



KEYWORDS: *palaeoart - cave art - visual perception - visual attention - Gestalt organisation; composition – framing - sequencing; graphic design; photography – cinema – Chauvet - Lascaux; Leang Karampuang*

## When the Image Has a Text: Achaemenid Rock Relief at Persepolis as a Control Case for Iconological Inference

Nastaran Aksoy

**Abstract.** Rock art research has largely passed Persepolis by, yet the Achaemenid terrace was cut from the living bedrock of the Kuh-e Rahmat by the same hands, and the same technique, that carved the royal tombs into the cliff at Naqš-e Rostam. Bednarik locates the epistemological impediment to interpreting rock art as universal to all periods up to the introduction of extensive written records — a boundary condition implying a class of corpora on the far side of it. Persepolis is such a corpus: its repeated motifs carry contemporaneous trilingual inscriptions, an anchor unavailable in the non-literate corpora that are palaeoart's primary subject matter. This paper exploits that anchor to calibrate iconological inference. Panofsky's model is stress-tested against the epigraphic record — not as three levels but as he actually framed it, three acts of interpretation each requiring an external corrective that must survive to function — and the results are reframed through Peirce's trichotomy, Eco's thresholds, and Cassirer's demand that a discipline know its symbols to be symbols. Three cases yield one finding. At the Apadana, where Darius's text directs the viewer to look at the sculptures, iconology holds. At Pasargadae, where a trilingual inscription stood directly above the four-winged figure and named only its patron, it collapses. With the griffin, where no contemporaneous text speaks, comparative analogy substitutes — and the comparative data dissolve their own conclusion. Confidence tracks not the presence of writing but its kind: Darius's sentence is a Peircean index, Cyrus's a bare symbol. A three-tier confidence spectrum follows — a heuristic for non-literate corpora, not an algorithm. This is calibration, not method.

### Introduction

Rock art research has a misconception to answer for, and it has already said so in its own pages. Lambert put the charge plainly in this journal: rock art has most commonly been associated with hunting-gathering societies rather than state-level ones, and as a result of that misconception a great deal of information about the communication technologies of early states has gone unnoticed (Lambert, 2014). The observation licenses a further one. If the association of rock art with non-literate societies has cost the discipline evidence, it has also cost it something subtler — a class of test cases. Corpora produced by literate states are not merely additional data. They are the only data against which the discipline's interpretive procedures can be checked at all.

This paper takes up that opportunity. It is offered as a contribution to method rather than to Achaemenid studies, and it belongs here rather than in an art-historical journal for one reason: the problem it addresses is not what Persepolis means.

### RAR's Mandate for Theory and Methodology in Palaeoart Research

It is what any of us are entitled to claim when we say that an image means anything.

### Bednarik's Literate/Non-Literate Distinction

The point of departure is Bednarik's, and this study accepts it without reservation. The world's rock art was typically produced by illiterate people whose cognition differed from that of literates; determinations of what such art depicts, made by anyone outside the culture that produced it, can be neither confirmed nor refuted, and are therefore unfalsifiable and unscientific; and this impediment, he writes, is universal to all periods *up to the introduction of extensive written records* (Bednarik, 2016).

That final clause is the hinge of this paper. It is not a loophole — it is a boundary condition, stated by the critique's own author, and it implies that somewhere there exists a class of corpora on the far side of the impediment. Bednarik draws the

line. This study walks across it, turns around, and reports what the line looks like from the other side.

### Persepolis on the Far Side of That Line

Whether Persepolis is rock art at all will strike many readers as the obvious objection, and Section 2 answers it in detail. The argument in brief: the terrace was cut from the living bedrock of the Kuh-e Rahmat, and the same dynasty, using the same technique, cut the royal tombs into the cliff at Naqš-e Rostam and into the mountain directly behind the terrace itself. The distinction between “rock relief” and “rock-cut architecture” is a modern taxonomic convenience. It is not a distinction the Achaemenids observed, and the chisel does not recognise it.

### The Existing Theoretical Landscape

Three literatures converge here, and the paper sits at their intersection rather than inside any one of them.

Lambert’s study is this journal’s own prior opening onto rock art under state and literate conditions, and the present paper is its reverse case. He examined rock art at the moment states were forming, where semasiography and glottographic writing operated as contemporaneous technologies of communication (Lambert, 2014); this study examines a mature imperial state at the opposite end of that trajectory, where writing has become so entrenched that it annotates the images directly. His question was what rock art did for the emergence of states. The question here is what a state’s writing can tell us about the limits of reading its rock art — and, by extension, everyone else’s.

Canepa’s framework establishes the second convergence: Iranian rock reliefs already possess a theorised art-historical literature, one that treats them not as isolated monuments but as components of a single spatial and ritual system (Canepa, 2014). That literature and rock art

research have had almost nothing to say to one another. This paper puts them in contact.

The third is reception. Briant’s account of the eighteenth-century discovery of Persepolis traces European perception of the site through the paintings, drawings, and written descriptions of the earliest travellers (Briant, 2020) — a genealogy that turns out to matter more than a footnote can carry, since Section 4.2 will show a central piece of this paper’s evidence surviving only in exactly that form: a draughtsman’s copy of an inscription that no longer exists.

### Research Question and Contribution

The question is single and narrow. *Can the textual record at Persepolis calibrate the confidence we place in iconological inference?*

The method under test is Panofsky’s, read through Kalkanis’s secondary account, and the choice of Panofsky is not incidental — his iconology became an indispensable part of art-historical method, and his contention was that we must first know what a work of art meant at the time and place of its creation before we can imagine what it ought to mean to us (Kalkanis, 2018). Kalkanis also poses, in passing, the question this paper answers at length: what happens if the art one wants to study is not itself based on Panofsky’s humanistic principles (Kalkanis, 2018)?

Panofsky’s model is usually summarised as three levels. It is more accurate, and far more useful, to say that it is three levels *each of which he equipped with a corrective* (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Panofsky’s synoptical table, reproduced in condensed form. The fourth column is the one this paper puts under stress. Panofsky did not offer his levels as a procedure that could run unsupervised; he specified, for each, an external control without which the interpretation is unchecked — and every one of those controls is a historical tradition that must survive in order to function.

| Object of interpretation                                                            | Act of interpretation          | Equipment for interpretation                                                 | Corrective principle (history of tradition) |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Primary or natural subject matter — the world of artistic motifs                    | Pre-iconographical description | Practical experience: familiarity with objects and events                    | History of style                            |
| Secondary or conventional subject matter — the world of images, stories, allegories | Iconographical analysis        | Knowledge of literary sources: familiarity with specific themes and concepts | History of types                            |

|                                                                 |                             |                                                                                   |                                                      |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| Intrinsic meaning or content — the world of “symbolical” values | Iconological interpretation | Synthetic intuition, conditioned by personal psychology and <i>Weltanschauung</i> | History of cultural symptoms or “symbols” in general |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|

(Source: Author’s own elaboration, based on Panofsky, 1995.)

Read the third column of the second row and the difficulty for palaeoart is immediate: the equipment Panofsky specifies for iconographical analysis is *knowledge of literary sources*. Not intuition, not erudition, not comparative breadth — literary sources. He is equally candid about what happens above that. For the iconological level, he concedes, we cannot hope to find an individual text that fits the underlying principles as John 13:21 ff. fits the iconography of the Last Supper; what is needed instead is a faculty comparable to a diagnostician’s, which he can describe no better, he says, than by the rather discredited term *synthetic intuition* — and which may, he adds, be better developed in a talented layman than in an erudite scholar (Panofsky, 1995). The more subjective and irrational this source of interpretation becomes, he insists, the more necessary the correctives (Panofsky, 1995).

So the model was never a licence. It was a set of levels with a set of brakes, and Panofsky said so. The trouble is that in a non-literate corpus the second column’s equipment does not exist, and the fourth column’s correctives — history of style, history of types, history of cultural symbols — are themselves reconstructions from the very material they are meant to check. Panofsky was writing for a discipline in which the Bible, Ovid, and the humanist tradition were on the shelf.

Persepolis is the rarest of things: a rock-cut corpus where a version of that shelf survives. Trilingual royal inscriptions accompany the repeated motifs; one of them turns and points at its own relief. Which makes the site a control case — a place where Panofsky’s levels can be run against an epigraphic record and their outputs compared to something other than a scholar’s confidence.

One coda before beginning, because it names the stakes better than any argument could. Panofsky’s own illustration of conventional meaning is a man lifting his hat in greeting, and he is careful about what the gesture requires of its reader: to grasp that the raised hat signifies politeness rather than merely occurring, one must be familiar not only with the practical world of objects and events but with the more-than-practical world of customs and cultural traditions peculiar to a certain civilisation — which is why, he notes, neither an Australian bushman nor an ancient Greek could be expected to realise it (Panofsky, 1995). The

principle is exactly Bednarik’s, arrived at independently and seventy-seven years earlier: conventional meaning is legible from inside a tradition and opaque from outside it.

What changed is the direction of the illustration. In 1977 an Australian Aboriginal man named Lamderod — highly initiated, one of the last who still held the authentic meanings — stood in Beswick Cave beside a professor of anatomy who had published identifications of eighty-one painted figures, and demonstrated that ninety per cent of them were wrong (Bednarik, 2016). The bushman Panofsky had summoned to embody the man who cannot read the sign turned out to belong to the only category of person who could; and the erudite scholar, whom the model casts as the interpreter, turned out to be the one standing outside the tradition, guessing. Panofsky was right about the structure and wrong about who would be standing where. This paper is about what that reversal costs, and Persepolis is where the bill can be read.

## Site and Materials — Persepolis Within the Achaemenid Rock-Relief Tradition

### The Parsa Terrace: A Technical and Conceptual Anchor

The terrace of Persepolis is not a building set upon the earth; it is the earth reworked. At its heart lies a low spur of the Kuh-i-Rahmat — the mountain flanking the site to the east — thrust out westward into the plain of Marv Dasht, and the contours of that promontory, its natural relief and its stubborn outcrops, governed the very outline of the platform the Achaemenid masons raised above it (Schmidt, 1953).

What the founders inherited from the mountain they did not merely build upon. They cut into it. Stretches of the terrace façade are scarped bedrock; the faces and tops of individual palace platforms lay the natural rock bare; and the built masonry that completes the structure buttresses the detritus of rock and rubble thrown off by the scraping and leveling of the promontory itself (Schmidt, 1953). The operation is total — the spur pared back where it obtrudes, built out where it falls short, until what was quarried and dressed — the made — and what was left standing of the living rock — the found — resolve into one

continuous surface. In the northwestern quarter that leveling was never carried to completion — a candid witness that the terrace is bedrock arrested mid-transformation, not an abstract plane conjured above the mountain itself (Schmidt, 1953). The blocks were set without mortar and locked with iron clamps run in lead (Schmidt, 1953); the seam between the made and the found

was engineered to vanish, and to endure. Nowhere is that technique more plainly on view than in the monumental double stairway climbing the western face, its flights cut from the same mortarless limestone as the platform they scale (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The double stairway to the terrace, cut and fitted from the same mortarless limestone as the platform it ascends.

*The stair is no ornament applied to the terrace; it is the terrace's own method made visible. The massive blocks — dressed to shape, locked without mortar — repeat the exact constructional act that elsewhere welds cut ashlar to the scarped bedrock of the Kuh-i-Rahmat. What registers to the eye as architecture is, at the level of technique, indistinguishable from what a palaeoart survey would log as worked rock: the collapse of categories on which this study's control case depends. It is likewise the kind of evidence on which the highest reaches of interpretive confidence — the subject of this paper's closing argument — must rest: the cutting, the dressing, and the joining are material fact, present in the stone before any question of meaning is raised.*

**Source:** Carole Raddato, "Part of the monumental double staircase leading up to the terrace, Persepolis, Iran," Wikimedia Commons, (CC BY-SA 2.0). Cf. Schmidt (1953); Ridolfi et al. (2019).

