Exploring the materiality of Darius' I *Behistun* (*Bīsitūn*) monument: text, image, and performance in the Achaemenid Empire (c. 550-330 BCE)

Explorando a materialidade do monumento de Dario I em Behistun (Bīsitūn): texto, imagem e performance no Império Aquemênida (c. 550-330 a.C.)

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Abstract

Achaemenid official imagery has traditionally been interpreted either in terms of contemplative "art" or as imperial "propaganda." However, interpreting monumental reliefs solely as canonical expressions of aesthetic excellence is anachronistic. Besides, the term "propaganda" may be misleading according the particular media discussed (rock reliefs, papyri, stele, etc.). To deepen our understanding of Achaemenid visual culture, new interpretive approaches are necessary. In the specific case of the Behistun monument, recent studies have begun to explore its performative dimensions and its capacity to elicit emotional

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responses. Building on this direction, we propose a reassessment of the Achaemenid concept of "image" as articulated in the inscription of Behistun and other Achaemenid documents. Our aim is to evaluate how the Old Persian term *patikara-* was conceptualized and how the interplay between text and image functioned in lived experience. Drawing on Bahrani's interpretation of *ṣalmu* in the Assyro-Babylonian tradition, we argue that the monument was intended to embody the perpetual presence of justice.

Keywords: Behistun. Archaeologies of Emotions. Image Theory. Achaemenid Art. Archaeologies of the Senses.

Resumo

A iconografia oficial Aquemênida tem sido tradicionalmente interpretada como "arte" contemplativa ou como "propaganda" imperial. No entanto, considerar os relevos monumentais unicamente como expressões canônicas de excelência estética é algo anacrônico. Além disso, o termo "propaganda" pode ser inadequado quando utilizado sem considerar o meio específico em questão (relevos, papiros, estelas, etc.). Para aprofundar nossa compreensão da cultura visual Aquemênida, são necessárias novas abordagens interpretativas. No caso específico do monumento de Behistun, estudos recentes passaram a explorar suas dimensões performativas e sua capacidade de provocar respostas emocionais. Seguindo essa direção, propomos uma reavaliação do conceito Aquemênida de "imagem", tal como articulado na inscrição de Behistun e em outros documentos Aquemênidas. Nosso objetivo é avaliar como o termo persa antigo patikara- foi conceituado e como a interação entre texto e imagem operava na experiência vivida. Com base na interpretação de Bahrani do termo ṣalmu na tradição assiro-babilônica, argumentamos que o monumento pretendia encarnar a presença perpétua da justiça.

Palavras-chave: *Behistun. Arqueologias das Emoções. Teoria da Imagem. Arte Aquemênida. Arqueologias dos Sentidos.*

Introduction

The Behistun monument is an ensemble of cuneiform inscriptions and rock reliefs carved by the Achaemenid Empire (*c.* 550–330 BCE) high into the cliffs of Mount Behistun (also known as *Bīsitūn* or *Bisotun*). This mountain, part of the Zagros range, is located in Iran's western province of Kermanshah. Strategically positioned along the Great Khurasan Road – the ancient route connecting Hamadan (ancient Ecbatana) to Baghdad (ancient Babylonia) – the site lies near natural springs, making it a vital resting place for caravans undertaking long journeys. From the time of the Neo-Elamite Kingdom (*c.* 1100-539 BCE) through to the Sasanian Empire (224-651 AD) (Garrison, 2017), Behistun was regarded as a sacred site, a status reflected both in its ancient name – **Baga-stāna*, meaning "place of the gods" – and in its continuous use as a location for monumental display. The Achaemenid monument was commissioned by king Darius I (522–486 BCE), who ordered the carvings to commemorate his accession to the throne and to celebrate his military victories over a series of rebellions that had threatened the stability and unity of the Persian Empire (Schmidt, 1953, p. 38–39; Cameron, 1960, p. 162; Luschey, 1968; Schmitt, 1991, p. 18–20; Briant, 1996, p. 136–137; Garrison, 2013, p. 575).

