

THE OLDEST PHOTO OF DARIUS'S INSCRIPTION IN BEHISTUN: A NEW DOCUMENT

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Abstract. Darius the Great's engraving on Mount Behistun is the longest and one of the most precious pieces of the world's cuneiform inscriptions. Apart from retelling the initial events of the reign of Darius, decoding its tri-lingual royal text established the starting point for the field of Assyriology. It was thought that the first photographs of this monument were recorded by American scholar "Abraham Valentine Williams Jackson" in 1903. In this article, for the first time, we introduced an Iranian pioneer Iqbal al-Saltanah, known as Agha Reza Akkasbashi. He prevails the royal photographer in the court of Naser-al-Din Shah Qajar. Agha Reza's photo of the Behistun inscription is 33 years older than Jackson's Images and shows the general status of this important inscription in the second half of the nineteenth century. Study of this important document can be seen from two different angles. First: an adequate understanding of the conservation status of the Behistun inscription in the nineteenth century and secondly: the history of Iranian's documentation activities for historical monuments and sites.

Keywords: Behistun, Photography, Assyriology

Introduction

On the 2800 - meter Behistun Mountain, 36 kilometers northeast of Kermanshah City, the inscription of Darius the Great is located and engraved on a cliff at a height of 100 meters, viewing the important historical road and the caravan route linking the land of Media and the central Iran to the Mesopotamian plains. This three-lingual inscription is 22 meters wide and 780-centimeter-high (15 meters high including reliefs) and is very important from two different aspects: 1- An account of Darius's stemma, how did the kingdom come to him, and the battle with the rebellions and their suppression in the first year of his rule. The contents of the inscription contain important historical information which is not mentioned in the Greek sources and is of great importance at the chronicle of initial events of the Achaemenid era. 2-The three-lingual and detailed narrative of events in three different cuneiform signs made it possible for scholars to decode the easier Old Persian text and make it a basis to decipher the Elamite and Akkadian versions. At the same time, the archaeological excavations in Mesopotamia led to the discovery of thousands of diverse Akkadian texts. It was followed by the identification of Sumerian documents written with the Akkadian alphabet. This led to the recognition of the Sumerian language and all of these studies shed light on the onset of human civilization.

For this reason, the position of the Behistun inscription in the historical studies of the Ancient Near East, as well as the history of the world is outstanding. Therefore, its recognition, studying and documentation is also worthy of attention and research. In This article, we will give a brief review to the efforts of the European pioneers who tried to identify and imaging the inscription, and then look at the first photographic pieces of evidence of this ancient monument .After that, we introduce the oldest and also Iranian photograph of this inscription. This photo with its annotation shows the level of awareness of Iranian nobles about their newly introduced ancient history, in the second half of the nineteenth century.

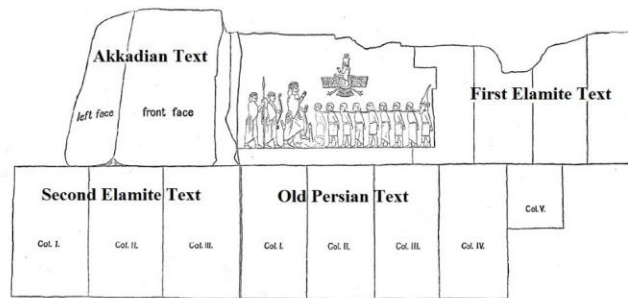


Fig. 1. Positions of the reliefs and texts (King & Thompson, 1907).”

1 Behistun Inscription after falling off the Achaemenids

After the fall of the Achaemenids, the inscription of Behistun and its contents were forgotten. The carvings and engravings of the Sassanid and perhaps Achaemenids reminded for the local people the romantic story of Sassanid king Khosrow and his rival Farhad over the Khosrow's Christian wife Shirin. This story is reflected in Persian literature.

Ibn Hawqal, the Muslim writer and geographer of the 10th century who passed from the hillside of Behistun, thought that reliefs of Darius and rebellions were the teacher and school pupils.