That gesture can be read at a resolution the rest of palaeoart is rarely granted, because the working of the Persepolis stone has been recorded not by

connoisseurial impression but by instrument. Darius, who raised the citadel within Pârsa as a vast artificial terrace to proclaim the reach of his kingdom (Ridolfi et al., 2019), commissioned a stone whose dull grey and near-black surfaces were deliberately buried under an applied white coating — and non-destructive X-ray fluorescence has now fixed both the fact of that coating and its shifting chemistry across the reigns (Ridolfi et al., 2019; see Table 2). The finding is no decorative footnote. It demonstrates that the Achaemenid surface was a manufactured surface, worked to a specification, and it yields the securest class of knowledge this paper will handle: material fact, retrieved without a single interpretive leap.

**Table 2.** The documented surface-finishing sequence of the Persepolis stone, fixed by non-destructive analysis. The progression from gypsum to calcined-bone fluorapatite is not a matter of taste but a datable technological shift, and it marks the terrace as an engineered, resurfaced artefact rather than raw exposed rock.

| Finishing Layer             | Chemical Basis                              | Chronological Attribution      | Detection Method  | Source                                  |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| White ground (gypsum)       | Calcium sulphate                            | Earlier monuments (pre-Xerxes) | XRF; PCA          | Ridolfi et al. (2019)                   |
| White ground (transitional) | Gypsum and/or fluorapatite                  | Xerxes period                  | XRF; PCA          | Ridolfi et al. (2019)                   |
| White ground ("bone white") | Calcium fluorapatite, from calcined bone    | Xerxes period or later         | XRF; PCA          | Ridolfi et al. (2019)                   |
| Polychrome traces           | Egyptian blue; red ochre; realgar; cinnabar | Achaemenid, various contexts   | XRF (high energy) | Ridolfi et al. (2019); Cf. Nagel (2020) |

The colour did not stop at the ground. On the colossal stone bull of the Hundred Column Hall — a beast near six meters in height, hewn from the local limestone and set at the portico’s end — the surface still holds, in its sounder patches, a fine and glassy film of blue, in all probability Egyptian blue, with red ochre banked in the nostrils and worked into the eye (Nagel, 2020). The quarried mountain was, in its finished state, a painted mountain. And the recovery of that fact is itself precarious: much of the evidence for Persepolitan polychromy was stripped away unrecorded by the very squeeze- and mold-making campaigns that nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship trusted to preserve it (Nagel, 2020) — a caution, entered here at the threshold, that material data is finite and its survival never to be presumed.

One thing the stone declines to tell us. Whether the Achaemenid builders conceived the cutting of the Kuh-i-Rahmat as an inscription of power upon the natural order — whether, that is, they held the terrace to be what we now propose to read in it — is nowhere legible in the rock; the mountain preserves the fact of its working, not the intention behind it. That distance between demonstrable act and inferred meaning is no defect in the evidence. It is the exact subject of this paper, encountered here in its most concrete form, at the level of the bedrock.

**The Wider Imperial Building Programme**

The terrace was never conceived in isolation. It was one operation within a coordinated imperial

building programme that Darius I set in motion on two fronts at once — the palace-city of Susa in the Elamite lowlands and the new dynastic seat at Persepolis (Kuhrt, 1997) — and the Persepolis platform, raised with materials and labour drawn from every quarter of the empire, was in a real sense the Susa terrace’s monumental sibling, built to a model already worked out on the Apadana mound at Susa (Wiesehöfer, 2001). That programme was never merely utilitarian. In Briant’s reading the royal capitals — Susa, and Persepolis above all — rose as allegories of a new imperial order, a built argument that political unity and the empire’s dazzling human diversity could be held within a single frame (Briant, 2002). To read the terrace, then, is to read one node in a network of foundations through which the Achaemenid house projected its conception of empire in stone, brick, and planted ground (Kuhrt, 1997).

That network was not built in one idiom. Three and a half kilometres west of the terrace stands the gate of Tol-e Ajori — an oversized replica of the Neo-Babylonian Ishtar Gate (Figure 2), raised not from cut stone but from baked and glazed brick, its walls carrying the same moulded bulls and the same mushkhushshu snake-dragons that faced the processional way at Babylon, down to the shared brick module (Askari Chaverdi & Callieri, 2020).



**Figure 2.** The Neo-Babylonian Ishtar Gate of Babylon (reconstructed, Pergamon Museum, Berlin) — the model that the gate of Tol-e Ajori, 3.5 km west of the Persepolis terrace, replicated in glazed brick.

*Cobalt ground, moulded aurochs and snake-dragons picked out in fired glaze: this is the idiom the Achaemenids commanded and, at Tol-e Ajori, chose to import wholesale into the plain of Parsa (Askari Chaverdi & Callieri, 2020). Set beside the grey, scarped limestone of the terrace, the contrast is total — two irreconcilable ways of raising an imperial monument,*

*held within a single reign and a few kilometres of the same ground. The terrace's rock was not the only surface available to Persian kingship; it was the one selected here, and the Babylonian alternative standing a short walk away is what makes the selection legible as a decision.*

**Source:** Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin, "The Ishtar Gate of Babylon at the Pergamon Museum, Berlin, Germany. From Iraq, 6th century BCE," Wikimedia Commons, (CC BY-SA 4.0). Cf. Askari Chaverdi & Callieri (2020).

It is the earlier monument. Its glazed-brick craft belongs to a more archaic tradition than the terrace or Susa; its bricks bear Elamite and

Babylonian signs but not a word of Old Persian; and the convergence of these clues places its foundation before Darius broke ground on the terrace, somewhere in the years between Cyrus' capture of Babylon in 539 and the start of Takht-e Jamshid around 518 (Askari Chaverdi & Callieri, 2020; see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Two imperial monuments in the Persepolis area, contrasted by construction idiom. The divergence in material, prototype, and technical tradition — within one imperial enterprise and across a few kilometres of the same plain — establishes that the terrace's rock-cut monumentality was a selected idiom, not a default dictated by circumstance.

| Monument                               | Location                           | Construction Idiom                                        | Prototype / Counterpart                         | Relative Date                      | Source                                                             |
|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Parsa terrace (Takht-e Jamshid)</b> | On the bedrock of Kuh-e Rahmat     | Living rock scarped and dressed; mortarless cut limestone | Susa palace-terrace (parallel royal foundation) | Darius I onward, c. 518 BCE        | Wiesehöfer (2001); Kuhrt (1997); Askari Chaverdi & Callieri (2020) |
| <b>Tol-e Ajori gate</b>                | 3.5 km west, at Bagh-e Firuzi East | Baked and glazed brick, moulded and figured               | Neo-Babylonian Ishtar Gate of Babylon           | Before the terrace, c. 539–518 BCE | Askari Chaverdi & Callieri (2020)                                  |

Here the wider programme repays the argument of the previous section. The same dynasty that could raise a Babylonian brick gate a short walk to the west — and had already laid out garden

capitals in the manner of Pasargadae, one of them the very complex to which Tol-e Ajori belonged (Askari Chaverdi & Callieri, 2020) — chose, at the terrace, to cut into the flank of the Kuh-e Rahmat

instead. The choice of the living rock was exactly that: a choice, drawn from a repertoire that demonstrably held alternatives, and so a deliberate selection among idioms rather than a constructional reflex. What the mountain records is not the only way the Achaemenids knew how to build; it is the way they elected to build here — and the election is itself part of what the terrace means.

### The Unambiguous Rock-Cut Anchors

If the terrace's claim to the rock-art tradition rests on an argument, two nearby monuments carry no such burden of proof. At Bisotūn, on the flank of a mountain the Persians knew as Bagastāna, "the place of the gods," Darius I carved the first monumental rock relief of the Achaemenid line —

a figural scene of the king trampling his defeated rival and facing nine bound pretenders in their ethnic dress, set beneath and around a trilingual inscription cut directly into the cliff (Canepa, 2014). That inscription is no minor gloss. It is the longest and, in historical and philological weight, the most consequential text the Achaemenid kings left anywhere, and it supplied one of the keys by which modern scholarship first unlocked cuneiform (Schmitt, 1991). In the Persian heartland itself, at the cliff now called Naqš-e Rostam, Darius carved his tomb into the living rock, breaking with the freestanding masonry tombs of his predecessors and founding the rock-hewn royal necropolis that every Achaemenid king after him would replicate (Canepa, 2014; Schmidt, 1970) (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** The Achaemenid royal necropolis at Naqš-e Rostam, northwest of Persepolis: four cruciform tombs cut high into the living cliff, their façades modelled on the columned front of a Persian audience hall. From left, the tombs are attributed to Darius II, Artaxerxes I, Darius I, and Xerxes I.

*No one disputes that this is rock art. Here the negotiation between image and living stone, which the terrace performs at the scale of a platform, is explicit and monumental: the tomb is subtracted from the cliff, its meaning inseparable from the rock that carries it (Canepa, 2014). The decisive point for this study lies in what the photograph cannot show — that the identical*

*tomb form was cut into the Kūh-e Rahmat, directly behind the Persepolis terrace (Canepa, 2014). The same dynasty, working the same practice, treated the mountain of Persepolis and this cliff as one continuous surface for royal rock-cutting; the boundary that would exile the terrace from the rock-relief tradition is a modern invention, not an Achaemenid one.*

**Source:** Diego Delso, "Naghsh-e rostam, Irán, 2016-09-24, DD 20-24 PAN," Wikimedia Commons, (CC BY-SA 4.0). Cf. Canepa (2014); Schmidt (1970).

These are the monuments against which no taxonomic objection can stand; they are rock-cut, royal, and Achaemenid beyond dispute. Yet Canepa's governing argument is that they were never meant to stand alone. For the Persian kings the rock relief was less an object than a spatial and ritual technology — a way of fusing a carved image or inscription to a particular site and to the ritual life performed there, so that monument, place, and rite were experienced as a single whole (Canepa, 2014). Read this way, the boundary

between Naqš-e Rostam and Persepolis dissolves. The tomb form Darius established on the cliff at Naqš-e Rostam was cut, in identical design, into the Kūh-e Rahmat, the mountain rising directly behind the Persepolis terrace (Canepa, 2014). The necropolis lay within processional distance of the palace and was bound to it by an apparatus of remembrance: tablets from the Persepolis Fortification Archive record the rations issued for rituals performed at the tombs for the benefit of the dead kings' souls, and to hold the office of "keeper of the tomb" ranked as a courtly honour (Canepa, 2014).

The consequence for this paper is direct. The rock-cutting that produced the undisputed reliefs of Bisotūn and the tombs of Naqš-e Rostam did not

halt at the edge of Persepolis; it climbed the mountain that flanks the terrace and, as the preceding sections argued, shaped the terrace itself. One dynasty, one continuous practice, one ritual system stretch from the cliff at Bīsotūn to the necropolis of Naqš-e Rostam to the tombs on Persepolis's own mountain and the worked platform beneath them. To award Bīsotūn and Naqš-e Rostam their standing as rock art while withholding it from Persepolis is to draw a border the Achaemenids never recognised — and it is a border this study declines to honour.

### The Assyrian and Elamite Comparanda

Achaemenid royal imagery did not spring, fully formed, from Persian soil. It was assembled — deliberately, and with a discriminating eye — from the visual traditions of the peoples the Persians had conquered or displaced, above all the Assyrians and the Elamites. Root's study of the making of this imperial iconography turns on a single insistent distinction: the Achaemenids selected and adapted their models; they did not copy them (Root, 1979). Two cases carry the point. The figure of Ahuramazda hovering in his winged disc above the king derives, in form, from

the ninth-century Assyrian image of the god Assur in the same device — but the Persians enlarged the god far beyond any Assyrian precedent and turned him to face the king, ring extended, so that the act of divine investiture, muted or absent in the Assyrian source, became the emphatic centre of the Persian scene (Root, 1979). The throne-bearers make the same move in reverse. The atlas pose — one or more figures straining to support a weight overhead — belonged in Mesopotamia almost exclusively to mythical bull-men and genii holding up the cosmos; at Persepolis and Naqš-e Rostam it was refitted to carry ranks of subject peoples, actual men, each a personification of a land of the realm, lifting the king's throne (Root, 1979). A cosmic motif was conscripted for a political sentence.

The gateway guardian makes the descent visible at a glance — a type the Persians inherited directly from the colossal palace-doorway guardians of Assyria (Curtis & Reade, 1995), their nearest models at Sennacherib's Nineveh (Wiesehöfer, 2001). At the Gate of All Nations, raised under Xerxes I, the same creature stands watch (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** A lamassu — a human-headed winged bull — at the Gate of All Nations, Persepolis, raised under Xerxes I. The type descends directly from the colossal gate-guardians of Assyria.