Figure 1 – Behistun Relief

Source: Photo of the Behistun Inscription by Korosh.091, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

The pictures of the central relief, measuring 3 x 5.5 meters, were carved possibly around 520-519 BCE. Darius, in hieratic stature, is shown wearing the Persian court robe, strapless shoes, and a crenelated crown ornated with several eight-pointed stars of Šamaš (Garrison, 2013; Root, 2013; Root, 2021, p. 1383-1386). He holds a bow with his left hand and puts one of his feet above the chest of a defeated rebel, Gaumāta, who, in turn,

raises his arms with open hands – a common gesture of fear and exasperation in ANE[1] iconography (Root, 1979, p. 194; Cornelius, 2017, p. 129; Wagner-Durand, 2018, p. 570; Bonatz, 2023, p. 534). Darius raises his right hand, apparently summoning forward (Root, 1979, p. 188-189) a sequence of rebel kings tied by their necks, nine in total, who are characterized according to specific ethnic markers. A winged-disc with an anthropomorphic figure, most likely Ahura Mazda, hovers above the scene (Calmeyer, 1974; Garrison, 2011, p. 47-48). It looks towards Darius and presents him a ring representing royal investiture – as in earlier Mesopotamian depictions with the "rod and ring" emblem (e.g., the Stele of Hammurabi, the Anubanini Reliefs, etc.) (Root, 1979, p. 180). Ahura Mazda seems to reproduce Darius' own hand gesture with his right hand. The winged-disc figure also wears a horned polos with a Šamaš star on top (Root, 1979, p. 213; 2013, p. 37-38; Garrison, 2013, p. 577). Two Persian weapon-bearers with a slightly smaller stature than the king are shown flanking Darius. One weapon-bearer carries a spear, the other has a bow and a quiver (Root, 1979, p. 184-186; Briant, 1996, p. 137-139; Feldman, 2007, p. 267).

Initially, the relief was accompanied only by a brief Achaemenid Elamite (AE) cuneiform inscription (DBa/AE) detailing Darius's titles and genealogy. A larger Elamite cuneiform inscription reporting the king's *res gestae* was added later (DB/AE), accompanied by AE labels for the figures in the reliefs. The Achaemenid Babylonian (DB/AB) and Old Persian (DB/OP) versions of the texts ensued. An excerpt that some believe to describe the invention of the OP cuneiform script and the diffusion of the inscription itself was then added in AE and OP only (§70). Finally, the Persian text was extended, with a supplementary narrative concerning two further battles fought by the Persian king. After the defeat of the "pointed-capped Scythians," narrated in this OP supplement, the image of their leader *Skunxa* was finally added to the relief, and the earlier Elamite text had to be erased to give room to this figure. Thus, the Elamite version had to be entirely recopied on the other side of the relief (Garrison, 2013, p. 575; Kosmin, 2018, p. 1-2).

DB/OP(/AE/AB) primarily recounts the turbulent succession of Cambyses and the claim that his brother and successor Br̥diya (known as Smerdis in Herodotus) was actually a magus priest and impostor. The narrative continues with the uprising of seven Persian nobles, led by Darius, against the impostor identified as Gaumāta. Darius then details other punitive campaigns he led against rebels across various regions of the empire following his rise to power, all "within one and the same year." In a typical Achaemenid Zoroastrian fashion (Barnea, 2025a), Darius presents himself as a defender of truth against the lie, always supported by the god Ahura Mazda in his enterprises (Skjærvø, 1999, p. 50-55).

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[1] Abbreviations used in this article: ANE = Ancient Near East(ern). OP = Old Persian. AE = Achaemenid Elamite. AB = Achaemenid Babylonian. DB = Darius' Behistu, i.e., the Behistun Inscription. For other abbreviations regarding Achaemenid inscriptions, I follow Basello et al., 2012.

