

Kaveh FARROKH\* (University of British Columbia, Canada)

Gholamreza KARAMIAN\*\* (Tehran Azad University, Iran)

Meysam DELFAN\*\*\* (Tehran Azad University, Iran)

Farzad ASTARAKI\*\*\*\* (Tehran Azad University, Iran)

## **Preliminary reports of the late Parthian or early Sassanian relief at Panj-e Ali, the Parthian relief at Andika and examinations of late Parthian swords and daggers**

**Keywords:** rock reliefs, Parthian, Sassanian, Panj-e Ali, Andika, sword, dagger

### **Introduction**

This article examines recent archaeological excavations with respect to two Parthian reliefs and an examination of Parthian blade weapons (swords, daggers). The first archaeological site examined is the late Parthian or early Sassanian cavalry motif in the town of Koohdasht in western Iran's Lorestan province. The Koohdasht motif is comparable to late Parthian and early Sassanian cavalry reliefs such as the Parthian relief of Gōdarz II in Bīstūn and Sassanian reliefs such as those of Ardašīr I in Fīrūzābād and the Sassanian cavalry relief panels in Naqš-e Rostam. The second site pertains to the recent discovery of the Parthian relief at Andika in Khuzestan depicting a Parthian nobleman lying sideways, leaning on his left elbow, as he holds a branch with his left hand. The theme of the Andika relief has parallels with Tang-e Sarvak (Block II) and the Tina mountain relief in Khuzestan. The third domain, which pertains to Parthian militaria is an examination of late Parthian swords and daggers housed in the Iran Bastan Museum in Tehran.

### **The Panj-e Ali Relief**

The 2015 archaeological expedition led by Gholamreza Karamian and Meysam Delfan at Koohdasht in Lorestan, Western Iran, discovered a cavalry motif known as the "Panj-e Ali" (Claw of Ali) (Figures 1, 2). This has notable parallels to Partho-Sassanian cavalry reliefs, especially at Naqš-e Rostam, Fīrūzābād and Dura Europos. The recently discovered Panj-e Ali motif is located near Charqelāh village in the southern Koohdasht town of Lorestan province, western Iran. The cavalry motif is situated on the east side of a free standing stone which is a sacred stone for the followers of the Yaresan clan. There is also a human-claw motif located on the other side of the cavalry motif. The Yaresan followers believe that the claw belongs to Imam Ali, the second Imam of the Shia sects. The Panj-e Ali motif is located within 30 meters of the eastern part of the Charqelāh village road that reaches the village of Quralivand.

The research team has concluded that the Panj-e Ali site may be the remains of the tomb of a cavalryman from the late Parthian or early Sassanian periods (c. 200s-220s CE) in western Iran. The finding is of interest given the relatively few representations of Parthian cavalry discovered to present. In addition, the paucity of available Parthian cavalry representations are (like Panj-e Ali) mostly dated to the later Parthian era (first to third century CE). As noted by Herrmann, representations of Parthian cavalry can be seen at the poorly preserved sites of Bīstūn (known as the Gōdarz relief, first century CE); Sarpol-e Zohāb (first century CE); the Elymaean relief at Tang-e Sarvak (late second-early third

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\* <http://kavehfarrokh.com/>; [manuvera@aol.com](mailto:manuvera@aol.com)

\*\* Department of History and Archaeology, [karamianreza@yahoo.com](mailto:karamianreza@yahoo.com)

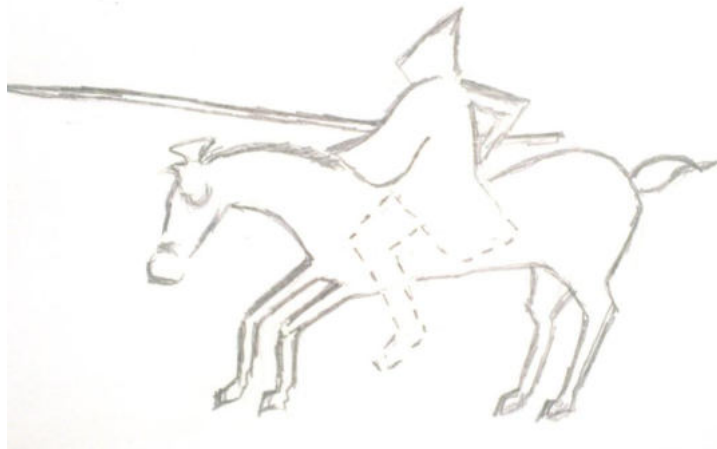
\*\*\* Department of History and Archaeology, [meisam.delfan@gmail.com](mailto:meisam.delfan@gmail.com)

\*\*\*\* Department of History and Archaeology, [gilanifarzad@gmail.com](mailto:gilanifarzad@gmail.com)

century CE); as well as the graffiti of Dura-Europos (early third century CE).<sup>1</sup> Other representations of Parthian horsemen can be seen in sculptures at Hung-e Kamalvand, for example. All of these sites are located in Iran's southwest regions, with Panj-e Ali located a little further north in the Lorestan province. The shortage of Parthian sites is also paralleled with the shortage of available artifacts depicting Parthian cavalry motifs.



**Fig. 1.** Photo of the Panj-e Ali motif (Photo: Gholamreza Karamian, 2015).



**Fig. 2.** Drawing of the Panj-e Ali motif by Gholamreza Karamian (2015).

The Panj-e Ali motif depicts a mounted cavalryman who is charging with a lance. The dimensions of the motif are 27 x 27 cm, with the lance measuring at a length of 28 cm. Our study of the motif has led to four general observations with respect to lance combat, headgear, attire, and steed.

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<sup>1</sup> HERRMANN (1989) 757.