*Inheritance, here as everywhere in the Achaemenid program, was not transcription. In Assyria these bulls and lions stood as guardian spirits set to repel evil; the Persians kept the creature and its station at the*

*threshold, but bent both to a Persian discipline — the same discipline that shrank the Assyrian lion-hunt, a vast narrative unrolled across register after register of palace relief, into a single formal, almost heraldic*

*combat of king and beast (Barnett, 1957). The motif is Assyrian; the syntax is Achaemenid.*

**Source:** A. Davey, "Detail- The Gate of All Nations, Persepolis, Iran," Wikimedia Commons, [\[Link\]](#) (CC BY 2.0). Cf. Root (1979); Curtis & Reade (1995).

Beneath the Mesopotamian debts lay an older and nearer inheritance. The Persian homeland in Fars rested atop the deep civilization of Elam — the highland culture of southwest Iran that Mesopotamian scribes had labelled from the outside, and that the Persians absorbed into their empire rather than effaced (Potts, 1999). That inheritance reached even into method: Khuzistan and Fars held a long Elamite tradition of carving reliefs into living rock (Root, 1979), so that the very medium on which the last three sections have insisted — image cut into mountain — descended to the Achaemenids as a regional birthright, whatever Darius made newly his own at Bisotūn. The columned halls and tomb-façades carry a comparable memory: their stout stone columns are the petrified trace of the slender wooden posts of an older Iranian hall-house, a form the Medes had already cut into the mountainside for their tombs (Godard, 1965).

None of this is genealogy for its own sake. It is the paper's first constraint on interpretation. Where a motif's descent can be followed — the winged disc to Assur, the gate bull to the lamassu, the very act of rock-carving to Elam — the range of readings it can bear narrows to what its ancestry will support. Traceable origin is a discipline upon interpretation; it tethers meaning to evidence. And in that tethering lies the seed of everything the later sections will argue: a motif whose lineage can be reconstructed stands on firmer ground than one whose meaning must be summoned by analogy to a culture that left no line of descent at all. The Achaemenids' borrowings, precisely because they can be documented, already begin to sort the confident readings from the merely ingenious.

### **Coda: The Afterlife as an Inscribed Surface**

The Achaemenids fell; their stone did not. Long after Alexander, on the limestone blocks of the Harem of Xerxes and the Tachara of Darius I, later hands came back to the terrace and cut into it — mounted princes in profile, standing figures with hand on sword-hilt, a lion seated heraldically on its haunches, the lines so fine that they yield to the eye only under a raking light (Callieri, 2006). These figural graffiti are a small fraction of what

the Achaemenid blocks carry; the bulk of the engraved material on them is epigraphic (Callieri, 2006).

The word "graffiti" misleads. At Dura-Europos the graffiti are what the name implies — casual marks by hands untrained in drawing. The Persepolis engravings are nothing of the kind. Costume fabrics are differentiated stroke by stroke; the horse-harness is rendered down to its phalerae and its hanging balls of hair; the diadem is ribboned and exact. These are the work of trained craftsmen, commissioned by the very personages they depict (Callieri, 2006). Whether they were even the finished work remains unsettled: cut so shallowly that they are barely legible, the incisions were in all likelihood the underdrawing for paint since vanished — a hypothesis that awaits infrared examination of the surface (Callieri, 2006).

Why cut anything here at all? A Middle Persian inscription of the fourth century, carved on a door-jamb of the Tachara by a Shabuhr Sakanshah, hands us the key. He came to Persepolis; he took wine beside the building; he made great rejoicing and ordered service performed for the gods; he proclaimed praise of his father and his grandfather, of Shabuhr King of Kings, and of himself. And he praised those who built this palace (Callieri, 2006). Centuries after the masons had dressed these blocks, a king still stood among them and thanked the men who cut them. To incise these walls was to pay homage to ancestors, to mark ownership of the ruins, and to assert continuity between the kings of a mythical past and the kings of the present — an impulse running from the Fratarakas of Hellenistic Fars through to the early Sasanians, a privileged relationship with these ruins sustained for at least four centuries (Callieri, 2006).

The pattern was not confined to the terrace, and Canepa's framework accounts for it. The Sasanians were drawn above all to the sites that had mattered to the Achaemenids, and the material vestiges of that heritage became the raw material of their own monumental and memorial practice (Canepa, 2014). At Naqš-e Rostam they cut eight reliefs beneath the Achaemenid tombs — more than at any other site — and Šāpūr I drove an extensive inscription into the site's Achaemenid tower (Canepa, 2014). What accumulated there was a cumulative aesthetic: the reliefs of earlier dynasties inspiring and challenging the creations of those who followed (Canepa, 2014) (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Šāpūr I (r. 241–272 CE) triumphant over the Roman emperors Valerian and Philip the Arab, cut into the cliff at Naqš-e Rostam directly beneath the Achaemenid royal tombs shown in Figure 3.

*Šāpūr did not choose this cliff for its geology. He chose it because Darius was already in it. The relief is an argument about lineage conducted in stone — and it is legible as an argument only because the rock it occupies had been claimed, nine centuries earlier, by the dynasty the Sasanians took for their ancestors. Here the confidence spectrum finds one of its firmest footings: that Šāpūr cut this relief at this place is a material fact, and its proximity to the tombs is measurable. What that proximity was meant to say is inference — well-supported inference, but inference all the same.*

**Source:** Diego Delso, “Naghsh-e rostam, Irán, 2016-09-24, DD 12,” Wikimedia Commons, (CC BY-SA 4.0). Cf. Canepa (2014); Callieri (2006).

The consequence for this study runs deeper than continuity. Herzfeld saw it first and Callieri sustains him: the Persepolis graffiti show that the repertoire of motifs typical of Sasanian sculpture already existed in drawing before the Sasanian period, and they disclose the artistic conception behind the conventionalized forms of the great rock-sculptures — the graffiti are the starting point of Sasanian rock relief (Callieri, 2006). The ribboned ring-diadem held out in the rider’s extended hand, which Sasanian investiture scenes would make the standard emblem of royal khwarrah, is already there on the Persepolis stone (Callieri, 2006). The terrace was not merely inherited as a surface to be marked; it was the seedbed of the rock-relief tradition that followed.

Whatever the moderns have settled about categories, the ancients answered with their chisels. A building would have been quarried for its stone. A rock surface gets inscribed.

And on that same stone, the problem this paper exists to address announces itself in miniature. Herzfeld named the figures with confidence: this one Manuchihr of Stakhr, that one Pabag, a third Shabuh — the brother of Ardashir I, who reigned three months and was killed by a falling stone while visiting Persepolis (Callieri, 2006). The names are seductive. The evidence will not carry them. Those identifications rest on comparison with the coinage of the kings of Persis, and the comparison discriminates poorly: the tall tiara with its scaled crest and crescent recurs across the coins of half a dozen rulers, and the dots that might tell one from another are legible with security neither on the coins nor on the graffiti (Callieri, 2006). Callieri therefore declines to name them, holding instead to what the material will bear — that the figures stand near in time to the Sasanian period, and belong more probably to the kings of Persis than to Sasanian princes (Callieri, 2006). An elegant narrative, confidently told, dissolves on contact with the evidence that was supposed to secure it. That collision — between the reading we want and the corroboration we have — is the subject of everything that follows.

**The Visual System — A Motif Inventory  
Documentary Catalogue**

Before any question of meaning can be posed, the corpus must be stated. What follows is not description for its own sake; it is the inventory against which Sections 4 and 5 test their inferences, and it is drawn from the two systematic records the site possesses — Schmidt's excavation catalogue (Schmidt, 1953) and the botanical survey of Caneva and colleagues (Caneva et al., 2023).

**Royal and ceremonial figures.** The king, enthroned in the Audience Scene of the Treasury with his son standing behind him, both holding bouquets (Caneva et al., 2023); ushers with staffs of office, Persian and Median alternating; Susian guards in flowing gown and twisted fillet, dressed as the Immortals of the Susa brick reliefs, drawn up in lines of forty-three, twenty-eight, and twenty-one across the three registers; thirty-two alternating Persian and Median dignitaries on either panel, a Persian taking precedence in each line; Median grooms with whips and folded rugs, one carrying the king's chariot stool strapped to his shoulders; the king's riding horses, perhaps of the Nisaeen breed; two royal chariots; and the twenty-three tribute-bearing delegations (Schmidt, 1953).

The king's *absence* deserves recording as carefully as his presence. Across the entire Apadana stairway programme he is not shown. The central façade carries two antithetic groups of four alternating Persian and Median guards, and above them the winged disc — centred, Schmidt notes, over the *blank space* between the two rows (Schmidt, 1953). His horses are there, his chariots, his stool, his grooms, twenty-three nations climbing toward him. He is not. What occupied that space, and why the composition converges

on a vacancy, is a question this study registers rather than answers.

**Faunal and hybrid creatures.** The lion and the rearing bull, locked in the combat that recurs at the corresponding position on the façade of every major stairway on the terrace; Herzfeld, noting that lion and bull are figures of the zodiac and that the scene attaches to the New Year festival at the spring equinox, proposed an astronomical meaning for it — a proposal Schmidt reports without endorsing (Schmidt, 1953). The winged sphinx, leonine in body and paw, with a bull's ear and the long square-tipped beard reserved for royalty and deity, triple horns marked on its tiara. The griffin, on capitals, walls, and vessels. And, at Pasargadae, the four-winged figure of Gate R.

**Botanical motifs.** Here the record is denser than any account before 2023 suggested, and the numbers matter (Table 4). Caneva and colleagues examined 170 reliefs at Persepolis and 45 at Susa and found the plant programme neither incidental nor decorative but saturating: rosettes on doorframes, on volutes and column capitals, on the collars of bulls, lions, and sphinxes, on the clothing of archers, and framing virtually every relief panel (Caneva et al., 2023). Their taxonomy is precise where the morphology permits: capitulate rosettes with a wide central disk and radiating rays, identified as Asteraceae — *Matricaria chamomilla*, possibly *Leucanthemum vulgare*; lotus rosettes in the manner of the Egyptian *Nymphaea lotus*, rendered at distinct stages of flowering and fruiting; the date palm *Phoenix dactylifera*, the tree of life, composed by fusing an Asteraceae rosette with an Egyptian lotus; and, in the offering scenes, mandrake, ephedra, papyrus, myrtle, and pomegranate (Caneva et al., 2023).

Dashes indicate absence in the examined corpus, not unavailable data. The distribution is the finding: the rosette is not an ornament applied to

the programme but the connective tissue of it, appearing on architecture, on garments, and on the necks of the sacred animals alike.

**Table 4.** Recurrence of plant elements in the monumental remains of Persepolis (P) and Susa (S).

| Context                      | Element class                       | P   | S  |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----|----|
| Reliefs examined (total)     | —                                   | 170 | 45 |
| Reliefs (border lines)       | Capitulate rosettes                 | 124 | 6  |
| Reliefs                      | Palm ( <i>Phoenix dactylifera</i> ) | 37  | 9  |
| Reliefs                      | Pine ( <i>Pinus brutia</i> )        | 13  | —  |
| Columns (bases and capitals) | Rosettes                            | 32  | 2  |
| Wall tiles                   | Rosettes                            | 4   | 10 |
| Dress of guards and archers  | Lotus rosettes                      | —   | 17 |
| Bulls (collar)               | Rosettes                            | 26  | 2  |
| Lions (collar)               | Rosettes                            | 4   | —  |

|                                                |                     |      |   |
|------------------------------------------------|---------------------|------|---|
| <b>Sphinx (collar)</b>                         | Rosettes            | 4    | 2 |
| <b>Winged disc (Ahuramazda)</b>                | Ceremonial elements | 12   | — |
| <b>Offering scenes (nobles, princes, king)</b> | Ceremonial plants   | 500+ | — |

(Source: Author's own elaboration, based on data from Caneva et al., 2023.)

**Architectural-decorative elements.** The lamassu of the Gate of All Nations; files of Persian guards armed with lance, bow, and quiver, carved on both inner faces of the stairways just above the steps; two Persian lancers on each newel; palmette-tipped segmented stalks filling the residual spaces, their lower ends connected garland-fashion; a terraced row of trees above each triangular panel; and twelve-petalled rosette frames bordering every panel — left unfinished, Schmidt records, in several instances (Schmidt, 1953).