1.1 European pioneers visit the Inscription

The sixteenth century was a turning point in Western travels to the territory of Safavid Iran and caused the flourishing of writing travelogues. At this time, the first reports of Darius's inscription begin to appear. Of course, because of the inaccessibility and the ambiguity about the identity of figures, the accuracy of the first descriptions is low. In 1598, Pinson Abel, the French servant of British diplomat Robert Shirley, spent a night in a caravanserai beside the site, describing the relief of a man in the winged circle as the ascension of Christ with a Greek script. (Hinz, 2001: 22-23)

Persons like A. Bembow, J. Otter, G. Ollivier, R. Gardanne and J.M Kinneir described the monument in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. (Dandamaev, 2002: 33). In 1807, for Gardanne Darius 'and rebellions' carvings were mistakenly equal as the display of Jesus and the apostles. Two years later, Kinneir correctly suggested that the reliefs of Behistun and Persepolis belong to a same historical period but he was unable to identify the characters due to the absence of any reading of the inscription. (Ibid.)

1.2 First drawing of the sculptures by Sir Robert Ker porter

It was in September of 1818 when British diplomat and traveler “Sir Robert Ker porter” attempted to climb the cliff to reach the sculptures. He managed to climb halfway to the mountain and made a watercolor drawing of the reliefs for the first time. Although Ker porter could not understand the true identity of carved characters on the rock. He had believed that it was a representation of the ten Jewish tribes of Israel and the Assyrian king Shalmaneser. (Ibid. 34)



Fig. 2. Reliefs of Behistun by Sir Robert Ker porter (British Library, 2018).

1.3 Eugène Napoléon Flandin and Pascal Xavier Coste and their 1839–41 expedition in Iran

French Academy of fine¹ Arts elected Flandin and Coste and introduced them to French Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the members of French diplomatic delegation to Iran. Their mission as an architect, painter, and orientalist was to provide plans, illustrations, and designs of ancient roads, cities, monuments, and antiques.

They arrived at Behistun in 1840 but despite all the efforts, they could not copy the inscription and succeeded only to draw a picture of carvings and the general landscape of the site.

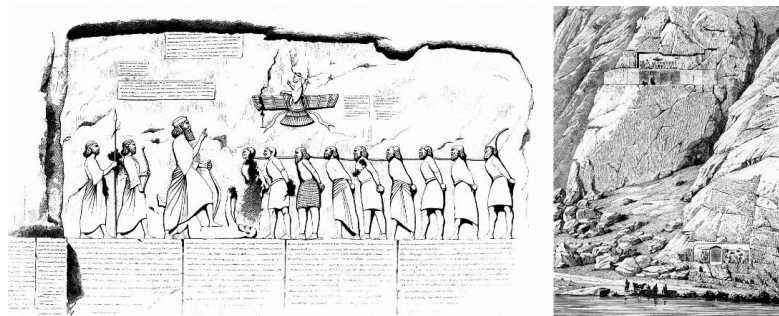


Fig. 3. Reliefs and the landscape of Behistun (Flandin&Coste, 1851-1854).

1.4 Sir Henry Creswicke Rawlinson and his brilliant work on Behistun Inscription

Sir Henry Creswicke Rawlinson was a British Military man, politician, and Orientalist who resided in the middle of the years 1835 to 1839 as a military advisor for organizing the Iranian army in Kermanshah. He had previously examined Darius and Xerxes cuneiform inscriptions on the hillside of the Alvand Mountain in Hamadan. Therefore, with such a background, he started to study the inscription of Behistun with the enthusiasm to make a reliable copy of the texts. He commenced with the Old Persian version in 1835 but His dispatch to join the battle of Afghanistan in 1839; interrupted his work. He resumed his research and project in 1844, finished copying the Old Persian text and later, by endangering his life he continued his effort and could do the same for Elamite text. Finally, he scored to complete his work by documentation of the Akkadian version in 1847. He was able to decipher the Old Persian version and announced it in the same year. The Akkadian text of the inscription published in 1851 and became available to scientists. Eventually, His compatriot, Edwin Norris, successfully decoded and translated the Elamite version in 1855. So, with Rawlinson's brilliant work, foundations of Assyriology were laid.

¹ Institut de France and the Académie des Beaux-Arts

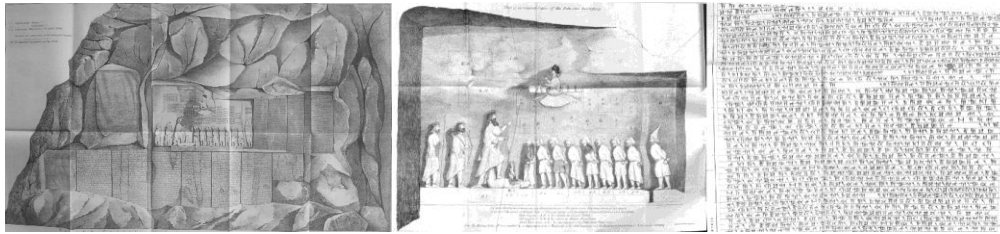


Fig. 4. Reliefs and the Inscription of Behistun (Rawlinson, 1848).