Lance combat and weaponry. The cavalryman clasps the lance in the two-handed fashion in what appears to be a lance joust or duel against another Iranian type cavalryman (i.e. Parthian, Sassanian, Armenian, etc.) or a Roman opponent. The lance depicted is most likely of the type seen with the five samples housed at the Iran Bastan Museum. These samples (like Parthian swords) were made of iron and (literally) socketed onto the lance shaft. The shortest of these is approximately 23.24 cm with the longest at approximately 37.5 cm. The shaft length of the Parthian *kontos* (lance) is generally estimated as having been 12 feet.<sup>2</sup>



**Fig. 3.** The Gōdarz II relief (c.40-51 CE) at Bīstūn, depicting a cavalry battle with his enemy Meherdates/Mithradates (49 CE) (Photo: Gholamreza Karamian).

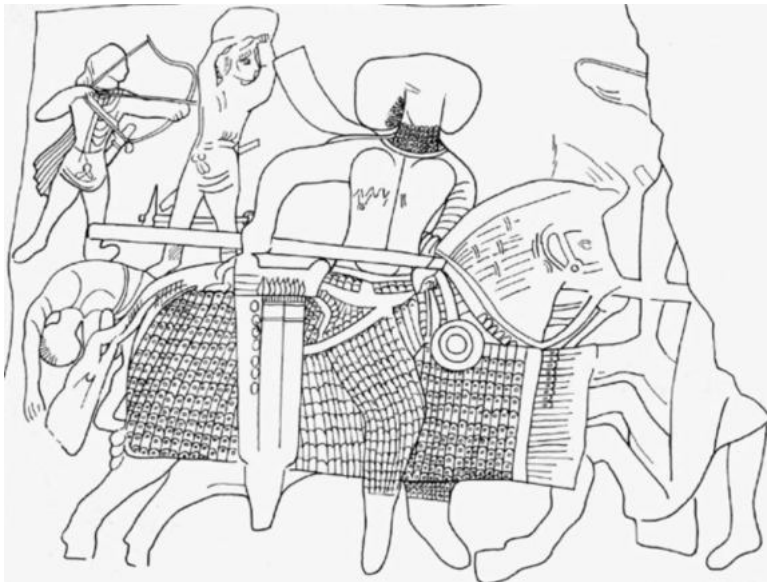
The Panj-e Ali cavalry motif is comparable to (a) the aforementioned relief of Gōdarz II in Bīstūn (Figure 3) (b) the scene at Tang-e Sarvak (Figure 4) (c) the battle between Parthian and Sassanian knights at Fīrūzābād in 224 CE (Figure 5) and (d) the mural painting from Dura-Europos (Figure 6). The state of Iranian cavalry in the early post-Parthian or earlier Sassanian era is also depicted at Naqš-e Rostam, Bišāpur, Naqš-e Rajab and Sar Mašad.

The Parthian relief attributed to Gōdarz II (r. c.40-51 CE) at Bīstūn (Figure 3) is located next to a carving attributed to Mithradates II. Above the Gōdarz II panel is a chiseled Greek inscription that

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<sup>2</sup> WILCOX (1999) 10, 55.

reads: *Gotarses Geopothros* [Gōdarz son of Guiv/ Gēv].<sup>3</sup> The use of the Greek lettering suggests that the relief may have been made sometime during the reign of Walagaš I (51-79 CE). Note that any precise dating for this relief is a major challenge due to both the paucity of Parthian reliefs in Iran in general and (like Panj-e Ali) intense weathering over the millennia upon the relief itself. Despite the weathering on the relief the Gōdarz depiction, however, provides some valuable information on the Parthian cavalry. Like Panj-e Ali, there is a cavalryman charging with a lance clasped with both hands. The Gōdarz II rider holds his lance at a depressed angle, just as a Nike soars above him. The lancer's foe is then seen tumbling to the ground with his horse stumbling. A rider less horse is then depicted riding away from behind the defeated foe. To the rear of the victor can be seen the hand and head of another rider holding a lance. In contrast to the Gōdarz depiction however, the Panj-e Ali lance is held slightly elevated, as if aimed towards the opponent's chest area. The Gōdarz relief shows the rider's lance held at a lower angle, such that the weapon appears to be aimed at the opponent's stomach/abdomen area. Lance duels were characteristic of a shared martial tradition with the wider Iranian-speaking milieu, notably the Sarmatians of the East European steppes. Battles in such scenarios would have most likely involved a combination of horse archery, lance and close quarter combat. As noted by Bivar, lance charges by armored knights of the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE were effective due to the situation that "...armour had established its superiority over the missile".<sup>4</sup> This meant that cavalry protected by contemporary armor could not be so easily neutralized by long-range archery.



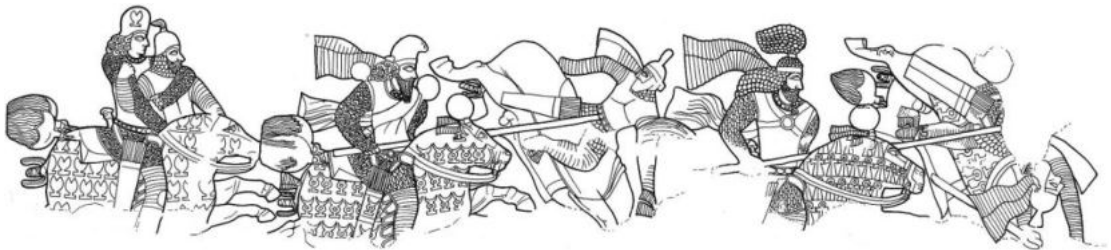
**Fig. 4.** Parthian lancer depicted at Block III at Tang-e Sarvak (Source: Encyclopedia Iranica, original drawing by Erik Smekens, Ghent University).