**Epigraphic motifs.** The trilingual royal inscriptions belong in this inventory and not in an appendix to it, because they were placed as compositional elements by the planners who placed the rosettes. Each stairway façade holds three panels intended for inscriptions — one central, one near the end of each wing. In both cases the central panel was left blank. The eastern panel of the northern stairway was left uninscribed as well; the western panel bears the Old Persian text of Xerxes, almost exactly duplicated on the southern wing of the eastern stairway; and the Elamite and Babylonian versions were combined into the single panel on the northern wing of the eastern stairway. Schmidt states the difficulty in his own words and leaves it standing: *We have no practical explanation for the fact that the center panel was left blank while these two texts were crowded into one panel* — since one would normally expect the Old Persian in the centre and the other two versions at either side (Schmidt, 1953).

Every value is a structural constant rather than an artistic choice made afresh: the programme is generated by combining a small number of

One entry in this catalogue is already contested, and the dispute is instructive enough to record rather than bury. Schmidt saw conventionalized *cypress* trees above the triangular panels (Schmidt, 1953). Caneva and colleagues identify the trees of the Apadana staircase as *Pinus brutia* var. *eldarica*, report that they have been misidentified as *Cupressus* by others, and note that Ghirshman and Roaf had already recognized them as pines (Caneva et al., 2023). The disagreement concerns a species of tree, at Panofsky's pre-iconographic level, in a corpus recorded by two of the finest field archaeologists of the twentieth century — and it took seventy years and a botanist to arrive at a probable answer. Before a single question of symbolism arises, the inventory itself is under negotiation. That is worth holding in mind when the same discipline announces what a griffin meant.

### Recurrence and Compositional Rhythm

Schmidt reaches for the same word three times, and he is not being unkind. The reliefs of the registers strike him as monotonous; the formalism governing them, monotonous again; the guards stand rigidly at attention (Schmidt, 1953). Monotony is the correct technical description of what the Achaemenid planners built. It is also, read properly, the most legible thing on the terrace — and the only part of the programme that requires no inscription whatever to be understood.

Count it and the system declares itself (Table 5).

repeated units under fixed rules of rank, sequence, and reflection.

**Table 5.** The compositional grammar of the Apadana stairways, counted from the excavation record.

| Structural variable                                          | Value                                                           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Stairways carrying the identical programme</b>            | 2, mirrored — approach direction reversed, opposite sides shown |
| <b>Registers per wing</b>                                    | 3                                                               |
| <b>Susian guards, upper register</b>                         | 43                                                              |
| <b>Susian guards, middle register</b>                        | 28                                                              |
| <b>Susian guards, lower register</b>                         | 21                                                              |
| <b>Alternating Persian and Median dignitaries, per panel</b> | 32                                                              |
| <b>Precedence within each dignitary line</b>                 | Persian first, invariably                                       |

|                                         |                              |
|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>Tribute delegations per stairway</b> | 23                           |
| <b>Guards on central façade</b>         | 8, in antithetic groups of 4 |
| <b>Delegation separator</b>             | one tree between each        |
| <b>Panel border</b>                     | rows of 12-petalled rosettes |

(Source: Author's own elaboration, based on data from Schmidt, 1953.)

The units are modular in the strict sense: each tribute delegation is a self-contained cell — usher, leader, attendants, gifts — bounded by a tree and interchangeable in position with any other, and the same cell logic governs the guards, who differ from one another in nothing at all. Nothing in the composition is unique. Everything is an instance of a type. And the whole apparatus is then reflected: the two stairways carry the same event with the direction of approach reversed, so that one façade shows the opposite side of every person carved on the other (Schmidt, 1953). That is not decoration. It is a system with rules, executed twice.

Rank is encoded in the same breath, and encoded *in the bodies*. The dignitaries, ushers, and grooms of the top register are cut somewhat taller than the Susian guards who precede them, which Schmidt reads as an unambiguous marker of higher standing; and the beards run the same gradient, those of the dignitaries falling between the guards' and the stately beards of royalty, a distinction he suspects also bears on rank (Schmidt, 1953). Height, beard-length, register, and precedence within the line: four independent variables, all continuous, all measurable with a ruler, none of them requiring a syllable of Old Persian to read. Hierarchy is the one thing at Persepolis that is written in the stone rather than beside it.

Gombrich accounts for the mechanism, and the account matters because the alternative explanation — that this is simply what a ceremony looked like — is what the evidence forbids. Making precedes matching: the artist does not begin from the world but from a schema, an inherited formula, which he may afterwards hold up against observation and correct, the corrected version then passing into the stock available to whoever comes next (Gombrich, 1969). The Persepolitan mason did not look at thirty-two nobles and draw them. He held a formula for *noble*, and executed it thirty-two times.

Which is why the one place the system breaks is worth more than the ninety-nine where it holds. Among the dignitaries — and Schmidt registers the surprise plainly, welcoming the relief it brings from the surrounding formalism — most stand in unconventional postures: looking backward,

evidently meant to be chatting with one another, holding hands, touching one another's shoulders or equipment in gestures of comradeship, while a few in their midst keep the respectful attitude of those in front (Schmidt, 1953). The formula slips exactly once, and it slips at the only point in the programme where the subject is men talking to each other rather than men standing for something.

So the grammar is recoverable, and this is the section's finding. Modularity, hierarchy, precedence, reflection, rhythm — each of these is available to an observer trained in the analysis of visual systems, without a text, an informant, or a convention to reconstruct; what such an observer needs is a ruler and the discipline to count. In Peirce's terms these relations are diagrams: hypoicons which represent the relations among the parts of one thing by analogous relations among their own parts, and whose likeness to their object may consist in nothing but those relations (Peirce, 1958). Diagrams survive the culture that made them, because the relations are still in the stone. But notice the ceiling. The grammar establishes *that* the Achaemenids ranked their world with extraordinary precision; it does not deliver the content of a single rank. That a Persian precedes a Mede in every line is a fact of the stone. Why — whether precedence encodes ethnicity, office, seniority, favour, or something for which we have no word — the stone does not say, and Section 4 will show how little of that gap even the richest epigraphic corpus in the ancient world manages to close.

### From Motif to Meaning — Testing Inference Against the Record

#### Text and Image Partly Align: A High-Confidence Case

Two monumental stairways climb to the Apadana, north and east, and their façades carry the same event in mirror image: a procession of twenty-three tribute-bearing delegations of the empire, marshalled between files of guards, dignitaries, grooms, horses, and chariots (Schmidt, 1953). The ethnography is meticulous. Each delegation is set off from the next by a cypress tree and led by an usher, Persian and Median alternating; within each group the leader and his attendants wear a

costume differentiated to the seam — the domed hat and belted coat, the fluted tiara and flowing candys, the bashlyk with its muffler flaps, the conoid turban with its lateral braid — and each

carries gifts that no other delegation carries (Schmidt, 1953). Here, if anywhere, iconography should be able to work (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** A tribute delegation on the southern wall of the east stairway of the Apadana, Persepolis: bearers in differentiated dress carrying vessels, a folded garment, and a metal ingot.

*Everything in this photograph is available to the eye without a syllable of text: the count of the figures, the cut of their garments, the objects in their hands, the direction of the march. That is Panofsky's pre-iconographic level, and it costs nothing. Name these men — call them Syrians, or Assyrians, or Lydians — and the price rises at once, because the stone does not say. The identification arrives from somewhere else. What follows traces where from, and what the passage costs.*

**Source:** Carole Raddato, "Relief on the southern wall of the east stairway of the Apadana depicting Syrians who bring a pair of bowls, a bar of copper in the shape of an animal skin, and a garment, Persepolis, Iran," Wikimedia Commons, (CC BY-SA 2.0). Cf. Schmidt (1953).

The obvious place to look for the text is the stairway itself, and the stairway disappoints. Its façades hold three inscription panels; the central one was left blank, and the others carry a trilingual proclamation of Xerxes that runs: a great god is Ahuramazda, who created this earth, who made Xerxes king; I am Xerxes, great king, king of kings, king of the lands of many tribes; what was built here by me and what was built elsewhere by me, all this I built by the grace of Ahuramazda (Schmidt, 1953). Not one word of it

concerns the procession carved beneath it. The king names himself, his god, and his buildings; the twenty-three nations climbing his staircase go unmentioned. A text sits on the same stone as the image and says nothing about it — a caution worth registering before any celebration of Persepolis as a corpus that speaks.

The corroboration comes instead from twelve kilometres away, and it comes with labels. On the tomb façade at Naqš-e Rostam the king stands on a platform lifted by ranks of the peoples of his realm, and those throne-bearers are identified by inscriptions (Schmidt, 1953). That is the hinge of the entire test. The Apadana delegations bear no labels; their identifications rest on comparison with the labelled throne-bearers of the tomb reliefs (Schmidt, 1953). The names we attach to the men on the staircase are therefore borrowed names — transferred from a lettered monument to an unlettered one across a dozen kilometres of plain, on the strength of shared costume.

What those labelled figures are, the earlier analysis has already settled: Root's throne-bearers are not decorative struts but the empire's lands made flesh, each nation embodied in a man who takes the platform's weight on his hands (Root, 1979). The inscriptions above them name territories, then, and not persons — which is

precisely why they can be lent to the staircase at all. A label reading “Mede” transfers to any figure in Median dress; a label reading a man’s name would transfer to no one.

Then comes the rarest thing in this corpus, and perhaps in any. Darius’s own inscription on that tomb turns and points at the sculpture. If now you shall think, “How many are the countries Confidence does not track the sophistication of the iconographic argument; it tracks the distance,

which King Darius held?” — look at the sculptures of those who bear the throne; then shall you know (Wiesehöfer, 2001). The text does not merely coexist with the image. It instructs the viewer to read the image, and tells him what the image counts. No palaeoart corpus in a non-literate context will ever hand an interpreter a sentence like that.

measured in transfers, between a figure and the nearest inscription that names it.

**Table 6.** The corroboration gradient within a single Achaemenid relief programme.

| Figure Group                                                                 | Location                          | Textual Corroboration                             | Panofsky Level Secured   | Interpretive Confidence | Source                               |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Throne-bearers                                                               | Naqš-e Rostam, royal tomb façade  | Direct — identified by accompanying inscriptions  | Iconographic             | High                    | Schmidt (1953); Cf. Root (1979)      |
| Delegations matching labelled throne-bearers (Medes, Susians, Babylonians)   | Apadana, east and north stairways | Indirect — one transfer, by costume comparison    | Iconographic             | Moderate                | Schmidt (1953)                       |
| Delegations absent from the tomb reliefs (Armenians?, Arians?, Arachosians?) | Apadana, east and north stairways | None — tentatively identified                     | Iconographic (unsecured) | Low                     | Schmidt (1953)                       |
| The programme as a whole                                                     | Apadana and Naqš-e Rostam         | Direct — DNA directs the viewer to the sculptures | Iconological             | High                    | Wiesehöfer (2001); Cf. Briant (2002) |

The gradient in that table is not this paper’s invention; it is Schmidt’s, and he marked it in his own catalogue. Delegation 1 is *The Medes*. Delegation 2, *The Susians*. Delegation 5, *The Babylonians*. But Delegation 3 is *The Armenians?*, Delegation 4 *The Arians?*, Delegation 7 *The Arachosians?* — and the question marks are Schmidt’s own. Nations not recognizable in, or not represented among, the tomb reliefs had been only tentatively identified (Schmidt, 1953). The punctuation is the finding. Within a single frieze, carved by one workshop in one campaign, interpretive confidence rises and falls exactly with proximity to an inscription — and Schmidt, working before any of this paper’s theoretical apparatus existed, encoded that fact in a typographical mark.

At the iconological level the reading holds, and holds firmly. The scene declares the empire unified under the king: differentiated peoples, each bringing what its land is known for, converging on a single throne. Darius’s text corroborates it directly — the sculptures are offered as the count of his countries — and the same ideology is legible across the wider building programme, in which Susa and Persepolis rose as allegories of a new and inclusive imperial world view (Briant, 2002). The gifts themselves carry the argument: what each delegation brings is what its region produces, so that the procession is a map of the realm rendered in objects (Wiesehöfer, 2001). So Panofsky passes. All three levels can be climbed at Persepolis, and the summit is secure.