Revista Pistis Prax., Teol. Pastor., Curitiba: Editora PUCPRESS, v. 17, n. 3, p. 403-425, 2025

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Figure 2 – Darius' crenelated crown with floral motives and the eight-pointed stars.

Source: Darius (Behistun relief). Photo by Leen van Dorp, via Livius.org.
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Biblical studies and text-centered approaches to the Behistun monument

The Behistun monument is widely interpreted by scholars as a form of royal propaganda intended to promote specific political and religious ideals (Granerød, 2013; Barnea, 2022; Kratz, 2022, p. 312; Jonker, 2024). Notably, this interpretation has gained particular traction within the field of biblical studies and among scholars focused on ancient Judeans and Yahwism. This is partly due to the discovery of a papyrus containing an Aramaic version of the Behistun Inscription (DB), along with excerpts from DNb (Darius's *Fürstenspiegel* at *Naqsh-i Rustam*), found in the archives of a Judean community at Elephantine (P. Berlin 13447) (Moore; Lepper, 2022; van der Toorn, 2025, p. 193-194). This remarkable document was unearthed by Otto Rubensohn during his 1906–1907 excavations and was first published by Sachau in 1911 (Greenfield; Porten, 1982; Porten, 1992, p. 446–447).

Some scholars further support the "propaganda hypothesis" by referencing an alleged second Aramaic copy of DB from Saqqara (Bae, 2001, p. 4), even if the Saqqara papyrus, published by Segal (1983, no. 62), is highly fragmentary and does not allow for a secure reconstruction of its content. Additionally, an Aramaic leather scroll from Qumran (4Q550), formerly known as "Proto-Esther" (Vermes, 2011, p. 619–620), has recently been re-edited by Gad Barnea, who demonstrates that it represents a late adaptation of DB 4:36–69 (Barnea, 2022; 2025a, p. 8–10). Further support for the propaganda interpretation comes from a disputed passage within the

inscription itself (DB/OP §70; DB/AE, L), which appears to describe Darius I's command to disseminate the text throughout the empire. Also noteworthy are the fragments of a Babylonian stele that replicates both the text and iconography of the Behistun inscription (Seidl, 1999). This stele would have been placed in a prominent location along a processional route in Babylon, reinforcing its propagandistic function (von Voigtlande, 1978, p. 63-67; Kuhrt, 2007, p. 158).

The discovery of P. Berlin 13447 has also intensified efforts to draw direct correlations between Persian epigraphic sources and the Hebrew Bible – at times, perhaps, to an exaggerated extent. For instance, Gard Granerød (2013) argues that the primary purpose of the Behistun Inscription was to be disseminated across the empire as a means of legitimizing Darius I's accession to power. He further suggests that the DB Aramaic version found at Elephantine may have been reissued during the reign of Darius II (Ochus), following his triumph over his half-brothers Sogdianus and Xerxes II – a succession conflict known from the narrative of Ctesias of Cnidus. Granerød speculates that a version of DB may have circulated in Yehud and that it potentially formed part of the scribal curriculum within Judean communities, offering a possible explanation for the alleged Persian influence over Judean theology and literature. Another notable proponent of this view is Louis C. Jonker, who, albeit cautiously avoiding the term propaganda, has drawn several direct parallels between Persian royal inscriptions (DB and DNb) and some compositions in the Hebrew Bible (Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, and the Pentateuch) (Jonker, 2019; 2021; 2024). Other scholars, such as Reinhard Kratz, also contend that "the function of the inscription and its translations in different imperial languages was, above all, royal propaganda" (2022, p. 312).