At the Block III portion at Tang-e Sarvak there is a Parthian rider holding his lance in what appears to be a combat scene but the lance's point of impact and enemy target are unclear but most likely directed against another cavalryman (Figure 4). The rider's steed appears to be protected by a Bargostvān system of scale armor for the torso with the neck and head seemingly protected in similar fashion. The Tang-e Sarvak depiction (Figure 4) shows archery equipment suspended on the steed's torso and connected by a strap to the rider's belt. The lancer is attacking to the right (his lance pointed

<sup>3</sup> This particular translation has been debated, with past interpretations of the Greek inscription *Gotarses Geopothros* also suggested as "Gōdarz, the clan of Guiv/ Gēv" – see discussion by BOYCE, BIVAR, SHAHBAZI (2001) 31-39, also available on-line: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/godarz>

<sup>4</sup> BIVAR (1972) 279.

to the right) with the archery equipment dangling on the right side of the horse that is visible to the viewer. The combatants at the Fīrūzābād relief in Fars province can also be seen with quivers. This relief depicts the battle between the Parthians led by Ardavān IV (r. 216-224 CE) against Sassanian rebels led by Ardašīr I (r. 224-242 CE) (Figure 5). The panel portrays three duels from left to right:



**Fig. 5.** The tri-battle relief of the Fīrūzābād battle between Ardašīr I and Parthian king Ardavān IV in 224 CE (drawing by Farrokh based on original by H. Von Gall, *Das Reiterkampf bild In Der Iranischen und Iranisch Beeinflussten Kunst Parthischer und Sassanidscher Zeit*, Berlin 1990, Abb.3).

(a) unknown Sassanian knight wrestling an unidentified Parthian opponent, (b) Crown Prince Šāpur unhorsing the Parthian grand vizier Darbandān, and (c) Ardašīr I unhorsing the Parthian king Ardavān IV. Swords are hardly depicted among the combatants, except for the hilt of a sword of the unknown wrestling Sassanian knight, indicative that his weapon is slung to his left side (it is the right side of the warriors that is depicted in Fīrūzābād). This is notable as Parthian swords would often be suspended on the left side and held within a sword belt through a leather strap running from the warrior's right hip to his left thigh.<sup>5</sup> The long sword was essentially suspended on the horse's left flank and attached to the rider as to ensure his right hand's ease of access to the weapon. The Dura Europos drawings show a cavalryman equipped in the Iranian fashion: fully armored (both the man and his horse) holding a lance as his sword hilt projects from his left side (Figure 6).<sup>6</sup> Another important depiction of an Iranian-type cavalryman is that of a fully armored archer.<sup>7</sup> Dating of the Dura Europos depictions however is debated among scholars. The older seminal works of scholars such as Allan,<sup>8</sup> Brown,<sup>9</sup> Colledge,<sup>10</sup> Rostovtzeff,<sup>11</sup> Robinson<sup>12</sup> and Shahbazi<sup>13</sup> date this to the later Parthian era (late 2<sup>nd</sup> century to early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE), with Symonenko<sup>14</sup> dating this to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE and Mielczarek<sup>15</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. Current scholarship now arrives at a date set between 232/233-256 CE, chronologically situated in the early Sassanian era.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>5</sup> WINKELMANN (2009) 240.

<sup>6</sup> JAMES (2004) 113, Figure 23.

<sup>7</sup> Dura Europos was originally a Seleucid settlement established in approximately 303 BCE by one of Alexander's former generals named Seleucis I Nicator (r. 306-281 BCE) who founded the Seleucid dynasty. Dura Europos was subsequently captured by the Parthians in approximately 113 BCE to then fall into Roman hands in 165 CE. The city was to then fall to the Sassanians led by Šāpur I (r. c. 242-272 CE) who captured it after a siege lasting several months in 256 CE.

<sup>8</sup> ALLAN (1986).

<sup>9</sup> BROWN (1936) 195.

<sup>10</sup> COLLEDGE (1977) 117, Figure 44B.

<sup>11</sup> ROSTOVITZEFF (1933) 207-209.

<sup>12</sup> ROBINSON (1975) 186.

<sup>13</sup> SHAHBAZI (1986).

<sup>14</sup> SYMONENKO (2009) 119.

<sup>15</sup> MIELCZAREK (1993) 36.

<sup>16</sup> WÓJCIKOWSKI (2013) 233-234; NIKONOROV (2005) Note 12.



**Fig. 6.** Depiction of Iranian-type cavalry of the late Parthian type from Dura Europos.

As noted previously the cavalry reliefs at Naqš-e Rostam show a number of parallels with Panj-e Ali with respect to lance combat. As at Panj-e Ali, the cavalymen at Naqš-e Rostam hold their lances at a slight (upward) angle toward their opponents' upper abdomen-lower chest area. This is seen with Bahrām II (r. 273-276 CE) who has two lance battle scenes depicted on a panel (Figure 7), Hormozd II (r. 303–309 CE) (Figure 8) who has knocked his enemy off his horse by the impact of his lance; the composition of this jousting scene seems to be derived from that of his great-grandfather Ardašīr at Fīrūzābād. Another example is a knight (Bahrām II or Hormozd II or Bahrām IV) closing in with his intact lance against an enemy whose lance is already broken (Figure 9).

Interestingly at the Panj-e Ali motif no other weapons systems (swords, archery equipment) besides the lance are evident. The Panj-e Ali rider is attacking to the left (lance pointed to the left), therefore it is possible that the illustrator simply could not depict archery equipment for this cavalryman as his archery equipment may have been hanging to the right side of the horse/rider. However no weapons of any kind (e.g. sword(s), mace(s)) can be seen on the left side in which the Panj-e Ali rider is depicted. This does not discount other weapons having been originally depicted as the harshness of the weather and elements over the centuries would most likely have eroded many of the panel's original details.





**Fig. 7.** Panel featuring two equestrian joust-battle scenes of Bahrām II (r. 273-276 CE) at Naqš-e Rostam (Photo: Mani Moradi, 2012).



**Fig. 8.** Equestrian victory relief at Naqš-e Rostam of Hormozd II (r. 303-309 CE) whose lance has unhorsed his opponent (Photo: Mani Moradi, 2012).



**Fig. 9.** Bahrām II (r. 273-276 CE) or Hormozd II (r. 303-309 CE) or Bahrām IV (r. 388-399 CE) about to close in with his intact lance against enemy with broken lance (left figure at panel) (Photo: Javad Chamanara, 2004).