But notice precisely why. Not because the iconographic method proved robust; not because the reading was elegant, coherent, or learned. It passed because a king left a sentence telling us what his sculpture meant, and because a scribe cut identifying labels above the figures on a cliff face. Strip those two textual warrants away and the entire structure — the names, the count, the meaning — reverts to conjecture. That is the control case doing its work.

Three tests, then, and a single variable running through them. At the Apadana a text speaks and ratifies what the image shows: the reading holds. At Pasargadae a text stands immediately beside the image and names its patron — yet volunteers nothing about what the figure is or means; identity is fixed, significance is not. At the griffin no contemporaneous text speaks at all, and meaning must be imported from cultures whose connection to the carver is itself a hypothesis. What changes across the three is not the calibre of the iconographic argument, which can be mounted with equal erudition in every case. What changes is the text. The first case has been examined. The second follows.

### **Text is Silent: The Low-Confidence Case of the Four-Winged Genius**

Fifty kilometres north of the terrace, at Cyrus's first capital, a single figure survives on the doorjamb of the north-eastern entrance to the gatehouse the excavators called Gate R. He is bearded, faces left toward the palace complex, and carries four wings. He stands 2.90 metres tall. His robe is Elamite, bordered with Ionian rosettes; his crown is an Egyptianizing hemhem; his stylistic register includes Neo-Babylonian elements — and the whole is composed within the Assyrian tradition of the winged genius (Ghirshman, 1964). The winged bulls that once flanked him are gone, reduced to fragments; he is what remains of the gate. The excavation record establishes all of this — the architecture, the setting, the sequence — and supplies not one syllable about what the figure is (Levine & Stronach, 1980).

Now the crucial fact, and the reason this figure belongs in a paper about textual corroboration. There *was* a text. Directly above the relief, cut into the same stone, stood a trilingual inscription in Old Persian, Elamite, and Akkadian: *I, Cyrus, the King, an Achaemenid* (Ghirshman, 1964). Trilingual, royal, contemporaneous, and in physical contact with the image — every property that made the Apadana case tractable. By the criteria of Section

4.1 this ought to be the strongest reading in the corpus.

It is the weakest. Read the sentence again and notice what it withholds. It names a king. It does not name the figure. It does not say what he is, what he does, what he guards, or what he means. Set beside Darius's *look at the sculptures of those who bear the throne*, which turns and points at its own relief, CMa points at nothing; it is a signature, not a caption.

Godard did not read it that way. Of this same doorjamb he wrote that the inscription — cuneiform, Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian, and by his day already vanished — identified the personage, and he concluded: "Obviously it can only be a portrait of Cyrus" (Godard, 1965, p. 96). The word to weigh there is *obviously*. A scholar of the first rank, standing before a text and an image on one stone, took proximity for reference and declared the matter closed. Ghirshman, writing a year earlier and looking at the same jamb, saw no portrait at all but a four-winged genius in Elamite dress, crowned in the manner of Egyptian Horuses (Ghirshman, 1964). Two eminent readings, one monument, one inscription — and flat contradiction.

The fact that undoes the portrait sits inside Godard's own account. Describing the building by which one entered the royal park, he notes that the inscription could once be read on it *repeated several times* (Godard, 1965). A text cut more than once across a single gatehouse is not naming a figure that occurs once. It is a foundation formula — the builder's signature, distributed across his building — and its appearance above the genius is a fact of architecture, not of reference. Godard had the evidence in hand and recorded it faithfully; he simply did not turn it against his own conclusion. His error was not ignorance. It was structural: he mistook adjacency for reference. The stone put a name near an image, and the name was read as belonging to it.

So the meaning stays open, and the excavation record — which fixes the architecture, the setting, and the sequence in full — adjudicates nothing (Levine & Stronach, 1980). What survives is a figure assembled from an Elamite robe, an Egyptianizing crown, and an Assyrian formal tradition (Ghirshman, 1964): a deliberate convergence of the visual languages of lands Cyrus had lately taken. That much the stone shows. Why those languages, in that combination, on that jamb — the stone does not say, and no text that survives will say it either.

The variable that separates them is not the presence of an inscription — both have one, trilingual and royal — but whether the inscription performs reference or merely occupies adjacent stone.

**Table 7.** Two Achaemenid figures compared by the character of their accompanying text.

| Variable                             | Apadana procession (4.1)                         | Four-winged figure, Gate R (4.2)                          |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Contemporaneous text on the monument | Yes — trilingual proclamation of Xerxes          | Yes — CMA, trilingual, directly above the figure          |
| Text names the figure                | No                                               | No — names the patron                                     |
| Text explains the figure             | No                                               | No                                                        |
| Text directs the viewer to the image | No (but DNa does, at Naqš-e Rostam)              | No                                                        |
| Independent corroboration available  | Yes — labelled throne-bearers, one transfer away | None — same text repeated across the building             |
| Highest Panofsky level secured       | Iconological                                     | Pre-iconographic                                          |
| Interpretive confidence              | High                                             | Low                                                       |
| Source                               | Schmidt (1953); Wiesehöfer (2001)                | Ghirshman (1964); Godard (1965); Levine & Stronach (1980) |

And then the text withdrew. Travellers of the early nineteenth century still saw it and drew it; it remained legible in 1861, and within fifteen years it was gone (Ghirshman, 1964). Everything the modern argument rests on descends from the hands of men who stood at that jamb while the

writing was still there (Figure 7). Whether it was prised away, quarried, or simply weathered off is not recorded — the loss is itself an open question, and a reminder that the textual anchors this paper depends upon are perishable in a way the rock is not.

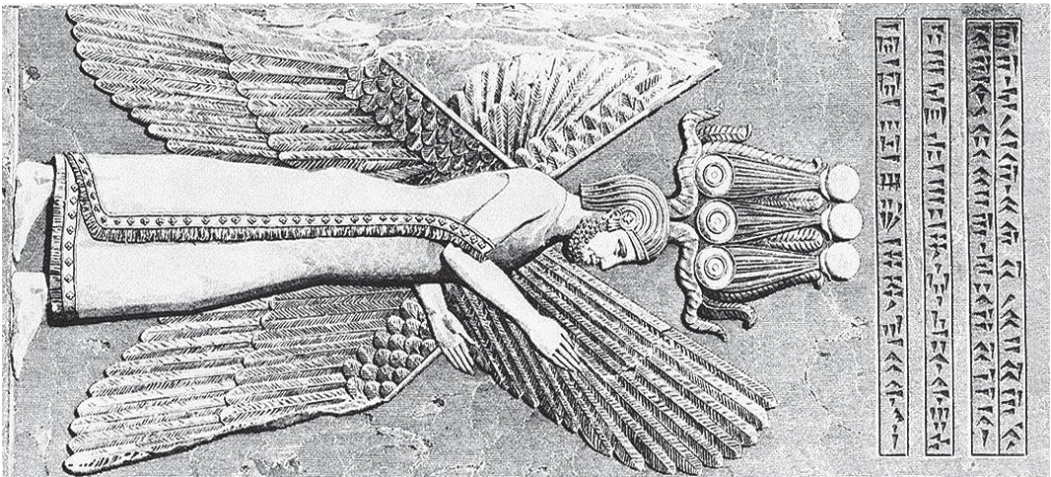


**Figure 7.** The four-winged figure of Gate R at Pasargadae, drawn by Charles Texier during his Persian expedition of 1839–40, when the trilingual inscription still stood above the relief.

*The drawing is not an illustration here; it is testimony. A nineteenth-century architect with a pencil is the reason a twentieth-century debate could occur at all — and the reason it could not be settled. Texier recorded what he saw: the wings, the robe, the crown, and a text that no longer exists to be re-read, re-collated, or re-*  
**Source:** Charles Texier, “Winged genius relief (Pasargadae),” from *Description de l’Arménie, la Perse et la Mésopotamie* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1842–1852), Wikimedia Commons, (public domain:

*translated by anyone applying a method more careful than his. The corroborating document survives only as a copy of a copy. Whatever confidence the modern reader places in CMA is confidence placed, at one remove, in the accuracy of draughtsmen.*

Texier, 1802–1871). Cf. Ghirshman (1964); Godard (1965).

Root’s framework is what makes the silence intolerable rather than merely inconvenient.

Achaemenid art, he argues, was planned deliberately to create a certain impression; it was not misunderstanding, nor the eclecticism of a declining civilization, that led to the reworking of prototypes, but a degree of deliberateness seldom credited by modern scholarship to ancient planners (Root, 1979). If that is right — and Section 2.4 showed it operating motif by motif — then this figure meant something exact. Someone chose four wings rather than two, an Egyptian crown rather than an Assyrian horned cap, an Elamite robe rather than a Persian *candys*, and chose each for a reason the planners could have stated in a sentence. The meaning existed. It simply was not written down.

That is the finding, and it is the opposite of what the Apadana suggested. Confidence did not collapse here because the text was absent; the text was present, royal, trilingual, and touching the image. It collapsed because the text was the wrong *kind* — a label where an exegesis was needed. Presence of writing is not corroboration. Only writing that refers is corroboration, and the difference between the two is the difference between Darius's imperative to *look at the*

*sculptures* and Cyrus's bare *I am Cyrus*. One instructs the reader how to read an image. The other merely shares its wall.

### Comparative Analogy Substitutes for Text: The Lowest-Confidence Case

The griffin is a composite: the body of a lion, the head and wings of an eagle, the ears of a horse (Feizi Moghaddam et al., 2023). At Persepolis it is everywhere. It crowns columns as a colossal double-protome, its great upturned ears cradling the cedar ceiling-beams; it is carved on palace walls; it decorates the ornate vessel an Armenian delegate carries up the Apadana stair; it circles seals, rhyta, coins, and gold armbands (Feizi Moghaddam et al., 2023) (Figure 8). The motif descends from a deep regional tradition of hybrid beings — Elam had long peopled its art with bull-men grasping the date-palm, horned dragons, fish-men drawn from Assyrian models (Potts, 1999) — and by the fourteenth century BCE the griffin proper was current in Mesopotamia, engraved on cylinder seals in middle Assyria (Feizi Moghaddam et al., 2023).



**Figure 8.** A double-griffin capital from Persepolis, locally called a *homa*. The upturned ears carried the timber ceiling-beams; the form is structural before it is symbolic.

*Here is the motif at the height of its Achaemenid articulation: naturalistic musculature, delicate*

*feathering, a rhythm of parallel lines running through mane and wing. Everything the eye registers is*

measurable — proportion, technique, the load-bearing geometry of the ears. What the beast signified to the mason who cut it is nowhere in the stone, and no inscription on this terrace addresses it. The griffin is the third test case precisely because it is the ordinary case: an image without a caption, which is the condition of nearly all rock art everywhere.

**Source:** Darafsh Kaviyani, “Homa Persepolis Iran,” Wikimedia Commons, (CC BY-SA 3.0). Cf. Feizi Moghaddam et al. (2023).

So the meaning must be imported. The standard move — and it is a careful, learned, entirely respectable move — is comparative analogy: trace the motif across cultures and centuries, and let the pattern of associations yield the sense. Feizi Moghaddam and colleagues execute it with Form persists exactly where it is least diagnostic — line and composition, which are near-universal in figurative art — and fractures precisely where the artist’s trained hand shows itself. The bottom

unusual rigour, assembling twenty-one Achaemenid and twenty-one Seljuk griffins, drawing each in line, and tabulating structure, accompanying motifs, symbolism, and visual variables (Feizi Moghaddam et al., 2023). Their conclusion is that the Seljuk griffin descends from the Achaemenid one, and that the two share a symbolic core: royal essence, wealth and power, guardianship of treasure and palace, protector of the tree of life, annuler of magic (Feizi Moghaddam et al., 2023). Fifteen centuries, a change of religion, a change of language, a change of dynasty — and the meaning, on this account, survives intact. Their own data say otherwise. Read the numbers rather than the conclusion (Table 8).

row is decisive: within Achaemenid art alone, one form carries two contradictory meanings.