Rawlinson's copy of the inscriptions was accurate and admirable, but the overview of the monument and reliefs, which was printed in his first translation of the Persian version, is not remarkably different from the previous designs.

1.5 Abraham Valentine Williams Jackson and the first known photographs of Behistun Inscription

Abraham Valentine Williams Jackson was an American specialist on Indo-Iranian languages. He traveled to Iran and Central Asia In 1903 and one of his main goals was to examine Behistun Inscription. He confirms this in his travelogue:

“This is not the place to discuss the great importance of Rawlinson’s work and the value of later contributions based upon it, as they are well known to scholars; but Rawlinson’s copy was made more than half a century ago, and there had been no opportunity to test its accuracy, as he was the only one who had studied the rock itself. Accordingly, one purpose of my journey was to make the ascent, if possible, and examine some of the mooted passages in the cuneiform text.” (Jackson, 1906: 179-80).

Jackson with great passion arrived in Behistun on April 13, 1903, and with the help of the local people climbed the cliff and made himself into Darius's inscription. Along with reexamining the accuracy of Rawlinson's copy, he recorded the first known photographs of the Behistun inscription in his name. He has taken one of his photos from the ground and down the rocks. The angle of the camera is adjusted to cover the Parthian carvings (and the added Safavid Inscription on the middle of it), and for this reason, Darius's inscription has lost its central position in the photo and has been marginalized(we have marked it in the image). It should be added that the distance between the camera and the inscriptions is so that their details are not recognizable. Jackson had taken the next two other photos very close and tangent to the inscription and the camera was on the narrow rocky edge below the texts. In these two images, the sediment effects of water leakage; as well as a part of the cuneiform signs of the Old Persian text can be seen.



Fig. 5. Reliefs and the Inscription of Behistun (Jackson, 1906).

2 The oldest newly identified photo of Behistun inscription.

It has long been thought that Jackson's photographs have been the oldest photos of Behistun Inscription but the truth is something else. In fact, there is a photo which is 33 years older. This Image has been hidden from scholars

among the thousands of Qajar royal photo albums for years. In 2003, a Catalogue of these Qajar selected photographs published by the efforts of M.Semsar and F.Saraian¹ and the picture we want to discuss; is among them. Photographer of this photo is Agha Reza Akkasbashi the royal photographer and adjutant of the king.

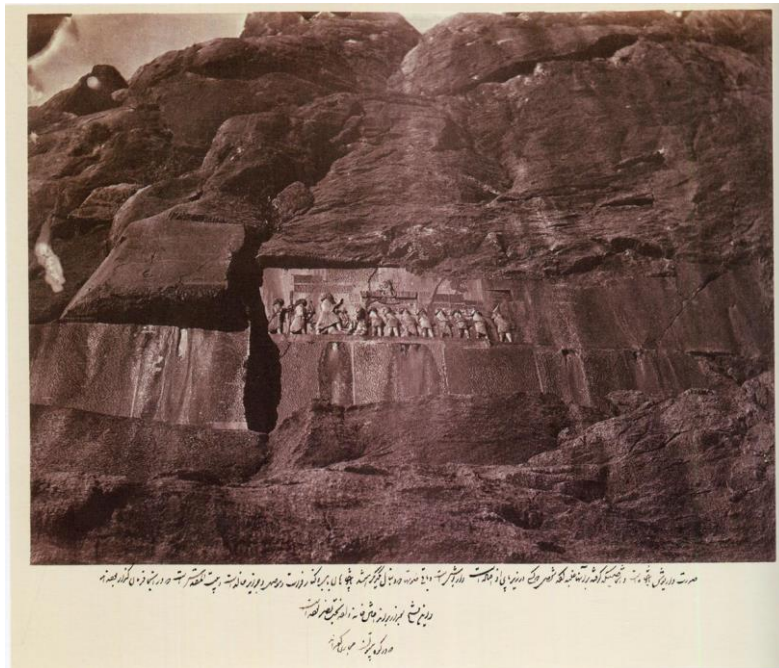


Fig. 6. Agha Reza's photo of Reliefs and the Inscriptions of Behistun (Semsar, Saraian, 2011).