Headgear: ceremonial or military? It is possible that the Panj-e Ali panel is providing a depiction of a high pointed helmet, perhaps a version of the type seen at Dura Europos (Figure 6). In such a scenario the helmet was most likely of the ridge type, consisting of several separate components riveted together. Interestingly one of the earliest known Sassanian helmets has also been discovered in a Roman countermine in Tower 19 of Dura Europos. This belonged to a fallen Sassanian soldier during Šāpur I's siege of Dura Europos in 256 CE. This particular helmet was constructed of two pieces, a left and a right side that were attached together with two iron bands with riveting technology.<sup>17</sup> Standing at around 25-26 cm, the Dura Europos ridge helmet was to also appear among the Sarmatians, Eastern Germanic tribes<sup>18</sup> and Roman forces in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE after their military encounters against the early Sassanian forces.<sup>19</sup> Scholars generally concur that the ridge helmet design is of Parthian origins.<sup>20</sup>

Given the amount of weather wearing on the Panj-e Ali site, the question can then be raised as to whether the cavalryman's headgear is ceremonial (rather than military) in function. If true, then the item would appear to have a Saka or Scythian appearance, partly reminiscent of the ancient stone reliefs of the Saka Tigrakhauda (Saka with pointed hats) depicted at the Apadana at Persepolis. As the original artists constructing the relief were working to display a typical Iranian cavalry lance charge, it would appear more likely that they were intending to display a headgear with military function.

Attire: armored or ceremonial? The effects of weathering make it difficult to ascertain the exact type of attire that has been depicted in the Panj-e Ali motif. In addition, there appears to be a contradiction in the manner in which the artist(s) have depicted the attire on the left and right hands of the rider (Figures 1-2). The left hand looks like it is covered with a loose type of cloak, suggesting ceremonial attire. In contrast, the right hand is not depicted with the loose cloak seen on the left hand. Instead, the attire appears to fit the shape or outline of the rider's arm. However, there are no visible detailed depictions of armour (lamellar, scale, etc.) or costume motifs (i.e. insignia, motifs, etc.) on the right hand due to the effects of weathering on the motif. Assuming that the original artistic depiction of the right hand provided more details before the effects of weathering, it may be possible that some type

<sup>17</sup> For a full discussion of this helmet consult JAMES (1986) 120-128.

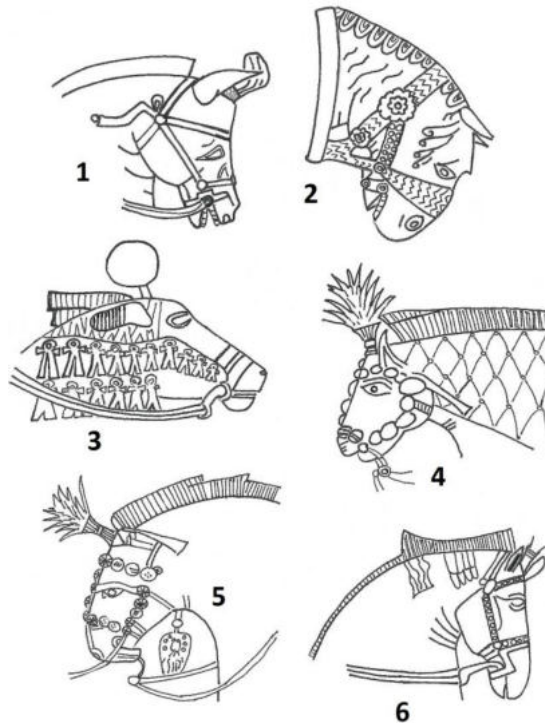
<sup>18</sup> JAMES (1986) 117, 119, 126; GRANSWAY (1963) 258.

<sup>19</sup> PETERSON (1992) 35.

<sup>20</sup> OVERLAET (1982) 190-191; WÓJCIKOWSKI (2013) 235-236, Footnote 9.



of armour was depicted, especially as the right hand is carrying the lance in a combative fashion. Using the Dura Europos lancer as reference (Figure 6), one thesis may be that the arm may have been covered by *Basu-band* ring armours or horizontally arranged segmented, curved, laminar metallic plates. Both Sallust<sup>21</sup> and Justin<sup>22</sup> for example have underscored the role of armor in covering the entire Parthian rider and his steed. The remaining question however is why has the illustrator depicted the attire on the left and right arms differently? One hypothesis may be that the illustrator was attempting to convey the rider as being armoured but also wearing a ceremonial cloak atop his armoured attire. If this is true then this may help explain the contradiction (cloak covering left arm but not the right).



**Fig. 10.** Early Sassanian bridles and the tube-hair bundle coiffure; (1) Snaffle bridle, Šāpur I, 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE (see Herrmann, 1980) (2) illustration of Savar bridle based on gilded silver Sassanian metalwork (4<sup>th</sup> century CE) at Louvre (MAO132) (see photo by Macquitty, 1971) (3) Horse bridle of Ardašīr I at Fīrūzābād, early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE (see Herrmann, 1989) (4-5) Horse bridle from Persepolis graffiti, late 2<sup>nd</sup>-early 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE (Persepolis in situ, Harem section) (6) Horse bridle of Ardašīr I at Dārābgerd, early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE (Kaveh Farrokh, 2015: original draft by Georgina Herrmann, 1989, p. 785).

**Steed.** The remaining question pertains to the steed of the rider. Again weathering effects have eroded the details of the horse, thus compromising our ability to provide definitive conclusions as to the attire of the horse. If the horse were armored, then it would presumably have been equipped with the type of Bargostvan (horse armor) constructed of scale armor seen at Dura Europos that protected the animal's neck, head and torso<sup>23</sup> (Figure 6). However, what remains visible at Panj-e Ali does depict the 'coiffure' atop the steed's head that is clearly in the Partho-Sassanian style. Despite heavy weathering, there appears to be a ring or tubular structure atop the horse's head through which hair is fitted through, to then project outward in a bundle shape. This is displayed in depictions of early

<sup>21</sup> Sallust, *Histories*, 16-17.