However, while there is absolutely no doubt that the content of DB was disseminated throughout the empire as a strategy of the Persian king to assert his legitimacy, the scope of this dissemination is not clear and, most importantly, *the purpose of the monument itself cannot be conflated with that of the other media in which DB circulated*. Importantly, Aramaic versions of DB on papyrus stem from an edition of the text which is slightly distinct from the one found at Behistun, as Chul-Hyun Bae (2001, p. 6) has demonstrated. The Babylonian stele, adapted to fit its local context (e.g., replacing "Ahura Mazda" with "Bēl"; see Seidl, 1999, p. 109), resemble the Aramaic version more than the monumental narrative. It is therefore prudent to assume that the various versions of DB had different origins and could serve different purposes. A primarily communicative or rhetorical function is evident in the Elephantine and Babylonian copies—*but cannot be ascribed to the monumental inscription itself*.

Moreover, the archaeological context, material medium, and dating of some of these copies are more ambiguous than the orthodox theory would like to admit. For instance, Otto Rubensohn did not specify the precise archaeological context of the papyrus containing the DB copy in his excavation diaries. Thus, there are substantial doubts regarding the exact provenance of this document and its precise relationship to the Yahwist colony at Elephantine (Kratz, 2022, p. 302). Furthermore, the papyrus was produced nearly a century after the DB monument was carved, suggesting a local preservation effort rather than a coordinated act by the royal chancery (Rollinger, 2015, p. 122; Rossi, 2021b, p. 76). Granerød's hypothesis that DB/Aramaic was reissued by Darius II due to his own succession struggles is interesting but highly conjectural and relies heavily on the notoriously unreliable Ctesias of Cnidus. Similarly, the hypothesis that the Babylonian copy of DB was placed at a very visible spot is also speculative (Jacobs, 2010, p. 109).

Regarding the controversial paragraph 70 in the DB/OP and AE texts, we see that the object of Darius's supposed command is not at all clear. The OP version reads:

> §70 Proclaims Darius, the king: By the favour of Auramazda this (is) the form of writing (*dipiciçam?*), which I have made, besides, in Aryan. Both on clay tablets and on parchment it has been placed. Besides, I also made the signature; besides, I made the lineage. And it was written down and was read aloud before me. Afterwards I have sent this form of writing (*dipiciçam?*) everywhere into the countries. The people strove (to use it) (Schmitt, 1991, p. 73-74).

The term *dipiciça-* appears only in this paragraph and has been variously interpreted to mean the "writing system" of Old Persian cuneiform ("type of writing"), the full inscription, or just its content (Schmitt, 1991; 2014, p. 169; Rossi, 2020). Notably, more standard words for "inscription", like AE *tuppi-* and OP *dipi-*, are avoided, replaced with compounds (*tuppime, dipiciçam?*). Some scholars, like François Vallat, suggest that the text disseminated throughout the provinces was Darius' genealogy (DBa), which is carved physically closer to the sentence, rather than the entire DB text (Vallat, 2011, p 273). Amiri Parian and Mahmoudi, of the University of Tehran, recently provided another epigraphic reading of this part of the inscription, correcting *dipiciçam* to *dipiriyam*. They contend that it refers to "a new text created by order of the king" (Amiri Parian; Mahmoudi, 2024, p. 1). Moreover, while §70 mentions parchment and tablets as the media for dissemination, the copies found in Babylon and Elephantine were inscribed on stone and papyrus, respectively (Mitchell, 2020, p. 63). Finally, the term *kāra-* is ambiguous in OP, possibly referring either to the "people" as subjects of the empire or to the military ("people under arms") (Rossi, 2020, p. 49-50). In short, we know *something* was disseminated among *some group*, but we don't know exactly *what*, or among *whom*.

Other sections of DB/OP are also commonly cited to support the claim that Darius intended to disseminate his monumental inscription. For example, §§60–61 read:

> §60 Proclaims Darius, the king: Now let what (has been) done by me convince you! Thus make (it) known to the people, do not conceal (it)! If you shall not conceal this record, (but) make (it) known to the people, may Auramazda be friendly to you, and may offspring be to you in great number, and may you live long!

> §61 Proclaims Darius, the king: If you shall conceal this record (*handugām*), (and) not make (it) known to the people, may Auramazda be your destroyer, and may offspring not be to you! (Schmitt, 1991, p. 70).