The profile information for this photo is: number 51 of Album number 171. The year is 1287 AH. Dimensions of the image are 18.4 * 13.7 cm and the negative number registered as 2_28.875 (Semsar, Saraian, 2011: 37). The year of imaging is equal to the year 1870 in the Gregorian calendar. Unfortunately, the data about the day and month in which the shooting took place is not available to us.

The information and the advantages of this photo

As we mentioned before, this document is 33 years Older than Jackson's ones. Also, from a technical view, the advantages of this photo, is the better position of the camera which is directly exposed to the monument and provided a better vision for the viewer. Another issue that should be considered is the moment of the photography process. The shadows indicate that shooting had taken place in the afternoon so, the angled sunlight has shone into engravings and caused to emerge their details better. It shows that Agha Reza had deliberately chosen this time for taking the photo.

We can look at the other information that appears from this picture from two perspectives. Firstly, from the subject of archaeological conservation, and secondly from the point of self-awareness of the Iranian elites and nobles of their newly introduced ancient history.

Behistun inscription, its erosions and conservation issues

The Behistun inscription has been exposed to various physical damages for a long time. The climate features of the Behistun region like cold winters, hot summers and changes in temperature results in stone freezing and water penetration into the rocks that break them down. (Jalilian, 2012: 92-3) Particularly the flow of water on the Old Persian and Elamite versions is considerable and has caused the disappearance of some parts of the texts. Since

¹ This series of photos was the achievement of the plan aimed at comprehensive identifying and organizing 2100 photos of 1040 royal albums and their 42500 photographs which preserved at the center of visual documents of Golestan Palace. These 2100 photographs have been researched and include information like photo subject, photographer's name, shooting date, original photo size, album number, description of the photo and its negative number.

Rawlinson deciphered and translated the texts, the measurement and the extension of these damages has always been a concern for scholars¹

Let's review memoirs of Jackson as he recorded in September 1903:

" a study of Old Persian tablets soon revealed the fact that the inscription has suffered much since the days of Rawlinson. Mention has already been made of the water that was oozing from the upper part of the inscription when first I saw it, so that it was wet in places for the spaces of several feet. Some photographs which I succeeded in taking on the second day upon the ledge, make clearer what we have lost and are losing, and I fear that other and fresher proofs of this will be found when the rock is examined with more detail than was possible in my short week's stay." (Jackson, 1906: 193)

According to the descriptions that we mentioned, Agha Reza's photo of the Behistun inscription presents it in the nearest time to the Rawlinson's period (about three decades). An accurate and high-quality scan of its Negative and a comparison with contemporary images can lead to a more precise opinion of both natural erosions and man-made damages that have occurred over decades. In the following pictures, we magnified eroded parts as they were in 1870.

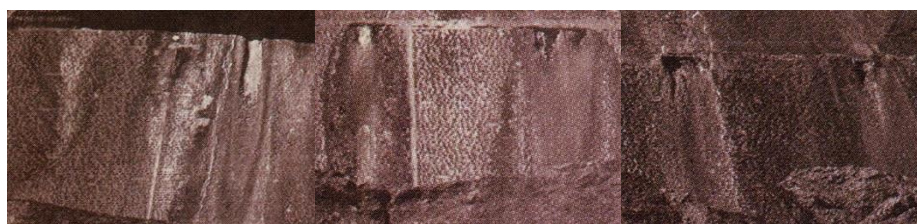


Fig. 7. The impacts of erosion caused by flooded water are visible.

The awareness of the elites and nobles of Iran's newly introduced ancient history

After the conquest of Iran by Muslims, the country became part of the Islamic empire and it took more than nine centuries to re-establish its political unity. But that did not mean the Iranians had forgotten their ancient past and identity. Traditional and national relations of ancient history and Iranian kings had a rooted background. Ferdowsi, the great poet of Iran turned these narratives to poetry in his famous book *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) and guaranteed their survival in the memory of Iranian people. The traditional knowledge mixed with the legends continued into the nineteenth century. It was at this time that by studying the ancient inscriptions and the beginning of archeological excavations, Iran's past and its political history re-introduced in a new form. Agha Reza's took his photo in a period when there had not been a long time since the experts had read the Achaemenid inscriptions. For this reason, pieces of evidence that reveal how well-educated and elite Iranians were looking at their newly discovered history during this transition is valuable. Fortunately, in this case, we have a first-hand proof, the annotation of Agha Reza is in his handwriting at the bottom of the picture.