<sup>22</sup> Justin, *Epitome*, 41, 2, 10.

<sup>23</sup> WÓJCIKOWSKI (2013) 215.

Sassanian bridles featuring the tube-hair bundle coiffure system (Figure 10). Like the Panj-e Ali relief, these early Sassanian horses clearly show a tubular clasp or ring through which the horse's hair is projected outward in a bundle-type shape (Figure 10). This equestrian coiffure design is also seen in the Sassanian silver-gilt rhyton shaped like a horse currently housed at the Cleveland Museum of Art in Ohio (Figure 11).



**Fig. 11.** Sassanian silver-gilt rhyton shaped like a horse currently housed at the Cleveland Museum of Art in Ohio (c. 200-325 CE); note tube-hair bundle coiffure and bridles of the seated horse (Source: Cleveland Museum of Art from Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Horse\\_rhyton,\\_200-325\\_CE,\\_silver,\\_Sasanian,\\_Cleveland\\_Museum\\_of\\_Art.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Horse_rhyton,_200-325_CE,_silver,_Sasanian,_Cleveland_Museum_of_Art.JPG)).

### **The Parthian Relief at Andika**

The 2012 archaeological expedition of Gholamreza Karamian and Farzad Astaraki discovered a Parthian relief in the western part of Andika in the northern section of Masjid Suleiman, in southwest Iran's Khuzestan Province. The relief's specific location is in the northern village of Darvish Ahmad situated 50 kilometers from western Andika (GPS position: N 32 23 32/3 and E 49 30 21/5). The dimensions of the Andika relief are 2 meters (length) by 1.20 meters (width). The Andika relief depicts a man (most likely a warrior and/or Azat) leaning on his left hand and taking a branch of plant (Figures 12-13).

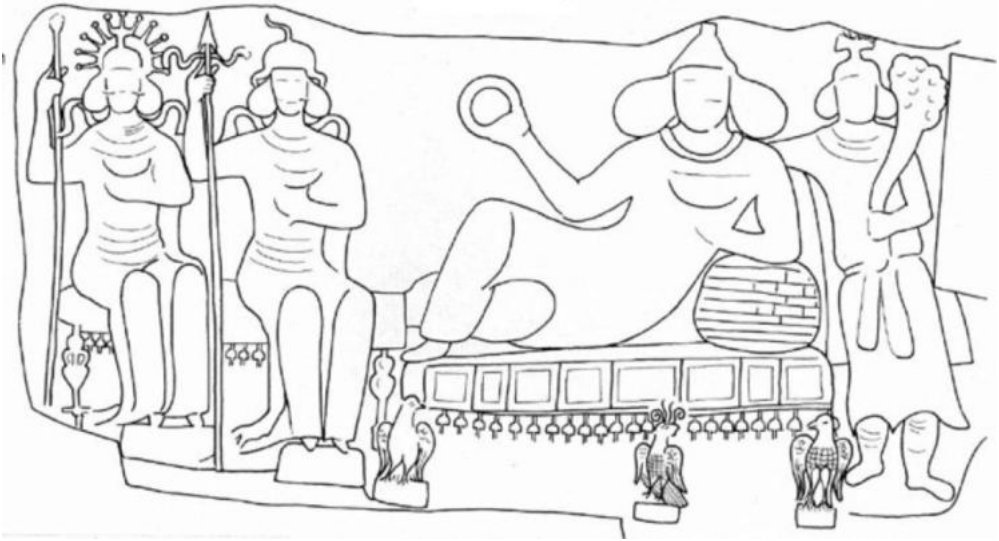


**Fig. 12.** Relief of reclining Parthian nobleman (Azat) discovered in the western part of Andika northern section of Masjid Suleyman, Khuzestan Province (Gholamreza Karamian & Farzad Astaraki, 2015).



**Fig. 13.** Sketch of the relief of reclining Parthian nobleman in western Andika, Khuzestan (Gholamreza Karamian, 2015).

The Andika relief shares characteristics with a number of Parthian reliefs also located in Khuzestan. The most similar motif is Block II in Tang-e Sarvak, an archaeological site in the mountainous area of eastern Khuzestan province, approximately 50 km north of Behbahan.



**Fig. 14.** Top register of the northeast side of Block II at Tang-e Sarvak depicting a reclining nobleman holding a ring with his right hand and a bowl with his left (Source: Encyclopedia Iranica, original drawing by Erik Smekens, Ghent University).

The northeastern side of the Tang-e Sarvak site is sculpted with two registers. The upper panel displays a man reclining on a couch or throne (Figure 14). The Parthian figure is seen grasping an investiture ring with his right hand, as he holds a bowl with his left hand. The legs of the couch are shaped like birds. Behind the Parthian stands a man holding what appears to be either a symbolic horn of abundance or perhaps a ceremonial mace. Problematic is the issue of the identity of the two seated figures situated to the front of the Parthian, which has been a topic of academic controversies.<sup>24</sup> Another Parthian site similar to Andika is located at the Tina mountain relief near Masjid Suleiman (Figure 15) originally discovered by the Vanden Berghe team in 1965. Like the Tang e Sarvak site, the Tina relief shows a nobleman leaning on a throne, as he holds a ring (or symbolic investiture ring?) with his right hand while holding a bowl with his left hand. This is situated 420 m to the east of Block III; the boulder (height: 4 m) is decorated on two sides.<sup>25</sup> Block IV depicts another reclining nobleman holding a cup with his left hand (Figure 16).