**Table 8.** Visual and semantic variables of the griffin across the Achaemenid and Seljuk corpora.

| Variable                                     | Achaemenid (n = 21)                                       | Seljuk (n = 21)                              | Continuity    |
|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|---------------|
| <b>Dominant line</b>                         | Curved: 100%                                              | Curved: 100%                                 | Total         |
| <b>Composition</b>                           | Asymmetric: 100%                                          | Asymmetric: 100%                             | Total         |
| <b>Motif frame:<br/>horizontal rectangle</b> | 38%                                                       | 52%                                          | Partial       |
| <b>Dominant rhythm:<br/>progressive</b>      | 52%                                                       | 19%                                          | Broken        |
| <b>Dominant rhythm:<br/>none</b>             | 0%                                                        | 52%                                          | Broken        |
| <b>Rendering</b>                             | Naturalistic; lion<br>musculature shown                   | Ornamental, arabesque;<br>musculature absent | Broken        |
| <b>Semantic valence</b>                      | Protective <i>and</i> demonic<br>(slain by the hero-king) | Positive only                                | Contradictory |

(Source: Author’s own elaboration, based on data from Feizi Moghaddam et al., 2023.)

Two rows dismantle the inference. First, rhythm: the Achaemenid griffin is governed by rhythm in nearly every instance, progressive or regular, because the naturalistic method required the sculptor to articulate each feather in sequence; the Seljuk griffin, in more than half the corpus, has *no rhythm at all* (Feizi Moghaddam et al., 2023). The variables that hold constant — curved line, asymmetric composition — hold constant at 100% in both corpora, which is to say they discriminate nothing; nearly every figurative animal ever drawn is curved and asymmetric. Continuity survives only in the variables incapable of carrying evidence.

Second, and fatally: the Achaemenid griffin is not univocal. On the wall of the Hundred-Column Hall and on seals in the British Museum, the hero-

king drives a dagger into the griffin’s skull — the creature is the *evil* in a confrontation of good and evil (Feizi Moghaddam et al., 2023). The same beast that guards the tree of life on one object is butchered as a demon on another, within one dynasty, one century, one imperial workshop. If the meaning of this form was unstable across a single palace, the proposition that it travelled unchanged across fifteen hundred years is not conservative — it is unsupportable.

Gombrich supplies the mechanism, and the mechanism is not semantic. His whole argument reduces, by his own formula, to the proposition that *making comes before matching*: the artist begins not from the world but from a schema, an inherited formula, which he then adjusts (Gombrich, 1969). Discovery of appearances, he

insists, owed less to careful observation of nature than to the invention of pictorial effects (Gombrich, 1969). What passes from Persepolis to a Seljuk tile is therefore best understood as a *visual module* — a transmissible unit of form, a solved drawing-problem, complete with its beak, its wing-curve, and its four-legged stance. The Seljuk craftsman inherited the module because it worked, and because he had been taught it. That he also inherited the theology of the men who first cut it does not follow, and nothing in the module records it. A schema is a formula for making, not a container for meaning.

Bednarik supplies the verdict, and it is uncompromising. He refutes the validity of ethnographic analogy as a tool of rock art interpretation outright, rejecting the claim that arts exhibiting apparently similar characteristics must relate to similar meanings as “complete nonsense” for which he perceives no logical, scientific, or epistemic justification (Bednarik, 2011). He allows exactly one exception, and it is the one that matters here: if a historical connection is possible, that is a different matter — there is no reason why one form of art should not have developed into another (Bednarik, 2011). The Achaemenid-to-Seljuk case sits precisely on that fault line. Continuity of *territory* is real; the objects were made in the same lands. Continuity of *culture* — the factor Bednarik requires as the link — spans a conquest, a conversion, and a millennium and a half.

And Bednarik has already described what happens across such a gap. Later peoples encountering the durable art of earlier ones adopt aspects of its motif range into their own art, or adapt them to fit their own interpretations (Bednarik, 2011). Section 2.5 watched this happen on Persepolitan stone: the Sasanians came back to Achaemenid surfaces and made them mean what Sasanians needed them to mean. Transmission of form is a fact. Transmission of meaning is a hypothesis that the transmission of form does nothing to support — and Feizi Moghaddam and colleagues, to their credit, concede the point in their closing sentence, granting that the motif underwent many changes across history and that societies depicted it *in response to their own needs* (Feizi Moghaddam et al., 2023). The concession dissolves the thesis. If each society redrew the griffin to serve its own demands, then the Seljuk griffin is evidence of Seljuk beliefs, and evidence of nothing whatever about what a Persepolitan mason thought he was carving.

This is the floor of the spectrum. Note carefully what has *not* been alleged. The comparative study

is meticulous; its authors drew every motif by hand, counted every variable, and reported the data that undercut them. Bednarik’s charge is not incompetence but category error: the identification of iconographic meaning by an observer who has no access to the iconographic conventions of the culture in question, producing hypotheses that cannot be confirmed or refuted by any scientifically acceptable procedure (Bednarik, 2011). The griffin readings are unfalsifiable. They are also, as he concedes with some grace, valuable — as folklore, as a record of how we perceive, as an enrichment of our own culture — provided they are not offered as science (Bednarik, 2011). Three cases, then, and one variable. The Apadana had a text that pointed. Pasargadae had a text that merely sat there. The griffin has no text at all, and what fills the vacancy is us.

### Closing Semiotic Framework

What the control case exposes, across its three stations, is a hierarchy of interpretive warrants in which material fact and textual corroboration occupy the summit, formal-compositional analysis holds a secure middle ground — for the Persepolitan programme is, at the level of visual order, a modular system of ranked and repeated motifs, its grammar legible without a syllable of text (Gombrich, 1969) — and comparative analogy, however erudite, anchors the floor. That hierarchy is not a moral about scholarly virtue. It is a structural fact about signs, and Peirce named its terms a century ago.

His most fundamental division of signs is into icons, indices, and symbols, and he distinguishes them by a single elegant test: what would survive if something were taken away (Peirce, 1958). An icon retains the character that makes it significant *even though its object had no existence* — a pencil streak stands for a geometrical line whether or not any line exists. An index would lose that character at once if its object were removed, but not if there were no interpretant: a piece of mould with a bullet-hole in it signifies a shot, because without the shot there would have been no hole — and the hole is there whether or not anybody has the sense to attribute it to a shot. A symbol, by contrast, would lose the character that renders it a sign *if there were no interpretant*; it signifies only by virtue of being understood to signify (Peirce, 1958).

Lay the three test cases against that test and the paper’s findings fall into place with a click.

The scarped bedrock of Section 2.1 is an index. The chisel-marks on the Kuh-e Rahmat, the gypsum ground beneath the polychromy, the mortarless joint locked with lead — each is a bullet-hole. Without the act of cutting there would be no cut; and the cut is there whether or not anyone reads it. This is why material analysis sat at the summit of the spectrum: the index is the one sign-relation that does not require an interpreting mind to exist, and Ridolfi’s fluorescence spectrometer is precisely an instrument for reading indices.

The griffin of Section 4.3 is an icon — and Peirce, in a phrase that could have been written for this paper, notes that any material image, in itself, *without legend or label*, may be called a hypoicon (Peirce, 1958). The griffin resembles a lion, an eagle, a horse. That resemblance is available to any observer of any century, which is exactly why it is worthless as evidence of meaning: an icon would signify identically if no griffin had ever existed, and it certainly signifies identically whether the Achaemenid mason meant a guardian or a demon. And the two inscriptions differ not in degree but in kind. Peirce is explicit that icons and indices assert nothing: an index, if rendered as a sentence, must be in the imperative or exclamatory mood — *See there!* or *Look out!* — whereas symbols are by The decisive column is the fourth: interpretive confidence tracks not the ingenuity of the reading

nature in the declarative (Peirce, 1958). *Look at the sculptures of those who bear the throne.* Darius’s sentence is an imperative. It is a pointing finger, dynamically connected to the relief it indicates, and Peirce’s own example is exactly this: if A says “there is a fire,” B asks “where?”, and A is forced to resort to an index — he points, and his finger is dynamically connected with the fire (Peirce, 1958). DNa is that finger. *I am Cyrus, an Achaemenid* is a declarative symbol that points at nothing whatever. The Apadana had an index in its textual record. Pasargadae had only a symbol. That is the whole difference, and it explains why a longer, richer, more royal inscription secured less. Chandler’s account of the model supplies the corollary that makes this operational: each sign-relation demands a different order of knowledge from its interpreter. To read a symbol one needs knowledge of the convention or rule linking sign to object; to read an icon, perceptual knowledge of the resemblance; to read an index, knowledge of the causal or existential connection (Chandler, 2025). Perceptual knowledge is universal. Causal knowledge is recoverable by instrument. Conventional knowledge is recoverable *only from the culture that held the convention* — and when that culture is gone and unlettered, it is not recoverable at all (Table 9).

but the kind of knowledge the sign-relation demands, and whether that knowledge survives.

**Table 9.** The paper’s three test cases resolved into Peircean sign-relations.

| Object of interpretation                        | Sign-relation             | What secures the relation        | Knowledge required to read it      | Survives the culture?               | Confidence |
|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------|
| Chisel-work, ground layers, polychromy          | Index                     | Physical causation               | Causal/existential connection      | Yes — instrumentally recoverable    | High       |
| Compositional order: rank, repetition, symmetry | Icon (diagram)            | Relations among parts            | Perceptual                         | Yes                                 | High       |
| Apadana figures as men bearing goods            | Icon (image)              | Resemblance                      | Perceptual                         | Yes                                 | High       |
| Those figures as Medes, Susians, Babylonians    | Symbol                    | Convention                       | The convention itself              | Only via the tomb labels            | Moderate   |
| DNa: <i>look at the sculptures</i>              | Index (imperative mood)   | Existential pointing             | Recognition of the act of pointing | Yes — the text survives             | High       |
| CMA: <i>I am Cyrus</i>                          | Symbol (declarative mood) | Convention — refers to no figure | The convention itself              | Text lost; refers to nothing anyway | Low        |

| Griffin as royal essence, guardian of treasure | Symbol | Convention — irrecoverable | The convention itself | No | Lowest |
|------------------------------------------------|--------|----------------------------|-----------------------|----|--------|
|------------------------------------------------|--------|----------------------------|-----------------------|----|--------|

(Source: Author's own elaboration, based on Peirce (1958) and Chandler (2025); data from Sections 4.1–4.3.)

Eco fixes the boundary with a precision that should be nailed above every palaeoart desk. Everything can be understood as a sign *if and only if there exists a convention which allows it to stand for something else* (Eco, 1976). The condition is not rhetorical. Where the convention is gone, the symbolic reading has no ground — not a weak ground, no ground. And Eco supplies the distinction that separates a responsible claim from an irresponsible one: it is one thing to say that an object *essentialiter* is something, and quite another to say that it can be seen *sub ratione* of that something (Eco, 1976). The griffin literature says the griffin *is* a guardian of the tree of life. What the evidence licenses is that it *can be seen as* one. The two sentences differ by the entire width of this paper's argument.

Eco also anticipates the reflexive trap. The semiotic approach, he warns, is ruled by a sort of indeterminacy principle, and the semiotician's work resembles not the exploration of a sea, where the wake vanishes behind the ship, but the exploration of a forest, where cart-trails and footprints modify the landscape being described, so that the explorer's account must reckon with the ecological variations he has himself produced (Eco, 1976). Section 4.3 watched that forest being trodden: fifteen centuries of readers redrew the griffin, and the readings entered the record as though they had been found there. Section 2.5 watched Herzfeld name the Persepolis graffiti with confidence and Callieri decline to. Interpretation leaves footprints, and the discipline then mistakes them for evidence.

Cassirer supplies the frame that holds all of this together — and the standard by which it should be judged. Read through his lens, the entire Achaemenid programme — the ranked delegations, the iterated gate guardians, the botanical friezes repeated from Susa to Persepolis — constitutes a visual identity system: a coordinated repertoire of forms, deployed across

The final column is the one that matters for a discipline working without texts: a warrant is transferable to non-literate corpora only if the knowledge it demands does not die with the society that held it.

multiple media and sites, to project a single, stable image of imperial order. That system is exactly what Briant found in the capitals, which rose as allegories of a new and inclusive imperial world view (Briant, 2002), and what Canepa found in the ritual topography that bound relief, place, and rite into one whole (Canepa, 2014). But Cassirer's decisive claim is epistemological, not descriptive. What distinguishes science from the other forms of cultural life, he argues, is not that it requires no mediation of signs and symbols and confronts the unveiled truth of things in themselves, but that — differently and more profoundly than the other forms — *it knows that the symbols it employs are symbols and comprehends them as such* (Cassirer, 1953).

