numismatic and sculptural, stresses the association between the Sasanian kings and sacred fires, as in the case of the dedicatory fire-altar found at Barm-e Delak, bearing images of Ardašīr I and Šābuhr I (Canepa 2009, 17-18, n. 63, with references); see also below § 3.

⁵³ See Darmesteter 1892-1893 II, 665-669.

⁵⁴ Darmesteter 1892-1893 II, 725. In a comparable framework, the epigraph of Šābuhr Sagān Šāh (early 4th CE), carved in the *tachara* of Darius I at Persepolis, reports that, after a communal banquet and religious services, the patron performed a long sequence of blessings addressed to the living king and his ancestors, see ŠPs I, 9-11 and Terribili forthcoming (Istakhr and its Territory; a Glance over Middle Persian Sources and Sasanian Epigraphic Evidence: in M.V. Fontana (ed.), *Istakhr (Iran)*, 2011-2015. Historical and Archaeological Contributions - Quaderni di Vicino Oriente), with references. The setting of this inscription located and surrounded by the reliefs of the Achaemenid kings must have accentuated the symbolic significance of this event, see Callieri 2003; Canepa 2010, 571 ff.

⁵⁵ Cipriano 1994, 37 ff.

⁵⁶ The verb *tarsīdan* means “to fear, be afraid” (Nyberg 1964-1974 II, 192; MacKenzie 1971, 82).

⁵⁷ According to the Zoroastrian doctrine, the concept of pietas conveyed by the term *tarsagāyīh* is associated with Ašwahišt, the Amahraspand who embodies the divine Truth and the cosmic order (Cipriano 1994, 40 ff.).

⁵⁸ Choksy 1988, 42.

period offerings were made to a statue of Darius I set in that temple,⁵⁹ although this may refer to local practices and institutions rather than exemplifying widespread customs. Possibly more relevant here is the episode narrated by Philostratus (*Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, I. 27), where a high officer in charge of the great gate of Babylon (Ctesiphon ?), or more likely of the Royal palace entrance, urged the people to pay homage (προσκυνήσιέ) to a golden image (εικόνα) of the Arsacid king. Regardless of the reliability of this account, Philostratus seems to be illustrating an actual practice of Arsacid-age protocol here, since in the same passage he specifies a rather technical point, namely that Roman ambassadors were dispensed from that commitment, while common citizens as well as foreigners were obliged to perform the act of deference. Intriguingly, we may deduce that before the king's effigy located at the city or royal palace gateways, visitors and subjects of the kingdom were expected to pay homage to the ruler.⁶⁰ If compared to the passage in Philostratus, the location of the Paikuli monument may also prove significant: it stood along a road leading to Ctesiphon, near a mountain pass that quite possibly marked the access to the "imperial" province of Asōristān.⁶¹ It is likely that in Pre-Islamic Iran, access into royal dominions or possessions required some kind of formal act of recognition of and submission to authority. In fact, royal busts adorned representative areas of palatine structures,⁶² while the archaeological evidence of the dedicatory monument at the centre of Bīšāpūr may provide a close parallel for an understanding of this and similar reverential practices.⁶³ On the other hand, an interesting case concerning the relation between communal loyalty and royal effigy occurs in the Babylonian Talmud, which refers to a statue of a third-century Sasanian king set in the synagogue of the village called Shephithibh of Neherdai.⁶⁴ Royal patronage over different religious communities, which mirrored the cosmic and universal character of Sasanian kingship, was evidently also disseminated through visual representations in places serving cultic functions,⁶⁵ as Byzantine chroniclers attest for the late Sasanian period in the case of the Husraw I's portrait decorating the doomed royal-ceremonial hall of the fire temple in Ganzak (i.e. Ādur Gušnasp).⁶⁶

Furthermore, it is also worth noting that the Paikuli monument is defined in the Narseh inscription with the term *pillag* (MP **plky**; Pa **plk**).⁶⁷ Although the term does not clarify the actual form of the monument, its semantic sphere implies a structure including a podium or steps.⁶⁸ Unfortunately, we have no direct evidence of this term associated with other known architectural structures, but the occurrences of the same term in Middle Iranian Manichaean texts⁶⁹ reveal some functional feature associated with it. Remarkably, in a fragmentary

⁵⁹ BM72747; see Wiesehöfer, 2014, 33; Rollinger 2016, 125.

⁶⁰ Cf. also the inscribed statue of Darius I standing near a monumental gate in Susa (Kuhrt 2007, 477 ff.).

⁶¹ Cereti - Terribili - Tilia 2015.

⁶² See above §1.

⁶³ The monument included a bilingual inscription and a statue of Šābuhr I flanked by small altars, see above § 1.

⁶⁴ Morony 1984, 316; see Talmud IV, *Rosh Hashana*, cap. 2 (Rodkinson 1918, 47).

⁶⁵ See Kröger 1982, 275 and above § 1.

⁶⁶ Panaino 2004, 563-564; Canepa 2009, 148.

⁶⁷ NPī §§ 2, 32.

⁶⁸ Henning 1952, 518 n. 6; Humbach - Skjærvø 1978-1983, 3.2, 20-21; Terribili - Tilia 2016, 419.

⁶⁹ Durkin-Meisterernst 2004, 289.