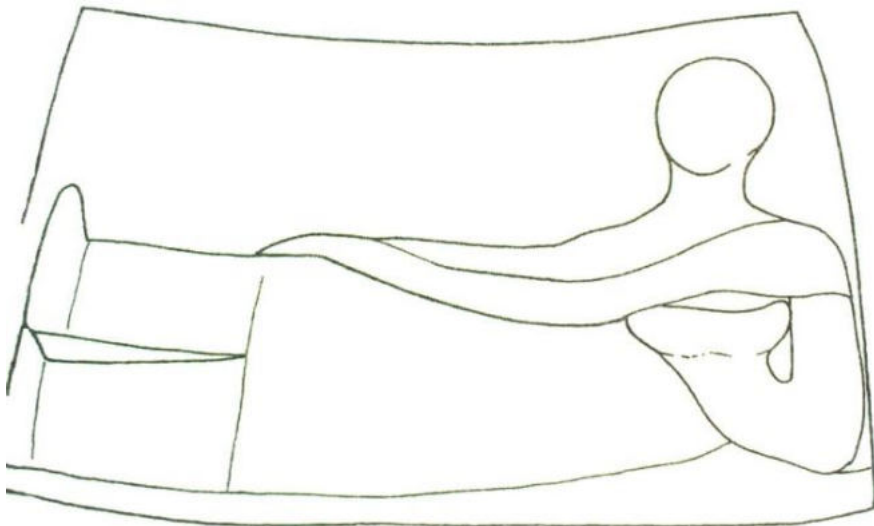
Despite weathering and erosion, the features of the Andika figure are relatively well preserved. The ‘fold’ details of the tunic raise questions: is this a looser type of garment that results in folds? If true then this would present a type of tunic not before seen in other Parthian type costumes. The nobles at Hatra and the Susa nobleman for example, feature the Parthian costume with a tunic or wrapped jacket, trousers and boots/footwear, generally typical of Iranian riding dress. Interestingly the length of the right side of the Andika tunic reaches to the knees (consistent with those seen with early Sassanian noblemen depicted at the Persepolis graffiti) but the left side of the tunic appears shorter and only reaches to the upper thigh. One hypothesis for this apparent asymmetry is that the artist was perhaps attempting to show the nobleman’s tunic on his left side as being pulled upwards as he is reclining. The other explanation would be that the tunic was uneven to begin with (right side longer than the left) but this type of costume asymmetry is highly unlikely.

<sup>24</sup> HAERINCK (2005).

<sup>25</sup> The north side shows two standing males, while on the east side a reclining person is holding a bowl.



**Fig. 15.** The Kūh-e Tinā site depicting a reclining nobleman holding a bowl in his left hand as he holds a ring in his right (Source: Sketch by Gholamreza Karamian).



**Fig. 16.** Block IV the east side depicting a reclining nobleman (?) holding a bowl with his left hand (Source: Sketch by Gholamreza Karamian).





**Fig. 17.** Statue of the Susa nobleman in Parthian type attire housed at Iran Bastan Museum (Source: Mihan Blog from: <http://shahanname.mihanblog.com/post/160>).



**Fig. 18.** The statue of Makai ben Nashri (Source: Photo by Diane Siebrandt, U.S. State Department, 2008).



**Fig. 19.** Depiction of king identified as Walagaš who carries two daggers (Source: The Zoroastrian Heritage Institute).

The features of the legwear and footwear are also well preserved, leading to further questions. A curious feature of the Andika nobleman is the ‘folds’ on the lower part of his ‘trousers’ which are visible from the knees to the ankles just above the footwear. While it is possible to argue that the ‘folds’ on the trousers are actually metallic laminated leg armor/guards, the authors hypothesize that the trousers are probably of the folded type (perhaps like the chaps worn by modern-day cowboys in North America). This type of chaps-attire is seen with the statue of the Susa nobleman (housed at the Iran Bastan Museum) (Figure 17) as well as the statues of the noblemen at Hatra like that of Makai ben Nashri (Figure 18). The challenge against this hypothesis is the question of the upper portion of the Andika nobleman’s trousers: is the relief showing further extension of various layers of overlapping clothing from the tunic (thus extending to the knees like the Persepolis graffiti) or is the clothing seen at the upper thigh areas part of the (upper) trousers? It is possible that the tunic has a ‘curtain’ type opening beginning just below the belt area, allowing for the display of the upper part of the trousers. If this is the case, then it is challenging to explain as to why the ‘chap’-like (or laminated-like) folds only appear at the lower legs and not at the upper. Perhaps this is a local variation of Parthian trousers, as the use of laminated leg armor for the lower legs (only) is not militarily functional and not seen in any known depictions of Parthian costumes. Thus the Andika nobleman’s leg wear may be indicative of a hitherto unknown type of design. The footwear of the Andika nobleman would probably be of the leather riding boots type, however the pointed and curved tip of the footwear (especially on the right foot) resembles the cloth-woven Giveh shoes worn by Iranian tribal peoples.

A final and curious feature is what appears to be a ‘bone’ like shape lying atop the nobleman from the upper to the lower abdomen area. The question is whether this is a ceremonial object of some kind. If this is the case, then perhaps the object is a symbolic mace with the ‘bone’ looking tip possibly being a small mace-type device that has been fastened to the shaft.

### **Overview of Parthian swords and daggers housed at the Iran Bastan Museum**

Information sources for Parthian weapons have been traditionally derived from seals, coins, rock reliefs and carvings, various minor arts, terracotta figurines, mural paintings and coffin lids. This makes the earlier discussion with respect to the depiction of Parthian weapons in the Panj-e Ali context of relevance here as well. This is because the Parthian rock reliefs are within the Iranian realms as opposed to the cities of Dura Europos, Hatra and Palmyra that were located in the peripheral regions of the Parthian empire.<sup>26</sup> However as noted previously swords are essentially not depicted in a cavalry combat context in the Iranian Parthian reliefs discovered thus far, excepting Firūzābād where there appears to be a sword hilt projecting from the left side of an unknown wrestling Sassanian knight (Figure 5). Recall also the allusion to a somewhat similar sword hilt projection with respect to the Iranian-equipped cavalryman at Dura Europos (Figure 6).<sup>27</sup>

The Parthian reliefs that depict swords and daggers, do so within a more ‘ceremonial’ and non-combat context. An example of this can be seen at Bīstūn where there is a relief of a standing king Walagaš (unclear which Vologases as six of these reigned between 51-228 CE) who carries two daggers (Figure 19). There is also Hung-e Nowruzi relief that shows a mounted warrior, possibly that of king Mithradates I (165-132 BCE) along with four warriors (shown frontally) who are carrying daggers and long swords (Figure 20). These reliefs, clearly from the later Parthian era (1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE), depict swords in association with high-ranked persons in a ceremonial (as opposed to combat) context. As with the Panj-e Ali site discussed previously, the Bīstūn and Hung-e Nowruzi reliefs are highly weathered and eroded, compromising any detailed close-up detailed information on

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<sup>26</sup> WINKELMANN (2003) 34.