There is the criterion, and the paper's closing finding follows from it directly. Rock art research cannot escape symbols; no discipline can. What it can do is know which of its own signs are symbols and which are indices — which of its claims rest on a convention it cannot recover, and which rest on a bullet-hole that would be there whether anyone read it or not. Persepolis, uniquely, lets us check. And the verdict of the check is unambiguous: interpretive confidence tracks degree of corroboration, not the internal elegance or coherence of the iconological narrative.

## Implications for Palaeoart Interpretation Generally

### A Proposed "Confidence Spectrum"

The control case has done its work; what remains is to say what it calibrates. Not a hierarchy — hierarchies imply that the lower rungs are defective, and they are not. A spectrum: a set of interpretive warrants ranked by the kind of evidence each requires, and by whether that evidence can survive the culture that produced it (Table 10).

**Table 10.** The confidence spectrum, derived from the Persepolis control case.

| Tier            | Interpretive warrant                                       | Peircean basis                 | Persepolis instance                                                                                                      | Transferable to textless corpora?                  |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Higher</b>   | Material and technical analysis                            | Index                          | Non-destructive XRF fixing the gypsum-to-fluorapatite sequence (Ridolfi et al., 2019)                                    | Fully                                              |
| <b>Higher</b>   | Formal and compositional analysis                          | Icon (diagram)                 | The modular order of rank, repetition, symmetry (Gombrich, 1969)                                                         | Fully                                              |
| <b>Higher</b>   | Textually corroborated iconology                           | Symbol secured by index        | Apadana delegations named via the labelled throne-bearers; DNA pointing at the relief (Schmidt, 1953; Wiesehöfer, 2001)  | Not at all — the warrant <i>is</i> the text        |
| <b>Moderate</b> | Socio-historical contextualisation of structured elite art | Symbol, externally constrained | The winged disc, the atlas pose, the deliberate programme (Root, 1979); the capitals as imperial allegory (Briant, 2002) | Only where an independent historical record exists |
| <b>Lower</b>    | Iconology by comparative or cross-cultural analogy         | Symbol, unconstrained          | The griffin traced to Seljuk art (Feizi Moghaddam et al., 2023)                                                          | Formally, yes — but it yields nothing              |

(Source: Author's own elaboration, synthesising Sections 2.1–4.4.)

Read the first two rows and the third together, because their asymmetry is the finding. Material analysis and formal analysis transfer *completely* to a textless corpus: the chisel-mark is an index whether or not anyone survives to read it, and the diagram of a composition is an icon available to any eye. They cost the discipline nothing and they are the two warrants palaeoart already possesses in full. Textually corroborated iconology, the summit of the spectrum, transfers *not at all* — its warrant is precisely the thing a non-literate corpus lacks by definition. The top of the ladder is unreachable from below. That is not a counsel of despair; it is a specification, and specifications are useful.

The moderate tier is where the argument earns its keep, because it is the tier most often mistaken for the higher one. Root's demonstration that the Achaemenids selected and adapted their models deliberately, and Briant's reading of the capitals as allegories of imperial order, are not textual corroborations of any single motif; no inscription says *the winged disc means investiture*. They are constraints imposed from outside the image — an independent historical record, an archive, a documented political geography — that narrow the field of admissible readings without fixing

any one of them. Palaeoart can sometimes reach this tier: stratigraphy, settlement data, faunal remains, and dating all constrain interpretation from outside the panel. But the tier remains moderate for a reason that Persepolis makes visible: context tells you what a motif *could* have meant to people so situated. It does not tell you what it *did* mean, and Section 4.2 showed the gap — the four-winged genius sits inside the richest historical context any rock art image will ever enjoy, and its meaning is still contested.

The floor requires the most care, because the temptation is to read it as an indictment. It is not. Comparative analogy is *formally* transferable — one may always line up two corpora and enumerate resemblances, and Feizi Moghaddam and colleagues did so with exemplary rigour. The objection is to what the operation yields. Bednarik's taphonomic principle states the rule with a precision that should govern this entire tier: any physical characteristic of a petroglyph that may conceivably assist its longevity must not be treated as culturally significant (Bednarik, 1994). Generalise it, as the griffin case demands. Any characteristic of a motif that may conceivably arise from something other than shared meaning — from the mechanics of drawing, from the

constraints of the medium, from the universals of the human visual system — must not be treated as evidence of shared meaning. Curved line at 100%; asymmetric composition at 100%. Those are not cultural continuities. They are the taphonomy of form.

The parallel with Bednarik's own domain is exact, and worth stating plainly. He observes that the oldest surviving open-air paintings across the world are consistently a particular dark red, and that this is almost certainly a taphonomic artefact — haematite is simply the most stable iron mineral, and in bichrome traditions the white has usually vanished entirely, leaving the ochre alone and a false "style" behind (Bednarik, 1994). Persepolis suffered the same theft, and we can prove it: Nagel documents that much of the evidence for Persepolitan polychromy was stripped away, unrecorded, by the very squeeze-and-mould-making campaigns that were meant to preserve it (Nagel, 2020). Ridolfi's spectrometer recovered the ground layers because they were mineral and bonded; the colour above them is largely gone (Ridolfi et al., 2019). A scholar who reasoned from the *surviving* surfaces of Persepolis to Achaemenid chromatic taste would be reasoning from a taphonomic remnant — and would never know it, because at Persepolis, as everywhere, the record does not announce what it has lost.

Hence the spectrum's governing principle, which is neither a method nor a rule but a question an interpreter can ask of any claim: *what would have to survive for this to be checkable, and did it?* For a claim about technique, the answer is the worked surface, and it survives. For a claim about composition, the answer is the arrangement, and it survives. For a claim about what a motif meant, the answer is the convention — and conventions are the most perishable things human beings make. Persepolis is the one site where enough of the convention was written down that we can watch the answer change from *yes* to *no* across a single afternoon's walk, from the Apadana stair to the gate at Pasargadae.

### Cautious Extrapolation to Textless Rock Art

An objection presents itself here, and it is the strongest one available: Persepolis is an imperial, literate, monumental, bureaucratically archived anomaly. What could it possibly license us to say about a panel of pecked marks on a sandstone shelter?

The answer begins with Bednarik's own line. He locates the epistemological impediment to archaeological claims of knowledge precisely, and

his formulation is worth reading with care: it is universal to all periods *up to the introduction of extensive written records* (Bednarik, 2016). The qualifier is not incidental. It concedes — indeed it asserts — that written records mark a boundary across which the impediment does not run. This paper has simply walked to the far side of that boundary and looked back. Persepolis is not offered as rock art's typical case; it is offered as the place where one can stand *outside* the impediment and observe its edge. The line is Bednarik's. The vantage is new.

And the discipline already has one such vantage, which is why the manoeuvre should feel familiar. Bednarik recounts what remains the only blind test ever conducted of the proposition that a cultural outsider can determine what rock art depicts. Macintosh, a distinguished professor of anatomy, recorded and identified the painted biomorphs of Beswick Cave; more than two decades later, discovering that a highly initiated Djauan man, Lamderod, still held the authentic meanings, he took him to the site and asked him to explain all eighty-one figures — testing his own published determinations against the only key that existed. He had failed to diagnose ninety per cent of them. Figures he read as male were female; a "female human" was a water lizard, a "kangaroo" a stone-country possum, a "marsupial head" a Rainbow Serpent; and images carried more than one meaning, a sacred reading withheld from those not entitled to it. Macintosh concluded that the mental code of the artists' schematisation cannot be cracked without keys provided by highly initiated informants (Bednarik, 2016).

Ten per cent is a random result, and the number should be set beside a scene from Section 4.2. Godard stood before the four-winged figure at Gate R, possessing the inscription, correctly transcribed, and the finest eye of his generation, and wrote that obviously it can only be a portrait of Cyrus (Godard, 1965). He was wrong, and the thing that proved him wrong was not a superior argument but an external key — a text repeated across the gatehouse on members bearing no figure at all, which he had himself recorded (Godard, 1965). Two experts, two continents, two millennia of subject matter, one structure: a trained outsider reads an image with confidence; an independent key becomes available; the reading fails. Lamderod was Macintosh's key. The epigraphic record is ours. Persepolis, in this precise sense, is the second blind test the discipline has ever had — and the first one that

did not require the culture in question to have survived.

What extrapolates, then, is not a result but a ratio. Nothing at Persepolis tells anyone what a Palaeolithic sign means; the control case yields no content whatever about non-literate corpora, and any reader expecting otherwise has misunderstood the exercise. What it yields is the *relation* between warrant and reliability, measured under conditions where reliability could be checked. Material analysis held. Formal analysis held. Iconology held exactly as far as its textual anchor reached and not one metre further — and where the anchor was a label rather than a pointer, it did not hold at all. That relation was not stipulated in advance; it was observed. And a relation observed in the one corpus where checking is possible is the only kind of evidence a discipline can have about corpora where checking is impossible.

From which follows the methodological humility the case recommends — not as an attitude, but as an allocation of effort. Bednarik, borrowing Searle's distinction, notes that an object has *brute facts* — it is made partly of wood, partly of metal — and observer-relative properties: its being a screwdriver exists only because someone represents it as such, and there is no evidence that this representation is shared between the ancient maker and the modern interpreter (Bednarik, 2016). The distinction is Peirce's trichotomy in another vocabulary, and it maps onto the spectrum exactly. Brute facts are indices; they survive their makers. Institutional facts are symbols; they die with the convention that constituted them. A discipline that spends its energies on the recoverable class is not settling for less. It is working on the part of the record that is actually there.

Persepolis also supplies, unexpectedly, a piece of practical discipline — and the discipline turns out to be one rock art research has already invented. Since Macintosh's disclosure was published in 1977, Australian rock art researchers have adopted the convention of always placing their "determinations" of motif meanings in quotation marks, a practice their colleagues elsewhere have not espoused (Bednarik, 2016). Schmidt reached the same solution independently, and twenty-four years earlier, with a different mark: *The Medes, The Susians, The Babylonians* — but *The Armenians?, The Arians?, The Arachosians?* (Schmidt, 1953). Where the tomb inscriptions reached, he wrote a full stop; where they did not, he wrote a question mark. Two disciplines, working in ignorance of

one another, arrived at the same instrument: a typographical mark that keeps the distance between what is corroborated and what is surmised visible on every page. It is a small thing. It is also, as far as this study can determine, the only device the humanities have ever devised that makes epistemic status legible at a glance.

None of which forecloses meaning. Bednarik himself declines that conclusion: nothing in his critique implies that the correct meaning of rock art is necessarily inaccessible and will always remain so — but access is contingent on the destruction of false interpretations, which are the first major impediment to it (Bednarik, 2016). Persepolis contributes to that destruction from an unexpected quarter. It does not tell us what the griffin meant. It demonstrates, in a case where the answer can be checked, exactly which kinds of claim about the griffin were never checkable in the first place — and clearing those away is, on Bednarik's own account, the precondition for anything better.

### A Calibration Exercise, Not a Universal Method

It should now be said plainly what this study is not. It is not a method. Nothing in it was invented. Panofsky's three levels were in place by 1939; Peirce's trichotomy by the turn of the previous century; Eco's thresholds by 1976; Bednarik's critique of ethnographic analogy has been available in this journal's orbit for three decades. The apparatus was already assembled and already public. What was missing was a site at which to check whether it works.

That is the whole of the contribution, and it is best described by an analogy from the laboratory rather than the seminar room. An instrument is calibrated by presenting it with a specimen of known value and recording what it reports. The specimen is not interesting in itself; nobody calibrates a spectrometer because they care about the reference standard. Its whole utility lies in having a known answer, so that the discrepancy between the reading and the answer can be measured. Persepolis is a reference standard. Its imperial, literate, bureaucratic anomaly — the very feature that seems to disqualify it from rock art research — is exactly the property that makes it fit for the role, because it is the only Achaemenid-scale corpus in which some of the answers were written down by the people who cut the stone. Run iconological inference across it and the instrument's error can, for once, be read off.