Manichaean Parable in Parthian language, the term *pillag* refers to an open-air, movable or permanent platform used for royal public audiences; standing upon this structure the king received the procession of dignitaries paying homage to him.⁷⁰ It is in fact a circumstance in some ways comparable to the events narrated in the Paikuli inscription; here the delegation of dignitaries met Narseh and recognized his accession to the throne in the same place where the king was later to build his commemorative monument.⁷¹ The presence in the Manichaean text of the Parthian word *šādīft* “happiness/rejoicing”, when describing the spirit of those approaching the royal platform, introduces into this account a concept that reverberates with references to the Iranian royal ideology as well as religious tradition.⁷² More generally speaking in the Manichaean literature the term *pillag* also indicates the “idol altar”,⁷³ suggesting a relation between structures of this kind and representation of a superior power and, consequently, the devotional-reverential practices performed there. Thus the term seems to have been selectively used for a material support structure for authoritative figures or images worthy of reverence,⁷⁴ while Narseh’s and Manichaean *pillags* may have shared analogies of a functional, rather than structural, nature.

2.1. The tutelary role of the king and the Paikuli context

When we consider the content of the inscription as part of the monument and in dialogue with Narseh’s figurative project, key elements of the Sasanian royal ideology come to light in a meaningful perspective. Although composed in a later period, Zoroastrian Pahlavi literature offers substantial terms of comparison to understand the role attributed to the King of Kings in the vicissitudes of the material existence (*gētīg*) and its sacred history. Theological texts, including the *Bundahišn* and *Dēnkard*, point out the salvific function that good kingship exerts in the cosmic battle against the Evil. In the third book of the *Dēnkard* this idea is expressed systematically:⁷⁵ the Mazdean king protects the earthly elements and the divine law by removing falsehood and disorder from the material world while ensuring

⁷⁰ M44, 167, 172; see Colditz 1987, 300-301.

⁷¹ NPi § 32. Moreover, through the rhetorical device of the epistolary dialogue between the king and the dignitaries, focused on the acceptance of the royal diadem and the throne of Ērānšahr, the inscription (NPi §§ 63-90) evokes the context of the crowning ceremony and the associated institutional speeches (Shayegan 2012, 129-132; Terribili 2016, 159-160, with references).

⁷² For this concept see e.g. Piras 1999; 2004; Lincoln 2012, 258-265. Cf. the MP expression *šād-dil*, “with a happy heart”, occurring in the quotation of a letter in which Narseh summoned Wahrām III to his court (NPi § 50), see Humbach - Skjærvø 1978-1983 3.1, 51, 124; Piras 2006; Skjærvø 2006, 120-121; Terribili forthcoming, 208-209 (Comunicazione regale e arte scribale, modelli di trasmissione fra iscrizioni achemenidi e sasanidi: J. Hämeen-Antilla - R. Mattila (eds.), Translation and Transmission in the Eastern Mediterranean 500 BC-1500 AD - The Intellectual Heritage of the Ancient and Mediaeval Near East Series, Münsterpp. 191-221).

⁷³ Boyce 1977, 76; Humbach - Skjærvø 1978-1983 3.2, 21.

⁷⁴ In the Iranian royal tradition the concept of “elevation” was already a substantial idea in Achaemenid imperial art and imagery (Garrison 2011, 66). Compare also with the ceremonial baldachin depicted on silver vessels with “enthronement” scenes (Harper 1981, 99-122); on royal platform and *takht* in Sasanian art, see also von Gall 1971.

⁷⁵ See Cipriano 1994.

the prosperity of his kingdom.⁷⁶ By asserting appropriate prescriptions and ritual rules, the king contributes effectively even to the salvation of his subjects' souls.⁷⁷ According to the Mazdean tenets, in fact, the king's prerogatives also have a mythic-ritual dimension.⁷⁸ In this respect the king's deeds assume an eschatological dimension, restoring an original condition foreshadowing the renewal of existence (MP. *frašgird*) and favouring its development. The core of these religion-based ideas is evident even in the content of Narseh's inscription; a text that aims, among other things, to extol this specific aspect associated with the ideal portrait of the good Mazdean sovereign. In fact, the inscription stresses the ethical as well as religious scope of Narseh's virtuous endeavour using concepts explicitly related to the Zoroastrian dualistic tradition and deeply rooted within the Iranian royal language.⁷⁹ Not surprisingly, the narrative section of the Paikuli inscription echoes motifs from the epic-oral tradition; in such a framework the figure of Narseh and other characters are defined on the basis of cultural archetypes and mythical patterns.⁸⁰ According to this ideological message, Narseh's political achievement actually has its own cosmological-eschatological significance, starting a new course of history and reinstating the right order established in a founding past while prefiguring the future renewal.⁸¹ From

⁷⁶ Similar ideas are also included in the deference formulas addressed by the Christian clergy to the Sasanian king and preserved in the *Synodicon Orientale*, see e.g. Chabot 1902, 320, 368 and above all 390-391. The evidence of these conventional eulogies gives us an idea of the encoded practices transversally shared by different communities in the Sasanian society, while also showing the inclusive extension of the Sasanian royal patronage, see Payne 2015.

⁷⁷ Cipriano 1994, 35. Some evidence indicates that the King maintained a prominent role in the actual performance of specific religious rituals (Panaino 2014, 333). In this case the ritual purity of the King must have been a prerogative, in order to enhance the effectiveness of the actions and prevent damage to the physical elements. Contrariwise, the tyrant causes the moral deviation of the subjects as well as the material deterioration of the kingdom, also fostering the propagation of infirmities and epidemics, see e.g. *Dēnkard* III, 36, 46, 125 (de Menasce 1973).

