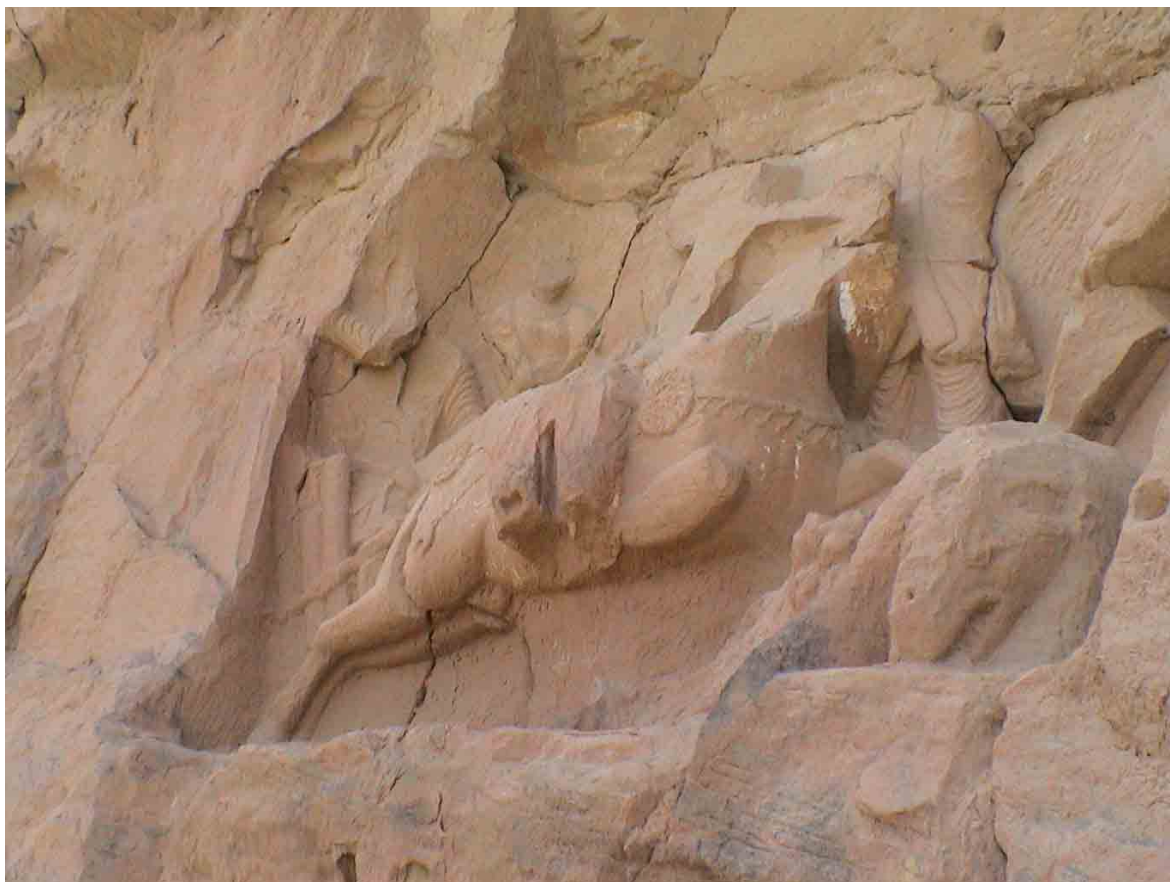


SURVEY/MISSION REPORT:

**THE ROCK RELIEF DISCOVERED IN THE
VILLAGE OF SHAMARQ, BAGHLAN PROVINCE**



Rag-i Bibi (The Vein of Lady Fatima).



Background:

In the winter of 2003 SPACH funded an expedition led by Dr. Jonathan Lee, specialist in Afghan history, to a village on the outskirts of Pul-i-Khumri in order to determine the exact location of a relief sculpture reportedly in the area. Dr Lee had seen photos of the relief prior to this. They were delivered to him by a BBC reporter in London who had been directed to it by Ministry of Information and Culture officials in Baghlan Province earlier that year. Dr. Lee immediately recognized that if the reports of the location of the relief were accurate, it would certainly be of great significance for the history and archaeology of Afghanistan.



Southern entrance to the valley from the site. Village of Shamarq from the south-east. Cliff where relief is located from the east.

Dr. Lee traveled to the village of Shamarq, approximately 45 minutes drive from Pul-i-Khumri (capital of Baghlan Province) along a potholed dirt road. Pul-i-Khumri lies approximately equidistant between this site and the great Kushan temple founded by Kanishka at Surkh Kotal. The site is located a few minutes walk from the village on the first tier of three natural terraces that form the structure of the cliff. Dr. Lee was guided by the local villagers several hundred feet up the snow covered mountain side and along a precarious icy path at times barely one foot wide.

The villagers led Dr. Lee along the path to the relief and there he saw a magnificent six by four metres high rock-relief particularly unique in the context of the history and archaeology of Afghanistan. It is known to the villagers as Rag-i Bibi (The Vein of Lady Fatima) and had been part of a local cult in the history of the village. Since the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, it is the only sculpture of its kind known to be still standing in Afghanistan. Indeed, it is no less amazing that the sculpture has remained unknown to the world outside Shamarq for so many centuries.

The Composition:

The rock-relief depicts a hunting scene similar to others known from Persia in the time of the Sassanids (AD 224-633) depicting victorious military campaigns. The composition contains a proportionately large central figure on horseback with at least three attendants in the hunting party and possibly one other indicated by an arm protruding into the composition from the now destroyed left segment of the sculpture. The sculpture seems to have been damaged in antiquity either by earthquakes, human intervention or a combination of both. Unfortunately, the principal horse's head, right front leg, and the torso of its rider are missing. The head of a second horse is visible behind the first.