The reading, stated as a finding rather than a doctrine: inference tracked corroboration and nothing else. It did not track erudition — Godard had more of that than most, and was wrong. It did not track the coherence of the resulting narrative — the griffin readings are coherent, elegant, and unfalsifiable. It did not even track the presence of a text, as Pasargadae proved. It tracked whether a surviving text *referred* to the image. That is a single number from a single instrument, and it is offered as such.

Hence no universal claim, and the limits are worth stating before a reviewer states them. One corpus. One dynasty. One region. A monumental, elite, state-commissioned programme whose relation to the pecked panels of a non-literate society is not analogical but structural at best. Nothing here transfers as content, and the spectrum of Section 5.1 is a heuristic — a set of questions to put to a claim — not an algorithm that converts motifs into meanings. Anyone who applies it as the latter will have reproduced precisely the error the paper documents.

What the exercise does claim is a place in a tradition, and the tradition is this journal's own. Bednarik has argued for three decades that palaeoart interpretation is distorted by taphonomic processes the discipline does not correct for (Bednarik, 1994), that ethnographic analogy cannot ground meaning (Bednarik, 2011), and that determinations made by cultural outsiders are unfalsifiable and therefore unscientific (Bednarik, 2016). This paper adds no new charge. It supplies a demonstration, in a corpus where the demonstration can be checked, of a critique already made on epistemological grounds. Where Bednarik reasons from first principles to the conclusion that outsider interpretation fails, Persepolis lets one watch it fail, with the answer sheet in hand.

And it takes one further cue from him, though the cue was offered in irony. A book about the myths to which rock art can credibly be attributed, he observes, would be a slim volume; by contrast, the ethnographic study of the creators of the myths about rock art — those describing themselves as rock art researchers — would prove a vastly more fertile field, and one that has received no concerted attention at all (Bednarik, 2016). Sections 4.2 and 4.3 are a small instalment of exactly that study. Godard, Ghirshman, Herzfeld, and the authors of the griffin comparison appear in this paper not primarily as authorities but as *data*: as documented instances of trained interpreters producing confident readings under specifiable evidential conditions,

which is the only way anyone will ever learn what those conditions do to a reading.

Bednarik sets the precondition for progress in a single sentence: before scientific approaches can be applied more systematically, the accumulated deadwood of rock art research must be eliminated — and before that can be done, it must be identified (Bednarik, 2016). Identification requires a standard against which to measure. Persepolis, for one narrow class of claims, is that standard. The paper offers nothing more, and declines to pretend otherwise.

## Conclusion

### A Control Case, Not a Design-History Footnote

The temptation this paper has refused throughout is the temptation to make Persepolis interesting. It is interesting. That is not why it is here. If a reader closes these pages having learned only something new about Achaemenid art, the paper has failed at what it set out to do. The terrace has been used here rather than studied: it appears as an instrument, a corpus whose value to palaeoart research lies entirely in a property no one has previously thought to exploit — that some of its answers were written down by the people who cut the stone, and can therefore be checked.

What the checking produced was not a discovery about Persepolis. It was a measurement of the discipline's own instrument, taken at the only site where the instrument's readings can be compared against something independent of them. Iconological inference, run across the terrace and its satellites, tracked one variable and one only: whether a surviving text referred to the image. It did not track erudition. It did not track coherence. It did not track the presence of writing — Pasargadae settled that. The mountain is not the finding. The ratio is.

## Explicit Limits

The limits are severe and should be stated without cushioning. One corpus. One dynasty. One region. A monumental, state-commissioned, imperial programme produced by a literate bureaucracy that archived its own rations — a set of conditions that obtains almost nowhere else in the human record and, by definition, nowhere in the corpora that constitute rock art research's actual subject matter. Persepolis is not representative of anything. It was never claimed to be. A reference standard is not representative either; that is what makes it useful.

Nor do the findings transfer as content. Nothing established here tells anyone what a Palaeolithic sign meant, and the confidence spectrum of

Section 5.1 is a set of questions to put to a claim, not an algorithm for converting motifs into meanings. Applied as the latter, it would reproduce precisely the error this paper has documented at length — the substitution of a confident procedure for an absent warrant. The findings are calibrative and suggestive. They are not a method, and this study proposes none.

### Future Directions

Two vectors follow, and both are tractable.

The first is replication. If Persepolis functions as a control case because its images carry contemporaneous text, then every literate empire that cut its ideology into rock offers the same opportunity — Rome, the Maya, and others besides. Run the same test on those corpora and the ratio reported here can be confirmed, refined, or overturned. A single calibration is a datum; several would be a finding. This paper's strongest claim to a future is that its procedure can be repeated by someone who disbelieves its result.

The second is longitudinal. Section 2, read retrospectively, amounts to a template for tracing the entire life of a rock surface as a medium of power. Tol-e Ajori demonstrates that the Achaemenids possessed an alternative idiom and declined it, which converts the terrace from a

constructional fact into a choice (Askari Chaverdi & Callieri, 2020). The Sasanian graffiti demonstrate that the surface remained live for centuries after the dynasty that made it had gone, and that later elites returned to the same stone to assert their descent from it (Callieri, 2006) — a pattern Canepa's cumulative aesthetic accounts for across the whole Iranian landscape (Canepa, 2014). Cutting, finishing, inscribing, abandonment, reappropriation, and the modern archaeology that reads the result: six phases of one surface, each recoverable, and no rock art tradition has yet been given a biography of that shape. Persepolis could supply the template because its every phase is documented — which is, once again, the only reason it is here.

The stone on the Kuh-e Rahmat records the fact of its working and nothing of the intention behind it. That was the observation with which Section 2 began, and the paper has done no more than take it seriously across a corpus large enough to test it. The mark is an index; it survives its makers, and it will outlast their interpreters. The meaning was a convention, and conventions do not survive at all unless someone writes them down. Persepolis is the place where, for a few motifs, on a few afternoons in the fifth century BCE, someone did.

Nastaran Aksoy  
MA of Graphic Design

### REFERENCES

- Askari Chaverdi, A., & Callieri, P. (2020). Tol-e Ajori and Takht-e Jamshid: A sequence of imperial projects in the Persepolis area. *East and West*, N.S. 1(1), 177–200. <https://doi.org/10.4000/abstractairanica.53582>
- Barnett, R. D. (1957). Persepolis. *Iraq*, 19(1), 55–77. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4199617>
- Bednarik, R. G. (1994). A taphonomy of palaeoart. *Antiquity*, 68(258), 68–74. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00046202>
- Bednarik, R. G. (2011). Ethnographic analogy in rock art interpretation. *Man in India*, 91(2), 223–234. <https://www.researchgate.net/>
- Bednarik, R. G. (2016). Myths about rock art. *Archaeopress Publishing Limited*.
- Briant, P. (2002). *From Cyrus to Alexander: A history of the Persian Empire* (P. T. Daniels, Trans.). Eisenbrauns.
- Briant, P. (2020). The Discovery of Persepolis in the Eighteenth Century: From the Accounts of Travelers to the 'ÉRUDITS DE CABINET', *The Art of Empire in Achaemenid Persia: Studies in Honour of Margaret Cool Root* 16, 5.
- Callieri, P. (2006). At the roots of the Sasanian royal imagery: the Persepolis graffiti, *Eran ud Aneran*: constructional fact into a choice (Askari Chaverdi & Callieri, 2020). The Sasanian graffiti demonstrate that the surface remained live for centuries after the dynasty that made it had gone, and that later elites returned to the same stone to assert their descent from it (Callieri, 2006) — a pattern Canepa's cumulative aesthetic accounts for across the whole Iranian landscape (Canepa, 2014). Cutting, finishing, inscribing, abandonment, reappropriation, and the modern archaeology that reads the result: six phases of one surface, each recoverable, and no rock art tradition has yet been given a biography of that shape. Persepolis could supply the template because its every phase is documented — which is, once again, the only reason it is here.
- The stone on the Kuh-e Rahmat records the fact of its working and nothing of the intention behind it. That was the observation with which Section 2 began, and the paper has done no more than take it seriously across a corpus large enough to test it. The mark is an index; it survives its makers, and it will outlast their interpreters. The meaning was a convention, and conventions do not survive at all unless someone writes them down. Persepolis is the place where, for a few motifs, on a few afternoons in the fifth century BCE, someone did.
- E-mail: [nastaranaksoy@gmail.com](mailto:nastaranaksoy@gmail.com), ORCID: 0009-0000-9660-9934
- Studies Presented to BI Maršak on the Occasion of his 70th Birthday*, 129-48. <https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/24982811/>
- Canepa, M. P. (2014). Topographies of power: theorizing the visual, spatial and ritual contexts of rock reliefs in ancient Iran. *Of Rocks and Water*, 53-92.
- Caneva, G., Lazzara, A., & Hosseini, Z. (2023). Plants as symbols of power in the Achaemenid iconography of ancient Persian monuments. *Plants*, 12(23), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.3390/plants12233991>
- Cassirer, E. (1953). *The philosophy of symbolic forms: Vol. 1. Language* (R. Manheim, Trans.). Yale University Press.
- Chandler, D. (2025). *Semiotics: The basics* (fifth ed.). Routledge.
- Curtis, J., & Reade, J. (1995). *Art and empire: Treasures from Assyria in the British Museum*. British Museum Press.
- Eco, U. (1976). *A theory of semiotics*. Indiana University Press.
- Feizi Moghaddam, E., Aref, M., & Sharif Zadeh, M. R. (2023). Comparative study of the griffin in Achaemenid art and Seljuk art. *Bagh-e Nazar*, 19(116), 23–40. <https://doi.org/10.22034/bagh.2022.341414.5183>
- Ghirshman, R. (1964). *The arts of ancient Iran*. Golden Press.

- Godard, A. (1965). *The Art of Iran* (M. Heron, Trans.; M. Rogers, Ed.). Frederick A. Praeger.
- Gombrich, E. H. (1969). *Art and illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. Princeton University Press.
- Kalkanis, E. (2018). *Erwin Panofsky's Meaning in the Visual Arts*. Macat International Ltd.
- Kuhrt, A. (1997). *The Ancient Near East: c.3000–330 BC* (2 volumes) (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203436257>
- Lambert, A. F. (2014). The role of rock art in early state formation. *Rock Art Research*, 31(2), 205–224. <https://doi.org/10.69978/rar.v31i2.128>
- Levine, Louis D. & Stronach, David (1980). Pasargadae. A Report on the Excavations Conducted by the British Institute of Persian Studies from 1961 to 1963. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 100 (1):68.
- Nagel, A. (2020). Preserving the Achaemenid Persian legacy: Aspects of conservation, technology, polychromy, and material culture in Persepolis. In E. R. M. Dusingberre, M. B. Garrison, & W. F. M. Henkelman (Eds.), *The art of empire in Achaemenid Persia: Studies in honour of Margaret Cool Root* (Achaemenid History XVI, pp. 113–136). Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten; Peeters.
- Panofsky, E. (1995). *Meaning in the visual arts*. University of Chicago Press.
- Peirce, C. S. (1958). *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Vol. 2). Harvard University Press.
- Potts, D. T. (1999). *The archaeology of Elam: Formation and transformation of an ancient Iranian state*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ridolfi S., Laurenzi Tabasso M., Askari Chaverdi A., and Callieri P. (2019) *The Finishing Technique of the Stone Monuments of Persepolis: Further Studies and New Findings Through the Use of Non-Destructive Analytical Techniques\**, *Archaeometry*, 61, 272–281. <https://doi.org/10.1111/arcm.12417>.
- Root, M. C. (1979). *The king and kingship in Achaemenid art*. Brill.
- Schmidt, E. F. (1953). *Persepolis I: Structures, reliefs, inscriptions*. University of Chicago Press.
- Schmidt, E. F. (1970). *Persepolis III: The royal tombs and other monuments*. University of Chicago Press.
- Schmitt, R. (1991). *The Bisitun inscriptions of Darius the Great: Old Persian text* (Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum, Part I, Vol. I, Texts I). School of Oriental and African Studies.
- Wiesehöfer, J. (2001). *Ancient Persia*. I.B. Tauris.