⁷⁸ Choksy 1988, 38.

⁷⁹ Narseh's opponents are depicted as fellows of Ahriman and his *dēws* (NPi §.4); likewise they are denoted by *daevis* lexicon, e.g. *druzān/druzīh* (liars/falsehood), *jādūgīh* (sorcery), see NPi §§ 37, 54-56 and 61. The use of such language strategies in connoting the enemies is already evident in Darius I and Xerxes inscriptions.

⁸⁰ Mori 1995; Skjærvø 1998; Shayegan 2012. The overall plot of NPi follows the Mazdean cosmological process as well as New Year-like mythical motives. The historical events of the king's accession corresponds to the struggle between the two Principles and are presented in a religion-oriented framework. The irruption of the "Lie" and unlawful behaviours of its followers starts the NPi narration (§ 4); only Narseh's endeavour, demanded by an assembly of Iranian nobles, can restore the social order. Furthermore, while referring to the "origin" time of his predecessors, the new king's deeds envisage a new era of material prosperity (§ 64 ff.). The idealistic restoration of the earth/kingdom to the perfection of the primeval, divine creation is a basic tenet of Iranian royal ideology that finds its origins in the Achaemenid legacy (Lincoln 2012). Moreover, the ritual enactment of worldly and cosmic restoration was the core of the equinox festivals, the two major Zoroastrian holidays, constantly exploited by Iranian kings for their coronations and solemn exhibitions, see Canepa 2009, 11, 12, with references.

⁸¹ NPi § 89 explicitly proclaims that the glory of the king (*xwarrah*) will contribute to keep the kingdom safe and sound until the *frašgird*. Cf. the concept of "imperial eternity" (e.g. the title αἰώνιος ἀγούστος) in the Byzantine tradition and the possible parallels with the Sasanian ideology (Panaino 2004, 566-568, 581, 584). Moreover, in the last lines of the Paikuli inscription (§ 94) it is expressed the wish to establish the realm anew. In fact, having arrested dissemination of the Lie, Narseh is recognized as possessing the sacred royal glory (§ 55; Cereti - Terribili 2014, 371, 374), and as the individual best suited to preserving the kingdom (§ 75 ff.). On these topics see also Terribili 2016, 160-161.

purely historical interpretation of Narseh's epigraphic text we are thus prompted to investigate more thoroughly its symbolic value and consequently that of the structure in which the text was physically included.

The concept of a cosmic, tutelary function of the good king along with justification of the hierarchical relationship between the higher authority and subjects were the pillars of the royal Sasanian ideological message.⁸² This cluster of ideas shaped both the variegated language involving the visual representation of kingship and the modes of its reception within Iranian society. The extraordinary position of the king within humankind was stressed in every kind of royal expression, also finding its way through the exaltation of physical perfection and prowess. The uniqueness of the King of Kings' body, his integrity and purity, was a model of human perfection; likewise, the royal *sacra persona* was conceived as a divine creation in the image of the gods, worthy of praise and source of joy and well-being.⁸³ By virtue of a sort of transitory effect, attuned to popular magical-ritual beliefs, we may suppose that the tutelary and propitiatory properties of the royal persona, as well as his sanctity, were by analogy also accorded to his two- and three-dimensional images.

It is in this broader conceptual framework that we can better appreciate the interactions among the different components of the Paikuli monument, the symbolic meaning of this structure, as well as the message of its inscription and the otherwise enigmatic, repetitive presence of Narseh statuary. Taken together, all these elements concur to render a consistent sense, forming part of a multi-layered propaganda system. In fact, the Sasanian communication strategy rested on a pattern of dichotomization, narrative/emblematic – historical/mythical,⁸⁴ which exploited the ambivalence of the messages conveyed by royal monuments and took advantage of their polysemy. Through both iconography and textual representation, the living king and his deeds were cast into an epic garb participating in the continuum of a mythologized history and benefiting from its symbolic capital. This aspect brings out the great significance of comparison between the Paikuli complex and the dynastic centres of the ancient Iranian world.⁸⁵

Recently, in a series of works M. Canepa⁸⁶ investigated the visual language of Iranian kingship and its forms of manifestation in celebrative epicentres, offering a key for interpreting both continuity and discontinuity phenomena. In all these spaces we find close dialogue between monumental inscriptions, dynastic memory, visual imagery, cultic or deference observances, discursive performances, and topographical or architectural

⁸² See e.g. Panaino 2004 and Canepa 2009.

⁸³ See Panaino 2004, 560 ff. Physical excellence as manifestation of royal dignity is an ancient and recurrent motive in Iranian royal identity, see e.g. Yarshater 1983, 405; Kuhrt 2007, 508; Llewellyn-Jones 2015. The likeness between the mirror-image figures of the god Ohrmazd and the Sasanian kings clearly emerges in the so-called "investiture" reliefs, a mimetic representation that casts light on the functional symmetry of the characters in governing the cosmic and worldly realms respectively (Panaino 2004, 579; Canepa 2009, 59 ff.; Shenkar 2014).

⁸⁴ An application of this model to the Sasanian context is inspired by Garrison's analysis of Early Achaemenid imagery, see Garrison 2011, 61 ff.

⁸⁵ Canepa (2010, 588) rightly highlights the conceptual connections between the cult of memory established by Šābuhr I at Naqš-e Rostam and Narseh at Paikuli.