The term *handugā-* refers primarily to the report or account of Darius's deeds, not necessarily a literal copy of the inscription (Schmitt, 2014, p. 189). It seems to address the king's successors, urging them – through curses and blessings – to preserve the memory of the king's achievements for the future, not to publicize them in the present. This form of exhortation was very common in ANE royal inscriptions, as in the Neo-Assyrian ones (Skjærvø, 1991, p. 21-24). It is clear, therefore, that this report would be mediated by future kings (Jacobs, 2010, p. 110).

It is also important to stress that the languages used in the monumental inscription are ceremonial and not exactly the same spoken or written everyday languages. For example, there is only one known OP document among the administrative tablets from Persepolis, and the OP script had no widespread bureaucratic use in the empire (Amiri Parian; Mahmoudi, 2024, p. 11). We also know that spoken Persian was evolving into what would become Middle Persian (Skjærvø, 2009, p. 46–47) and that the written Persian language preserved some archaisms. In the case of Achaemenid Babylonian (the Akkadian dialect used for the Achaemenid royal inscriptions) it is unlike both Standard Babylonian and the Late/Neo-Babylonian used in administrative texts from the same province during the Achaemenid Period (Beaulieu, 2006, p. 203; Daneshmand, 2015, pp. 328-329). Accordingly, it was not aimed at a broad readership.

Defining Persian monuments as "propaganda" also raises other issues, as noted by Bruno Jacobs (2010; 2021):

> This view fails to recognize that, in the Ancient Near East, both images and writing had an effect simply by existing, and communication with a recipient was only one aspect of their impact (= *Dabei verkennt man, daß Bild und Schrift im Alten Orient ihre Wirkung schon durch ihre bloße Existenz entfalteten und die Kommunikation mit einem Adressaten nur ein Teilaspekt ihrer Wirkung ist*) (Jacobs, 2010, p. 108).

Finally, the most obvious problem with the category of "propaganda" is that Persian monuments are not easily readable and are mostly located in the imperial core. This supports the argument – already widely accepted in the case of Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs (Bachelot, 1991; Bagg, 2016; Ranieri, 2018; Rede, 2018; Nadali, 2019, p. 336) – that the monuments themselves cannot constitute "mass media" or "propaganda" in the traditional sense

(Jacobs, 2010, p. 109). This is especially true for Behistun, situated atop a mountain and not visible or legible from the ground, or even from the nearest platform below. Note that archaeologist Sylvia Matheson, who visited Iran before the 1979 Revolution, confessed she had difficulty seeing the monument even with binoculars (Matheson, 1979, p. 127; Root, 2013, p. 47; Treuk, 2023a, p. 5). It is also worth noting that early western travelers to Iran often struggled to accurately interpret what they were seeing. In the 18th century, for instance, Robert and Anthony Sherley mistook the figure of Ahura Mazda and the twelve human figures for Christ and the apostles, while a French diplomat came even to claim that there was a Christian cross in the reliefs (Castelluccia, 2021, p. 210). In sum, if we define "propaganda" as a form of media intended to persuade the masses, the largely inaccessible and difficult-to-read monument can hardly be considered propaganda in and of itself.

The materiality of Behistun

Previous approaches to Behistun's visuality and materiality can be very roughly categorized into three main theoretical tendencies: two grounded in an art historical perspective, and another one reflecting more agentive or performative frameworks, in the context of the "material turn" (for "agency" and "materiality," see Gell, 1998, p. 1-27; Boivin, 2008; Hicks, 2010, p. 74; Bennett, 2010; Hodder, 2012, p. 1-13; Latour, 2012, p. 29; Rede, 2012; 2024; Meneses, 2012, p. 256-257; Ranieri; Fattori, 2021).