<sup>27</sup> JAMES (2004) 113, Figure 23.





**Fig. 20.** Possible figure of mounted king Mithradates (Mehrdad) I (165-132 BCE) flanked with four warriors carrying daggers and long swords (Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mithridates\\_I\\_of\\_Parthia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mithridates_I_of_Parthia)).

the nature of the daggers and swords. As noted by Winkelmann visual representations of Parthian weaponry capable of providing objective information on armaments are “*unequally distributed in time and space*”.<sup>28</sup> Winkelmann further avers that excepting Parthian coins, there are no forms of figurative arts available that are continuously represented in Parthian arts and “...*we have scant information from Iran itself*”.<sup>29</sup> While true that information from inside Iran remains limited, our research team examined and tabulated four late Parthian swords (Inv. Number: 1603/18028-Figure 21, Inv. Number: 1604/18029-Figure 22, Inv. Number: 3630/19198-Figure 23, Inv. Number: 3631/19199-Figure 24) and three daggers (Inv. Number: 1614/18039, Inv. Number: 3628/19196-Figure 25, Inv. Number: 3629/19197) housed at the storage facilities of the Iran Bastan Museum (Table 1). Thus far much of the research literature on Parthian armament studies has relied on materials from regions situated to the fringes of the Parthian empire (Commagene, Osrhoene, Hatra, Dura Europos, Palmyra, Characene and Parthian strata of ancient Mesopotamia),<sup>30</sup> with these finds being chronologically limited to the later Parthian era. The swords and daggers we examined are also from the late Parthian era (1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century CE). These are of interest given their discovery and excavation in two regions of northern Iran, the Nowruz Mahalleh region of Deylaman and Rasht, Gilan in late 1960 and 1966 respectively (Table 1).

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<sup>28</sup> WINKELMANN (2009) 235.

<sup>29</sup> WINKELMANN (2009) 235.

<sup>30</sup> Note that the Parthian strata are themselves combined with local elements, as well as Hellenic-Seleucid and Roman admixtures.





**Fig. 21.** Iran Bastan Museum, Inventory number: 1603/18028; Source: Gholamreza Karamian, Rakhsareh Esfandiari.

The first distinguishing feature of the four Parthian swords is the lengths of their blades: these range from 62 cm (Inv. Number: 1603/18028-Figure 21), 83 cm (Inv. Number: 1604/18029-Figure 22), 84 cm (Inv. Number: 3630/19198-Figure 23) to a maximum of 87.5 cm (Inv. Number: 3631/19199-Figure 24). All of these weapons show significant rusting, with Inv. Number: 3630/19198 (Figure 23) having a part of its blade broken off and Inv. Number: 3631/19199 (Figure 24) being slightly bent as well as having breakage (Table 1). While rusting and damages have distorted the original length of at least a number of these weapons, these are on the whole shorter than those depicted at Hatra, an archaeological zone with a wide array of sword displays. Parthian-type long swords are prominently depicted among figures of Hatrene officers, noblemen, kings and gods. The Hatrene weapons are reported as being (sword handle and blade) at 100 and 130 cm in length.<sup>31</sup> These are portrayed as flat, narrow and with pointed or straight scabbard ends. Interestingly the dimensions of the Parthian swords at the Iran Bastan Museum resemble those portrayed with the gods at Hatra. The latter are portrayed with a shorter form of broadsword and are reported as being approximately 80 cm in length.<sup>32</sup> These shorter long swords are not depicted with officers, noblemen or royalty at Hatra.

<sup>31</sup> WINKELMANN (2009) 241.

<sup>32</sup> WINKELMANN (2009) 241.



**Fig. 22.** Iran Bastan Museum, Inventory number: 1604/18029; Source: Gholamreza Karamian, Rakhsareh Esfandiari.

The Parthian swords we examined also appear to have dimensional features in common with earlier 7<sup>th</sup> century CE Scythian long swords from the Starshaja Mogila graves as well as the Anatolian Karmir Blur and Irmiler Blur Scythian graves that range in 74-80 cm length.<sup>33</sup> Scythian/Saka swords then increase in length in the 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, such as those of the Tagisken Kurgans whose weapon length increases to 125 cm, and increasing to 135 cm as discovered in the 4<sup>th</sup> BCE site in Khosrabad, Uzbekistan.<sup>34</sup> Trousdale has proposed that it was the Kushans who introduced the long sword to the Parthians<sup>35</sup> (a technology reaching Hatra and Palmyra as well). Developments in parallel with the Scythians/Saka are also observed with 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE Sauramatian gravesites, evolving into the early Sarmatian or Prochorovka stage (5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE), such as the 130 cm sword discovered in the Uzboj region along the Ustjurt plateau along the Don River.<sup>36</sup> Sarmatian sword development continues into the Middle Suslovska or Middle Sarmatian stage (2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE-2<sup>nd</sup> century CE). Early Sassanian contacts with Sarmatian military technology may partly explain the relatively longer sword length of later Sassanian armies. Parthian swords were like later Sassanian weapons of the scabbard slide type. The early scabbard slide swords of the Sassanians however were longer than those of their Parthians predecessors as these had been extended to a length of approximately 1-1.11 m. The width of the early Sassanian scabbard slide ranged at 5-8.5 cm.

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<sup>33</sup> BRENTJES, BRENTJES (1991) 21.

<sup>34</sup> BRENTJES, BRENTJES (1991) 22-25, Figure 28.