⁸⁶ Canepa 2009; 2010; 2013; 2014; 2015a; 2015b; see also Shenkar 2014.

features.⁸⁷ In these contexts, conceived with the aim of building up historical memory and cultural identity, the effigy of the monarch played a primary role in enhancing the expression of power. In fact, all these constituents formed a core of socio-political and religious messages, projecting the ideal portrait of the king into a tangible and enduring dimension. A similar ideological function can be ascribed to the architectural and figurative program set by Narseh at Paikuli to assert his royal dignity. The four royal high-relief busts, whatever their exact position on the walls, with their imposing proportions dominated the scene for the visitor, accompanying him around the monument; the path followed the view of the two epigraphs engraved on the eastern and western walls, while their content narrated the king's restoration of the true order and recognition of his royal credentials. Possibly somewhat more direct and interactive may have been the rapport between visitors and the single bust sculpted in the round – a sculpture that strongly evoked the immanent manifestation of the King of Kings. Conceivably, the whole architectural structure with its plinth, corner columns and ornamented canopy simulated the royal baldachin (*pillag* ?) used in open-air audiences, as the four high-relief busts find parallel with the busts adorning the *ayvān* of the Sasanian palaces; by contrast, the sculpture in the round symbolized the bodily presence of the sovereign within the royal space. Along with the inscription that evokes the enthronement ceremony and its participants, all these components represented and condensed a topic royal event.

In reproducing a royal context, the Paikuli monument and above all the Narseh sculpture in the round may have prompted in the travellers reverential or devotional observances commonly performed at other dynastic sites or at the Sasanian court itself.⁸⁸ These acts followed a solemn etiquette, but they might also have included the recitation of blessing formulas addressed to the kings, both living and departed, and frequently associated with the performance of “outer” rituals.⁸⁹ These habits had religious purposes as well as a markedly social dimension, since they offered the opportunity, especially to high-class members, to exhibit in public their prestige, liberality, loyalty and personal ties with the primary source of authority. On the other hand, through these reverential acts the royal power achieved manifest recognition of his patronage.

From this point of view, we can arrive at a more organic appreciation of the extent of the programme established by Narseh, who conceived his celebrative monument combining a well-established tradition with innovative forms. Magnification of the living king's deeds and dignity not only legitimised the secular authority of Narseh, but also extolled the everlasting and eschatological role of this king, associating to him a soteriological function. Through the multifaceted Paikuli imagery, the good king Narseh is described as a restorer of the lineage that held the sacral royal charisma (*xwarrah*) and consequently ensured the physical integrity of the worldly creation. Likewise, in a perspective projected to the future, this programmatic message aimed to include Narseh into the inner circle of the venerable-

⁸⁷ According to Canepa these features characterised the main royal sites in the broader Iranian world such as Surkh Kotal, Rabatak, the royal sites of Commagene and Naqš-e Rostam (Canepa 2015a, 24 ff.).

⁸⁸ The occurrence of *nāmaz* mentioned in the inscription (NPI § 75) in conjunction with Narseh's royal status recognition (Cereti - Terribili 2014, 379, see also above n. 49), may have inspired analogous acts of reverence.

⁸⁹ See above § 2.

tutulary ancestors of the royal lineage.⁹⁰ In showing himself acting as a pious Mazdean and righteous king who defeated the agents of the Lie, Narseh fabricated his figure as that of an *ahlaw/ardā*, “the just; righteous” (lit. Who possesses the Truth), a concept, which conveyed manifold religious nuances as well as warrior-class ideals, including above all afterlife expectations and soteriological beliefs.⁹¹ In order to assert his claims and achieve an enduring position among the venerable ancestors of his line,⁹² Narseh exploited an integrated assortment of elements: epigraphic narrative and visual valence, hieratic portraits, architectural features and topographical location.⁹³ Accordingly, the space of Paikuli, primarily conceived for Iranian-internal consumption, was intended to preserve the memory of and catalyse ritual deference to Narseh, the living-king/blessed-*ahlaw*,⁹⁴ who saved the Iranian kingdom from devilish impostors re-establishing both the legitimate branch of the Sasanian family and the proper course sanctioned by the gods.

⁹⁰ It cannot be ruled out that the commemorative monument might represent a sort of Narseh cenotaph (Canepa 2010, 588).

⁹¹ The quality of MP. *ahlaw/ardā* (Av. *ašāvan-*; OP. *artāvan-*) is achieved during life and ensures a blissful existence in the other world (Gnoli 1987). In the Zoroastrian tradition the *fravaši ī ahlawān/ardā frawahr* (the eternal souls of the righteous) held a prominent position in safeguarding the material world as well as the community of believers from the assault of Evil (see e.g. Yt. 13), see also below n. 92.

⁹² On various occasions Narseh mentions the *ahēnag*, “forebear/s” and *niyāg/niyāgān*, “grandfather, ancestors”, always in relation to the claim to the throne and legitimate rule (see NPi §§ 18, 48, 71, 76, 80, 82, 84, 90). For analysis of the role of forefather classes in Sasanian inscriptions, see Shayegan 2011.

⁹³ Narseh built the monument in a very evocative place; surrounded by impressive cliffs it stood on the top of a hill overlooking a major communication route (Cereti - Terribili - Tilia 2015).

