

Shapur the Great and His Victory

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The triple victory over the Romans was of such importance that Shapur I commemorated the event in both word and image. His victorious battles were commemorated in the trilingual inscription carved into the walls of the Ka'aba-i Zardusht, written in Parthian, Middle Persian and Greek, the official scripts used in Sasanian administration. The use of the site at Naqsh-i Rostam was deliberate.

Although the Sasanians no longer possessed any detailed knowledge of the Achaemenids, they were aware that a previous Persian power had ruled the lands before the Parthians, and the monuments in Persis were testament to their greatness. Naqsh-i Rostam, where the royal tombs of the Achaemenids were located, therefore became the site, which the Sasanians now adopted to document their political and military achievements. In doing so, the Sasanians laid claim to a historical succession of Persian dynasties.

Visually the victories over the Romans were commemorated with the creation of three separate rock reliefs, capturing the same scene, the victorious Shapur I on horseback, surrounded by the defeated Roman emperors. The scene on the reliefs depicts the body of Gordian III lying beneath Shapur's horse, with Philip the Arab supplicating before the king, and Valerian standing beside him, his hand held by Shapur I, symbolizing his captivity.

The reliefs were carved at Darabgird, probably in honor of Shapur's father Ardashir I, at Bishapur in Persis, the city built by Roman prisoners of war to commemorate Shapur's victories, and – ideologically perhaps most important – at Naqsh-i Rostam, 1 where the tombs of the dynastic predecessors of the Sasanians were testimony to the historical continuity of Persian power.