The first of these theoretical stances is an artisan-centered or ethnic-centered approach, which seeks to assess the specific contributions of distinct groups of artisans to the stylistic conventions and visual language of Achaemenid official imagery (Richter, 1946; Amiet, 1974, p. 169-170; Nylander, 1979; Boardman, 2000, p. 104-111; 123-149; Stavis, 2020, p. 10). In Behistun, the focus has been on the alleged "Greek" influence over the rendering of dress patterns with folds (Boardman, 2000, p. 109-111). These discussions can bear orientalist overtones, since they tend to stress the influence of "western" artisans and the supposed emulation of foreign styles and conventions by the Achaemenids. Formal art historical approaches, on the other hand, focus on the analysis of iconographic conventions, visual motives, symbolic interpretation, and the ways in which the Persian imperial chancellery organized and deployed imagery to construct a distinctive vision of Persian kingship and imperial ideology (Root, 1979; Garrison, 2011, p. 17-18; Stavis, 2020, p. 9). Within this framework, Iranian, Egyptian, Urartian, Akkadian, and Neo-Assyrian prototypes are understood to have been selectively incorporated and adapted to express the Achaemenid ideal of a cooperative and hierarchical relationship among vassals and governors within a culturally diverse empire. The investigation into Behistun's visual "prototypes" – particularly those found in the palace reliefs of Ashurbanipal, the Anubanini rock reliefs (*Sar-e Pol-e Zahab*), and the Naram-Sin Stele – stands as one of the most paradigmatic contributions of art historical scholarship to the interpretation of the monument (Root, 2013, p. 29–49).

The interpretation of Achaemenid visual expression primarily as "art" can, however, whether intentionally or not, lead to a distorted reading of historical sources – one that assumes a predominantly contemplative or aesthetic function for ancient monuments. In contrast, we would like focus on the *emic* function of Ancient Near Eastern reliefs – objects that did not merely represent or communicate messages, but actively *did* things (Khatchadourian, 2016).

Considering this theoretical framework, some scholars have sought to analyze Behistun through the lens of the agency of the reliefs. Notably, Marian H. Feldman (2007) draws parallels between the Behistun monument and both the style and iconography of the Naram-Sin Stele. Feldman emphasizes the monument's "affective properties" – its capacity to evoke emotional responses – and contends that the "physical realization" of Naram-Sin's idealized and alluring body served as a model for the depiction of Darius in the Behistun relief. In so doing, she suggests that the creators of the monument consciously linked the Achaemenid ruler to the long-standing imperial legacy of Akkad. In the same vein, Margaret Cool Root has explored the performative strategies of Achaemenid royal imagery (Root, 2013, p. 59), while Neville McFerrin has examined the role of monumental

reliefs as devices that elicit from visitors the enactment of their programs (McFerrin, 2019), addressing also other performative aspects of the Achaemenid architecture.

Another possibility has been to reinstate the emic meaning of "images" in the ANE as artifacts able to enact beings and persons under certain circumstances, bearing with them a relation of ontological identity. This perspective draws mainly from the discussions developed by Zainab Bahrani and her concept of "performative image" (2003; 2004; 2008; 2014). In her studies, Bahrani explains how Mesopotamian thinking conceived the entire world as an ensemble of codes meant to be deciphered, just as ominous natural signs, dreams, and cuneiform inscriptions. What we call "images" were thought to be coextensive with other beings through means of similitude, homonym, metaphor or metonym/synecdoche, and, according to a proper liturgy which could entail utterance of words and ritual performances, one could overcome the insistent ambiguity of things and enact particular presences (e.g., as in the *mīs pî* ritual). In this way, even what we see as public monuments could effectively be invested with sovereign power, magically capturing the essence of historical episodes and political authority. Discussions of Behistun under this light have been developed, for instance, by Jacob Stavis (Stavis, 2020, p. 107-140), who stressed the numinous location of the monument and its ritual functions, and indirectly by Lori Khatchadourian, who uses Behistun to illustrate the Persian conception of sovereignty in terms of materiality (the "satrapal condition"; Khatchadourian, 2016, p. 2-11). This performative/agentive approach, often linked to the "material turn" in archaeology (Khatchadourian, 2016, p. 40-50), seems to be of great use to us for its necessary focus on (i) *the concreteness of the particular media studied* and the (ii) *emic understanding of images*, therefore taking into consideration the sensibilities of their historical audiences.