⁹⁴ The devotion paid to the blessed souls of the righteous (*fravaši ī ahlawān*) and the related funerary commemorations are widely attested. In the Middle Persian tradition these spiritual beings are invoked in every liturgical office and associated dedication, while one of the most important seasonal festivals, the *fravardīgān*, is dedicated to their veneration (Boyce 1995; 2000). According to the *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag* (Vahman 1986, 198), the souls of the good kings form a group of blessed souls among the higher spheres of paradise dwellers. If the good souls of the departed were the object of widespread devotional acts, on occasions of commemorations involving souls of royal status, these practices must have had a collective dimension. Intriguingly, G. Gnoli (2009, 143, 150) suggested an association between the concept of tutelary *fravašis* and interpretation of the royal Kushan sanctuary at Rabatak. The Bactrian inscription from this site mentions statues representing the living sovereign alongside statues of deceased kings and divine entities, mostly linked to Zoroastrian *post mortem* and eschatological beliefs. A passage by Theophylact Simocatta (IV, 8) may allude to the concept of an eternal and royal *ardā frawahr* participating in the heavenly assembly that entered Sasanian official ideology; here Husraw II claims to be: “among the gods a righteous and immortal (ἀγαθὸς καὶ αἰώνιος) man” (Whitby 1986, 114; Panaino 2004, 566; Canepa 2009, 103; cf. Ciancaglini 2004, 649-650). Interestingly, in the following passage, Ciancaglini (2004, 654-657) interpreted the hapax ἄσωνας as derived from the learned MP. term *ašō/ašōwān* > Young Avestan *ašaon-*, Av. *ašāvan-* “righteous, just”; in this case the sentence could be read as: “the one [i.e. Husraw II] who employs/rewards (μισθοῦμενος) the righteous and preserves the monarchy for Persians” (see Whitby 1986, 114) - a sentence that closely evokes Iranian concepts. Compare Gr. μισθός “hire, pay” with the cognate Av. *mīzda-*; MP. *mīzd*, “reward, hire, wage” (Mayrhofer 1994, 358), also used in the ritual-religious sense of “boon, allotment, reward” (Bartholomae 1904, 1187). According to Yt.1.25 integrity (*Haurvatāt*) and immortality (*Aməratāt*) are the reward of the righteous (*mīzdəm ašaonqm*) in the future abode (Pirart 2007, 61). Apparently, the Pahlavi translation (*zand*) specifies the ritual/religious sense of *mīzd* in this passage adding a term as its gloss: *kē ast mīzd - *jādag - ahlawān*, “who are the reward (i.e. the share) of the righteous” (Dhabhar 1927, 97), cf. Dhabhar 1963, 182. Thus by ritually rewarding the *ardā frawahrs*, the Sasanian king granted the safeguard of his subjects.

The association between text and image has in fact been a long-lasting feature of Iranian royal art, and as early as the Achaemenid period the epigraphs are often accompanied by a figurative repertoire.⁹⁵ Following a similar pattern, the Sasanian royal inscriptions were also placed in connection with or in proximity of royal effigies.⁹⁶ This may be considered an element of continuity, corresponding to a programmatic choice aiming at extolling the symbolic capital of these components and at directing the same fruition of these awe-inspiring royal spaces. On the other hand, for the coeval and mostly illiterate audience both the textual and the iconographic evidence were conflated in a conceptual continuum operating at the level of a shared imagery. If until now the high-relief busts of Narseh could have been seen as little more than decorative elements, bearing mere aesthetic value, in our opinion the rehabilitation of the fifth bust in the round shifts interpretation of the entire figurative programme of Paikuli towards a more meaningful framework, consistent with the context of royal “epiphany”.

Gianfilippo Terribili

3. THE DEDICATORY NAME OF THE PAIKULI MONUMENT

A further, indicative element regarding the symbolic value associated with this monument is offered by its honorary name. In fact, among the recently-published blocks belonging to the inscription, the Parthian a12 sets out in the first line the compound name Narseh gave to the monument, namely: Pērōz-Anāhīd-Narseh (Npi § 2).⁹⁷ In Middle Persian onomastics, proper names composed of three elements, or even more, are well attested; however, the general rules governing these compounds as well as the semantic relationship among the different items are hard to track down.⁹⁸

In Pērōz-Anāhīd-Narseh the first element is an adjective, “victorious”, extensively used also as a person’s name, the second is a deity’s name, while the last is the name of the King himself. It is probably a possessive compound with the approximate meaning of “Narseh with a victorious Anāhīd”,⁹⁹ or alternatively we may see it as an open compound name governed by an apposition bond as Pērōz-Anāhīd+Narseh, namely “Pērōz-Anāhīd (and) Narseh”, i.e. “The Victorious Anāhīd (and) Narseh”. Be that as it may, the overall sense is clear: the dedicatory name underlines the connection between the King and the goddess, implying the importance accorded to this deity in granting victory to the legitimate heir to the throne.¹⁰⁰ A similar dedicatory, three-term name is associated with the votive fire at

⁹⁵ Garrison 2011, 58; Canepa 2014; Wiesehöfer 2014, 30.

⁹⁶ Given the places where they were carved and the status of their patron, an individual closely associated with the royal inner-court, the four inscriptions of the high priest Kerdīr can also be counted within this category, even if the definition may sound somewhat inappropriate.

⁹⁷ Written **prgwz-nhtyE-nryshw**. The passage reads: “(This is) the monument of Pērōz-Anāhīd-Narseh and we made this monument because ...” (Cereti - Terribili 2014, 355, 357).

⁹⁸ In a study published in 1979, the French scholar Ph. Gignoux, tried to analyse some of the three-term names considering the first two elements as joined in a determinative compound (e.g. Burz-Mihr + Gušnasp; Gignoux 1986, II/8). Nevertheless, the author did not pursue this path further in his subsequent studies on Middle-Persian onomastics (Gignoux 1986; 2003).