But the translation of his writing:

"The face of King Darius and the people who have overcome them. Darius is the person that someone has fallen under his feet, and the rest of the faces that follow each other are the kings of Babylon and the Euphrates and Mosul and the "Djazair al-Khalida"² and Bayt al-Maqdis (Jerusalem), where they were rulers, and this victory was after overthrowing of Nebuchadnezzar dynasty, which had been carved in the mountains of Behistun".

¹ It's a pity to mention that in the past century, the inscription has not been safe from human activities and damages, soldiers had been fired at the Behistun inscription during the second world war and its impacts can be seen in different parts of the carvings; on the other hand, the accelerated industrialization of Behistun Plain and the presence of petrochemical industries increase the chemical reactions and cause damage to the surface of the rocks.

² the Eternal Islands', the Arabic equivalent of Gk. αἱ τῶν Μακάρων νῆσοι, Lat. Fortunatae Insulae, as applied to certain islands off the W. African coast, apparently the Canaries.

Dunlop, D.M., "al-Djazā'ir al-Khālida", in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E.

As we see, Agha Reza's awareness of the contents of the inscription is almost correct. Darius and rebellions and their territory have been addressed in Mesopotamia and the Middle East, and even the semi-legendary Djazair al-Khalida can mean somehow the distant lands of the Achaemenid Empire. The mention of Nebuchadnezzar and the fall of his dynasty reminds the conquests of Cyrus the great in Babylon. All of this testifies to the fact that Iranians had become more aware of the forgotten ancient kings. Interestingly, in 1846, one of the scholars and writers of the Qajar period "Mohammad Taghi Sepehr" translated the content of the Behistun Inscription based on Rawlinson's work. He writes in the introduction:

"The reign of Darius the Persian in Babylon and his overcoming of Egypt and Levant and Bayt al-Maqdis (Jerusalem) and Armenia were 4887 years after the fall of Adam (Peace be upon him), which lasted until 1263 years according to the Islamic calendar, and 2573 solar years." (Alizadeh Gharib, 2013: 404)

Most likely, Agha Reza had read his translation.

3 Agha Reza, his time and his life

Agha Reza Iqbal al-Saltanah, who was titled Akkasbashi (the Photographer), was born in 1843. There are no details of the city or the exact date of his birth. His grandfather and his family had long been in touch with the Qajar dynasty. For this reason, he was a servant in the court from childhood and later became the special retainer of the king. The turning point in his life came from the enthusiasm and great interest of the young king to the photography¹, Francis Carlhian was recruited in 1858 to teach photography and began with Agha Reza and the king himself. The attention of the king to the recording and documentation of everyday activities, various ceremonies, games, hunting parties and journeys, led in 1858, to establish the first independent photography center (Akkas Khaneh) and its mansion inside of the Royal area of the palaces. The administration of the photography and training of this technique was under the supervision and management of Agha Reza. Eventually, after six years of learning photography, he was titled "Akkasbashi"(the photographer) by the king in 1863 (Sattari, Tahmasbpour, 2006: 2-8).



Fig. 8. Agha Reza Akkasbashi (Ibid)

On the orders of the king, the presence of a photographer was obligatory on all journeys and royal camps all around the country and beyond (Abolfathi, 2015:87). For this reason, Agha Reza accompanied the king in many of his travels, including two European journeys. We must acknowledge that He has documented the faces of many of the figures, old monuments, sacred religious places and even the social life of people who have changed today or disappeared. He is the first Iranian to deal with the phenomenon of photography seriously (sattari, 2006: 5). Apart from photography, he was responsible for various duties during his lifetime. We can name positions like the adjunct of the king, head of the artillery department and head of the Ministry of Ammunition. He died at the age of 48 in his own private garden in Tehran.

Finding and introducing the oldest photo of Behistun inscription among the Qajarid photographs highlights the importance of collaborative research again. In this case, due to the lack of proper research

¹ An example of Nasser-al-Din Shah's interest in documenting and photographing of historical monuments is the mission he gave to French photographer "Jules Richard" in 1850. His job was to take pictures of the reliefs and inscriptions of Persepolis. Unfortunately, he did not succeed in this purpose. The beginning of photography in Iran in the form of a daguerreotype has been recorded in the name of Richard.

relationships between scholars of ancient history and their colleagues of contemporary history, this oldest document unwittingly has been ignored for years. With the development of these partnerships, we can expect a lot of surprises and knowledge.

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