However, clear traces of the outline of the main figure's torso and head remain where the figure emerges from the rock. The legs of this rider, attached to the horse in side-saddle fashion, are still visible though the feet have broken off. The outline of the hair in of the rider in typical Persian royal style lends weight to his identification as a Sassanian King.



Detail of middle section.

Architectural motif and traces of paint.

Detail of second horse and attendant.

Under the hooves of the horse is an animal which has been killed by the hunting party. At first sight it appears to be a dragon or other mythical beast, accentuated by a grimace on the right side of the mouth as you view it and a mouthful of menacing teeth. However, a flattened section on the snout of the beast and an associated peg-hole suggest that a horn was once attached. Indeed, there are numerous similar holes in different parts of the relief suggesting that such applied decoration was employed in the final product to overcome deficiencies or limitations in the material they had to work with. The ears of this animal would also have been applied in a similar fashion. The whole composition was plastered and painted meaning that such appliqué would have been indistinguishable from the stone in the final product. With the inclusion of a horn the animal can clearly be identified as a rhinoceros. Rhinoceroses, of course, do not have such large sharpened teeth, but these may have been added by the sculptors for dramatic effect, as in a similar fashion, a tongue protruding from the right side of the mouth of the animal indicates its death. Above this animal in the upper-right portion of the composition as you face it, the same type of animal is fleeing the hunt, covered in scales or scaled armour. This figure is in similar proportions to the other rhinoceros figure, although its head and right front leg are missing.

The top of the composition was originally bordered by a banded architectural motif. There are small segments of this motif still intact in the top-left and right corners but the middle section has been completely destroyed. Traces of the original paint and plaster can also be seen in the top left-corner underneath a turban or crown motif associated with the architectural band.

The sculpture contains a curious combination of local and Persian elements, and it will be interesting to see how the story unfolds, as more research is undertaken around the world, concerning the relationship of this relief to the aspirations and claims of the



Sassanid Kings Shapur I & II to expand their influence in Afghanistan during the 3rd and fourth centuries AD.



Fleeing animal with scaled armour.



Front view of dead rhinoceros



Rhinoceros mouth with teeth.

The Survey:

In May 2004, SPACH, in conjunction with DAFA, facilitated a team of French archaeologists headed by Professor Frantz Grenet in visiting, documenting and photographing the site using a specialized camera able to capture images in 3-D. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of France funded Frantz Grenet and his team and SPACH provided funds for Dr. Lee and equipment for the survey. DAFA provided vehicles for the French team and acquired the appropriate government permission. Special mention must also be made of Mr. Najibullah Ahrar, the Director of the Ministry of Information and Culture of Baghaln Province, and his colleague Mr. Tokhi, who assisted the team greatly and under whose auspices the survey took place. Much praise too, must go to the local villagers who were employed in various roles and worked extremely hard to assist the expedition. The Ministry supervised all the work and posted several guards on the site to ensure the security of equipment that had to be left on site during the process. ACTED provided the team with accommodation and the guards with the use of a tent for the duration of the procedure. SPACH donated equipment to the Ministry in order to equip the guards properly for protecting this and other such sites in the future.





Building the platform.

The survey involved building a two to three metre high platform several hundred metres up a steep slope on the mountain side, enabling Philippe Martinez, the photographer, to work with his equipment. The team had only approximately 1 metre in which to work and erect the platform. It took several days to erect the structure and clean the relief for photographing and the work was also delayed by heavy rain for several days. Carpenters from Pul-i-Khumri were hired to build the platform and labourers from the village were hired to make the area on which the platform would be built and the track in the immediate vicinity wider and more safe to work on. The men from the village and the carpenters worked in difficult conditions hundreds of feet up the steep mountain side with little room and did so very successfully. This enabled the 3-D photography to proceed without problems and under safe conditions.



Philippe Martinez photographing the relief



Clearing excess dust in preparation for the scan.

The 3-D image captured of the relief means that it can be studied in some detail by scholars without actually visiting the site, and the data contained in the image could also be used to produce a scale model for the Kabul Museum, other museums or future research.

The Future of the Rock-Relief:

Professor Frantz Grenet reports that the sculpture is the only Sassanian rock-relief yet discovered east of Tehran and certainly anywhere in Afghanistan (personal



communication). Indeed, since the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas it is the largest and only sculpture of its kind existing in Afghanistan and thus of central importance to the cultural heritage of the country.

Therefore, some thought and planning for the future of the site needs to be undertaken now. The site has already created much interest within Afghanistan and abroad and will attract increasing numbers of people to view it. These people must be managed in way that serves the interests of both raising awareness and celebrating and protecting the material heritage of Afghanistan, and also the interests of the local people in whose village the bas-relief is situated. No program should be developed that does not provide some benefits to the local community who have kept the relief largely intact over so many centuries.

Firstly, some minor restoration work should be undertaken to sure up some large cracks in the cliff face that may open up with further earth tremours and put the relief in jeopardy. Secondly, some type of protective frame should be installed to ensure that people cannot climb on the sculpture and further damage some of its more delicate details. Thirdly, a guard/guide station or interpretation centre could be set up to provide security to the site and information on its significance to would-be visitors. Such a service would provide a minimal income to ensure the longevity of the site for future research and generations of Afghans. Local people from the village could play a significant role in this.