⁹⁹ Cereti - Terribili 2014, 357-358.

¹⁰⁰ Throughout Pre-Islamic Iran, the victory-bestower Anāhītā/Anāhīd had a primal role in fostering royal ideology (see e.g. Chaumont 1958; Boyce - Chaumont - Bier 1989). Apparently, Narseh was particularly

Barm-e Delak, established to commemorate the first victory of king Šābuhr I over the Romans. In this case, the patron named it Pattāy-Šābuhr-Abnōn, possibly to be understood as: “Long-lasting Šābuhr (and) Abnōn”.¹⁰¹ Apparently, according to a later Islamic source, the former Sasanian king, Ardašīr I, already employed a three-term compound, Irān-kunē-xwarrah,¹⁰² “may (he/she/it) make the glory of Iran”, in naming a monumental edifice, possibly a fire temple, built after his triumph over the last Arsacid sovereign Ardawan in his first capital Ardaxšīr-xwarrah (Gur).¹⁰³ The dedicatory denomination of new foundations including the sovereign’s name was a practice extensively followed throughout the Sasanian period becoming part of the royal language.¹⁰⁴ Narseh’s father, Šābuhr I, after the victory over the emperor Gordianus III, entitled the city of Mišike with the celebratory name of Pērōz-Šābuhr, “The Victorious Šābuhr”.¹⁰⁵ Among the commemorative denominations given to new provinces or urban foundations we find a considerable occurrence of three-term compounds. In all these formulas, expressing a wide range of concepts referring to the royal ideology, the king’s name always ranks in the third position, as in Paikuli. This pattern is highlighted by verbal-compound names as Ērān-abzūd-Husraw, Šahr-winnārd-Yazdgird or Ērān-āsān-kar-Kawād, respectively “Husraw increased Iran”, “Yazdgird arranged the kingdom”, “Kawād made Iran peaceful”. We may assume that in this position the king’s name attained a special resonance and that it was perceived as the focal element. It is also possible that a sort of general rule governed the composition of celebratory and official names – a practice which forged and disseminated royal identity within the Sasanian society.

devoted to this goddess, or at least he was compelled for political convenience to associate himself with her figure. For contrasting interpretations of the female figure represented in the Narseh relief at Naqš-e Rostam see Weber 2010 and Shenkar 2014 with references. In NPi § 19 Anāhīd the Lady (MP: *anāhīd ī bānūg*) is named at the end of a propitiatory formula that includes Ohrmazd and all the gods. The passage marks the beginning of Narseh’s march towards the Ērānšahr and his fight against the enemies. The invocation of this deity before an imminent struggle recalls a very long section of the *Ābān Yašt* (Yt. 5. 21-83; 103-118), the hymn dedicated to Aradvī Sūrā Anāhītā, where several mythical Iranian heroes sacrificed to the goddess in order to beseech her for success in their undertakings. In each instance Anāhītā chose the one to whom boon and victory were to be granted. In particular, Narseh’s circumstances may recall the passages in Yt. 5. 68-69 and 108-110 where Jāmāspa and then Wištāsp sacrifice to the goddess imploring victory over the *dāevas*-worshippers and *drugvants* (“followers of the Lie”) threatening the Aryan people (Malandra 1983, 125; Agostini 2013, 23). Narseh’s devotion to the Mazdean tradition may indeed have been a conspicuous trait of his personality since in his father’s inscription at the Ka’ba-ye Zardošt he is the only one to be distinguished by the religious-oriented title of *ēr mazdēs*n, “the Aryan worshipper of Mazda” (ŠKZ § 34). It is thus possible that part of the conceptual framework of Narseh’s account was inspired by the Mazdean textual tradition and, in this case, embedded in the Anāhīd worship.

¹⁰¹ See MacKenzie 1993, 106-108, with references. In this case Paikuli and Barm-e Delak evidence seem to follow the same pattern: attribute-tutelary figure + monument patron.

¹⁰² Attested in Ibn Ḥawqal’s *Opus geographicum*, see Chaumont 1958, 159.

¹⁰³ Chaumont (1958, 159-160) assumed it to be a temple of Anāhīd.

¹⁰⁴ This pattern is particularly evident in new administrative settlements or in the renaming of old cities. At the same time, the practice also regarded pious foundations; for example, ŠKZ (§§.33-34) gives a list of fires, each named after the member of the royal house to whom the fire was dedicated. In this case, the compound is formed by the adjective *husraw* “renowned/glorious” and the proper name of the Sasanian member: e.g. Husraw Hormizd-Ardašīr, “Distinguished (is) Hormizd-Ardašīr”.

¹⁰⁵ ŠKZ §§ 4, 8. The appellative *pērōz* is also recorded by Ammianus Marcellinus (19.2.11) in describing the Sasanian soldiers acclamation of Šābuhr II (Canepa 2009, 125).