I am still here...

If the Behistun monument did not serve a *primarily* communicative function, we must ask ourselves: why was it erected at all? Why carve this scene and these inscriptions atop the mountain? Can we deduce its purpose from its iconography and materiality?

Bahrani's discussion of the ontology of images in the ANE deals with Assyro-Babylonian *ṣalmu*, which, as already said, could be conceived as a medium for the embodiment of beings and persons, becoming effectively identical to these beings after particular ritual procedures (Treuk, 2023b, p. 22; Bahrani, 2004, p. 165-169). In the Mesopotamian worldview, written words and images were not seen as separate symbolic registers, but as overlapping and mutually reinforcing elements, each capable of enacting a being. To achieve ontological stability, the system relied on excess, redundancy, and the convergence of diverse but resonant components in what Bahrani calls a "pluridimensional chain of possible appearances" (Bahrani, 2003, p. 128-129).

As explained by Bahrani:

> *ṣalmu* is [...] clearly part of a configuration that enables presence through reproduction. It is necessary for a valid representation. It is not a statue or a relief or a painting; in other words, it is not a work of art (Bahrani, 2003, p. 131).

These reflections inevitably lead us to the following question: how did the Ancient Achaemenid Persians themselves perceive the status of images, or *patikarā*?

The three monumental versions of DB demonstrate that the Persians shared a cultural perspective closely aligned with that of the Assyrians regarding the role of *ṣalmu*. The §65-67 from DB/OP are informative in this regard:

> § 65. Proclaims Darius, the king: You, whosoever hereafter shall look at this inscription which I have written down, or these sculptures (patikarā), do not destroy (them); as long as you shall be vigorous, thus care for them!

§ 66. Proclaims Darius, the king: If you shall look at this inscription or these sculptures (patikarā), (and) shall not destroy them and, as long as there is strength to you, shall care for them, may Ahuramazda be friendly to you, and may offspring be to you in great number, and may you live long! And what you shall do, may Ahuramazda make that successful for you!

§ 67. Proclaims Darius, the king: If you shall look at this inscription or these sculptures (patikarā), (and) shall destroy them and shall not, as long as there is strength to you, care for them, may Ahuramazda be your destroyer, and may offspring not be to you! And what you shall do, may Ahuramazda let that go wrong for you! (Schmitt, 1991, p. 71).

In the OP version of the text, Darius expresses a marked concern for the preservation and protection of both images and inscriptions – particularly, one may infer, the genealogy and names associated with the depicted figures. This suggests that these two forms of graphic expression, often treated as distinct in modern cultural mentality, were intended to function in concert within the Achaemenid context (Bahrani, 2003, p. 174). Moreover, the inscription includes explicit curses directed at anyone who might deface or destroy the images or texts, alongside blessings for those who would safeguard them (Bahrani, 2008, p. 215-219; Skjærvø, 1999, p. 23-24). These curses were perceived as real and efficacious: in keeping with longstanding ANE traditions, they threatened the destruction of an offender's progeny – a fate understood as a loss of perpetuation. Such threats reflect a conception of images as capable of preserving and perpetuating the presence of individuals or beings, where the appropriate, "proportional" punishment for damaging them would be the eradication of the offender's own continuity through the loss of his descendants (Bahrani, 2003, p. 169-171).