<sup>35</sup> TROUSDALE (1975) 100.

<sup>36</sup> LEBEDYNSKY (2002) 80, 89, 91.



**Fig. 23.** Iran Bastan Museum, Inventory number: 3630/19198; Source: Gholamreza Karamian, Rakhsareh Esfandiari.

Being a Scythian people in origin, the Parthians retained the military system and culture of their North Iranian kinsmen, notably in the wearing of daggers. The early Sakas of Tuva and the Altai wore daggers, a tradition predated by the Karasuk Siberian culture (12<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE) and Tagar culture (9<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE). The feature of wearing daggers is seen among the Sarmatians in the period spanning the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. By this time (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) the Sarmatians had become neighbors of the Parthian empire as they now controlled a very large swathe of territory stretching from eastern Siberia across Chorasmia and West Kazakhstan all the way to the Volga to the west. Winkelmann notes of the appearance of steppe type daggers into Parthian arts, courts and nobility through the eastern marches of the Parthian empire.<sup>37</sup> By the early years of the Sassanian dynasty the wearing of the dagger continues among the Sarmatians especially in the Caucasus and parts of Eastern Europe. Notable in early Sassanian arts for example is the dagger strapped to the thigh of the knight. Thus the dagger was a regal display among both the North Iranians (Scythian, Sarmatian) and Iranians of the Medo-Persian milieu. As noted previously Hatra provides an important resource into Parthian dress and equipment: the nobles and gods carry daggers<sup>38</sup> alongside their weapons belt and swords.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> WINKELMANN (2009) 245.

<sup>38</sup> Priests are not depicted with daggers.

<sup>39</sup> See WINKELMANN (2003) 45.



**Fig. 24.** Iran Bastan Museum, Inventory number: 3631/19199; Source: Gholamreza Karamian, Rakhsareh Esfandiari.

The three Parthian daggers examined by our team (Inv. Number: 1614/18039, Inv. Number: 3628/19196-Figure 25, Inv. Number: 3629/19197) are (like the Parthian swords described previously) characterized by significant rusting with two of these (Inv. Number: 3628/19196-Figure 25, Inv. Number: 3629/19197) severely corroded with one of these (Inv. Number: 3628/19196-Figure 25) even being distorted and malformed as result of exposure to the elements (Table 1). Given the wide range of blade lengths between these weapons, the use of the term ‘dagger’ to describe these within a single category of weapon may require revision. The shortest of these (Inv. Number: 1614/18039) has a maximum length of 28 cm, with the remaining two (Inv. Number: 3628/19196-Figure 25, Inv. Number: 3629/19197) at 36 cm and 48 cm respectively. It is of course possible that corrosion and weathering over such long periods of time has distorted the dimensions of the weapons examined. The remaining question with these daggers is the manner in which they would have been sheathed and strapped. Winkelmann notes of three ways in which the Parthian 4-looped dagger would have been worn<sup>40</sup>: (1) directly fixing these to the trousers by belts, straps and/or rivets, a style primarily found on warriors’ costumes (2) a Palmyran style in which the dagger is worn over the tunic, held in place by a simple belt suspension and (3) wearing the dagger within a pocket which was actually the preferred method of the Parthians of Iran and the populace of Hatra.

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<sup>40</sup> WINKELMANN (2009) 245.



**Fig. 25.** Iran Bastan Museum, Inventory number: 3628/19196; Source: Gholamreza Karamian, Rakhsareh Esfandiari.

**Parthian long swords**

**Parthian daggers**

	Inv. No: 1603/18028 [Figure 21]	Inv. No: 1604/18029 [Figure 22]	Inv. No: 3630/19198 [Figure 23]	Inv. No: 3631/19199 [Figure 24]	Inv. No: 1614/18039	Inv. No: 3628/19196 [Figure 25]	Inv. No: 3629/19197
Characteristics	no designs	no designs, small nail at end of sword	no designs	no designs	Simple with no designs, small nail at end of dagger	Simple with no designs	Simple with no designs
Length (handle to sword tip)	62 cm	83 cm	84 cm	87.5 cm	28 cm	36 cm	48 cm
Weight	495 gm	438 gm	na	na	160 gm	na	na
Color	“Burnt” dark brown	“Burnt” dark brown	na	na	Brown	na	na
Material	Iron	Iron	Iron	Iron	Iron	Iron	Iron
Excavation site	Nowruz Mahalleh, Deylaman	Nowruz Mahalleh, Deylaman	Rasht, Gilan	Rasht, Gilan	Nowruz Mahalleh, Deylaman	Rasht, Gilan	Rasht, Gilan
Excavation year	1960	1960	1966	1966	1960	1966	1966
Current condition	Rusted	Rusted	Rusted, part of blade broken off	Rusted, slight bend, broken	Rusted	Rusted, corroded, malformed	Rusted, corroded

**Table 1:** Comparison of Parthian long swords and daggers housed at Iran Bastan Museum



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## **Summary:**

This article examines recent archaeological excavations with respect to two Parthian reliefs and an examination of Parthian blade weapons (swords, daggers). The first archaeological site examined is the late Parthian or early Sassanian cavalry motif in the town of Koohdasht in western Iran's Lorestan province. The Koohdasht motif is comparable to late Parthian and early Sassanian cavalry reliefs such as the Parthian relief of Gōdarz II in Bīstūn and Sassanian reliefs such as those of Ardašīr I in Fīrūzābād and the Sassanian cavalry relief panels in Naqš-e Rostam. The second site pertains to the recent discovery of the Parthian relief at Andika in Khuzestan depicting a Parthian nobleman lying sideways, leaning on his left elbow, as he holds a branch with his left hand. The theme of the Andika relief has parallels with Tang-e Sarvak (Block II) and the Tina mountain relief in Khuzestan. The third domain, which pertains to Parthian militaria is an examination of late Parthian swords and daggers housed in the Iran Bastan Museum in Tehran.

**Keywords:** rock reliefs, Parthian, Sassanian, Panj-e Ali, Andika, sword, dagger