A striking example of naming a celebrative monument after the king comes from the Kushan Bactria. The Paikuli formula can in fact be compared to the Kaniška dedication of the royal/dynastic shrine at Surkh Kotal (2nd century CE), where the syntagm *καθηῤκο οανινδο βαγολαγγο* (the sanctuary ‘Victorious-Kaniška’) occurs in the Bactrian epigraph of “Nokonzoko”.¹⁰⁶ The meaning of this open compound formed by direct-case terms¹⁰⁷ has long been debated. While it is possible to take the term *οανινδο* either as an epithet of Kaniška (“the victorious Kaniška / Kaniška the Victor”)¹⁰⁸ or the epithet/name of an Eastern Iranian goddess known after her appellative of Oanindo/Wanind (“Kaniška and The Victorious”),¹⁰⁹ preference has generally been accorded to the former interpretation.¹¹⁰ Whatever the actual nature was of this and the other ambiguous Sasanian evidence, some sort of parallelism seems to emerge in the designation of commemorative structures. Indeed, the continuity in language strategies and dynastic habits prompts wider investigation into the meaning and features of the royal monuments in Pre-Islamic Iran and adjacent regions.

Gianfilippo Terribili

4. CONCLUSIONS

The wealth of details characterizing the Narseh bust in the round from Paikuli definitely rules out the possibility that the fifth sculpture had been discarded by the monument builders. Conversely, on the evidence of the data we must reconsider not only the location of this bust, but also the original form of the entire structure. We may in fact consider the possibility that the fifth bust was set before the monument, possibly resting on a bust-pillar monument or a sort of podium, like the sculpture that adorned the monument of Bišāpūr, now lost. Alternatively, it may have been part of the main structure. Since the lack of convincing evidence, also a location of the sculpture into a deep niche into the wall or in a sort of *ayvān* is at the present moment impossible to prove, even though this solution would be consistent with Sasanian architectural patterns.¹¹¹ Be that as it may, the 3D rendering of the two re-joined fragments offers us one of the rare examples of Sasanian royal statuary in

¹⁰⁶ The first line of this inscription reads: “This Citadel (is) the sanctuary ‘Victorious-Kaniška’ to which the Lord King Kaniška gave its name” (Huyse 2009b, 108, with references).

¹⁰⁷ Henning 1960, 52-53.

¹⁰⁸ Interestingly, Humbach (2003, 157, 159) compares this epithet to the use in Hellenistic times of the Greek *nikatōr*.

¹⁰⁹ Starting from Henning’s observations, F. Grenet (Lazard - Grenet - de Lamberterie 1984, 200; see also Grenet 1987, 42, n. 10) suggested that the term stands for this goddess. Wanind was the embodiment of victory, a deity who in the Greco-Bactrian iconography assumed the appearance of a Nikè (Grenet 1987, 42). Postulating that apposition governed this compound, we should have a sort of *dvandva* form, i.e. “The Kaniška (and) Wanind Sanctuary”. In this case, the Bactrian evidence should be very close to the naming of the Paikuli monument, ‘Victorious-Anāhīd (and) Narseh’, and that of Barm-e Delak fire, ‘Long-lasting-Šābuhr (and) Abnōn’. However, it must be remembered that, like the Bactrian compound, also the Sasanian ones are subject to different interpretations.

¹¹⁰ Huyse 2003, 176-178. See also the adjectival function the term *οανινδο* has in the Rabatak inscription (l.18; Sims-Williams 1998, 83).

¹¹¹ As possible terms of comparison, see the monument of Taq-e Girra (Terribili - Tilia 2016, 420) and the silver plate from Qazvin where an “enthronement” scene is framed in an *ayvān*-like architecture (Harper 1981, pl. 34). In both cases the structures are surmounted by stepped crenellations.

XXI (2017) A forgotten Sasanian sculpture. The fifth bust of Narseh from the monument of Paikuli

the round, and with it the possibility to widen our perspective on the manifold significance of the Narseh architectural programme set in Paikuli. Viewing all the monument features in an integrated perspective highlights the consistency of the cultural and political message associated with it. This cluster of elements formed an intricate language steeped in the tradition of Pre-Islamic Iran and comparable to that expressed through other royal/commemorative sites of the Iranian world. Therefore, the fifth Paikuli bust constitutes a further piece in reconstructing royal-patronage self-imagery during the formative period of Sasanian identity. In comparison with the figurative projects of his predecessors, in Paikuli Narseh chose more static visual representation, possibly more attuned to the concepts of social appeasement and political inclusion stressed in the associated inscription. In a yet broader perspective, the Paikuli monument is a key to understand the forms in which members of this dynasty cultivated the imagery of their authority and their claim to sacral kingship.

Luca Colliva - Gianfilippo Terribili

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XXI (2017) A forgotten Sasanian sculpture. The fifth bust of Narseh from the monument of Paikuli

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Fig. 1 - The Sasanian monument of Paikuli, KRG, Iraq (from Google Earth).

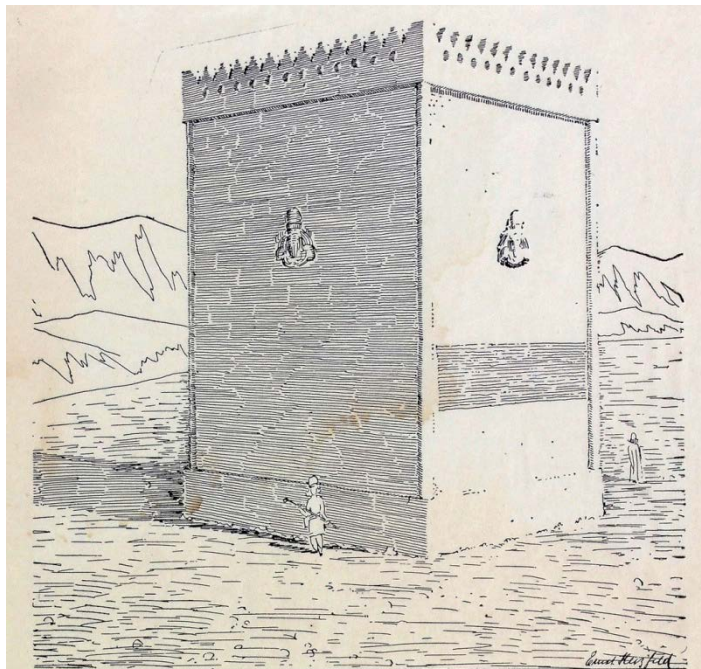


Fig. 2 - Herzfeld's reconstruction of the Paikuli monument (courtesy of The Ernst Herzfeld papers. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.).



Fig. 3 - 3D renderings of a high-relief Narseh bust from Paikuli, now at the Slemani Museum (image DiSA-MAIKI; image processed by Studio 3R).



Fig. 4 - A fragment of the crown of the in the round bust of Narseh from Paikuli, now at the Slemani Museum (photo DiSA-MAIKI).

XXI (2017) A forgotten Sasanian sculpture. The fifth bust of Narseh from the monument of Paikuli



Fig. 5 - 3D renderings of the in the round bust of Narseh (two fragments) from Paikuli, now at the Slemani Museum (image DiSA-MAIKI; image processed by Studio 3R).

SOMMARIO

A. Catastini - <i>Ricordo di Giovanni Garbini (1931-2017)</i>	1
L. Nigro - D. Montanari - A. Guari - M. Tamburrini - P. Izzo - M. Ghayyada - I. Titi - J. Yasine - <i>New archaeological features in Bethlehem (Palestine): the Italian-Palestinian rescue season of November 2016</i>	5
J. Bogdani - <i>The archaeological atlas of Coptic literature. A question of method</i>	59
V. Pisaniello - <i>Hittite (ninda) kaz(za)mi(t)-</i>	71
A.L. Corsi - <i>A brief note on the Early Abbasid stucco decoration. Madinat al-Far and the first Friday Mosque of Isfahan</i>	83
F. Duva - <i>New perspectives on the first Abbasid Masjid-i Jum'a of Isfahān</i>	97
V. Laviola - <i>Three Islamic inkwells from Ghazni excavation</i>	111
R. Giunta - <i>Tombeaux et inscriptions funéraires de Ghazni (Afghanistan). Quelques documents inédits Du IX^e-XIII^e siècle</i>	127
M.V. Fontana - <i>Qal' a-Iṣṭakhr and the Si Gunbadān</i>	147
L. Colliva - G. Terribili - <i>A forgotten Sasanian sculpture. The fifth bust of Narseh from the monument of Paikuli</i>	167
M. Di Cesare - <i>A note on an Umayyad carved ivory plaque kept at the Walters Art Gallery</i>	197
A. Santi - <i>The role of Madīna in the emergence of the Mosque-Dār al-Imāra combination: a preliminary note</i>	211
L. Nigro - D. Montanari - M. Ghayyada - J. Yasine - <i>The el-Atan Tomb: an Early Bronze IVB female burial in the heart of Bethlehem</i>	225
V. Laviola - <i>Unpublished Islamic bronze cauldrons from private collections: two early and one very late specimens</i>	257
D. Montanari - <i>Bollettino delle attività del Museo del Vicino Oriente, Egitto e Mediterraneo della Sapienza, anno 2017</i>	265
A. Ten - <i>Roma, il culto di Iside e Serapide in Campo Marzio: alcuni aggiornamenti</i>	273



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SOMMARIO

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L. Nigro - D. Montanari - A. Guari - M. Tamburrini - P. Izzo - M. Ghayyada - I. Titi - J. Yasine - <i>New archaeological features in Bethlehem (Palestine): the Italian-Palestinian rescue season of November 2016</i>	5
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V. Pisaniello - <i>Hittite (NINDA) kaz(za)mi(t)-</i>	71
A.L. Corsi - <i>A brief note on Early Abbasid stucco decoration. Madinat al-Far and the first Friday Mosque of Isfahān</i>	83
F. Duva - <i>New perspectives on the first Abbasid Masjid-i Jum'ā of Isfahān</i>	97
V. Laviola - <i>Three Islamic inkwells from Ghazni excavation</i>	111
R. Giunta - <i>Tombeaux et inscriptions funéraires de Ghazni (Afghanistan). Quelques documents inédits du XI^e-XIII^e siècle</i>	127
M.V. Fontana - <i>Qal'a-Iṣṭakhr and the Si Gunbadān</i>	147
L. Colliva - G. Terribili - <i>A forgotten Sasanian sculpture. The fifth bust of Narseh from the monument of Paikuli</i>	167
M. Di Cesare - <i>A note on an Umayyad carved ivory plaque kept at the Walters Art Gallery</i>	197
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L. Nigro - D. Montanari - M. Ghayyada - J. Yasine - <i>The el-Atan Tomb: an Early Bronze IVB female burial in the heart of Bethlehem</i>	225

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V. Laviola - <i>Unpublished Islamic bronze cauldrons from private collections: two early and one very late specimens</i>	257
D. Montanari - <i>Bollettino delle attività del Museo del Vicino Oriente, Egitto e Mediterraneo della Sapienza, anno 2017</i>	265
A. Ten - <i>Roma, il culto di Iside e Serapide in Campo Marzio: alcuni aggiornamenti</i>	273