The curses in the Behistun inscription are not only aimed at those who would damage the king's image or name, but also extend to the destroyers' own deeds. This likely reflects the understanding that the images and inscriptions served to immortalize Darius's *res gestae* – his judgments, victories, and the suppression of rebels and the Lie (*drauga-*). The curse, then, is carefully calibrated to match the offense, reflecting the Mesopotamian principle of proportional justice, famously encapsulated in the motto "an eye for an eye" (Bahrani, 2003, p. 170-171). In this sense, the Behistun monument participates in the same cultural tradition as the Assyro-Babylonian *ṣalmu*, functioning not merely as representation but as a powerful mechanism for presence and retribution.

The OP term *patikara-,* commonly translated as "relief" or "statue", is a compound meaning a "reproduction" or, more precisely, a "production in the likeness of" (Grillot-Susini *et al.*, 1993, p. 58; Kent, 1950, p. 194-195; Skjærvø, 2009, 188; Schmitt, 2014, p. 230), derived from the verb *kar-* ("to make") and the prefix *pati-* (as a verbal prefix, "to, against"; see Schmitt, 2014, p. 230-231). As in the Assyro-Babylonian conception of the *ṣalmu*, *patikara* should not be understood as mere mimesis, but as an ontological multiplication, a re-production of an existing being or entity, since likeness could potentially entail identity. This point is crucial: *ṣalmu* was not perceived exclusively as a likeness or symbolic representation in the Western sense, but as an effective repetition of the original. It belonged to the same ontological field as the entity it depicted, possessing the potential to *enact* rather than simply *represent* (Bahrani, 2003, p. 132-133).

In the extant Achaemenid texts, *patikara-* refers to both the stone statues of Darius and the reliefs of throne bearers found on his tomb (DSn; DSab §2; Schmitt, 2009, p. 138; 146). It is also implicitly present in subtitles of reliefs relating to the empire's peoples, such as in DNe, where one sees the use of the demonstrative pronoun *iyam* in the singular before a plural noun (*iyam [patikara] Sakā tigraxaudā*, instead of the expected *imai Sakā tigraxaudā*) (Schmitt, 2000, p. 49; Skjærvø, 2020, p. 29). The term thus occupies a semantic range closely aligned with its Akkadian counterpart. Indeed, in the Akkadian version of the Behistun inscription, the OP pl. *patikarā* is rendered as *ṣalmānu*, the nominative pl. of *ṣalmu* (Malbran-Labat, 1994, p. 27; 105). This linguistic correspondence reinforces the conceptual affinity between the two traditions (DNa §4; Schmitt, 2009, p. 103; Nagel, 2023, p. 27-28). Furthermore, DB/AE §53 "glosses" the elamite *in-na-ak-ka4-nu-ma* ("sculptures";

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Hallock, 1969, p. 702) with a following OP loanword "*pattikarum*". The juxtaposition of two apparent synonyms (Grillot-Susini *et al.*, 1993, p. 58) was likely meant to avoid any ambiguity concerning this conspicuous concept.

Besides, the Behistun monument itself exhibits features that suggest a deliberate attempt to assemble multiple interrelated elements to conjure and stabilize a set of presences. It has been argued that Behistun is not far from the actual site of Gaumāta's execution, the fort *Sikayuvati,* meaning that the place chosen for the carvings was aimed at reenacting Darius' victory in the very same spot where it took place. In sum, the place, the images, the inclusion of inscriptions labeling the figures, the display of royal genealogy, and possibly additional ritual acts or recitations of names in the terrace below the monument, all functioned synergistically to enact and secure the essences tied to that foundational event (Henkelman, 2008, p. 435-436; Stavis, 2020, p. 135). The Achaemenid practice of inscribing the same content in multiple languages (OP, AE, AB) constitutes an additional layer of this performative redundancy.

This theory is further corroborated by the continued practice of abduction of statues by the Achaemenid Persians. For instance, historians have long been intrigued by the presence of a Greek statue of a woman at Persepolis, possibly representing Homeric Penelope (Boardman, 2000, p. 111; Gruen, 2011, p. 50-52), and by accounts of Xerxes' abduction of a bronze statue of the Athenian tyrannicides, Harmodius and Aristogeiton, to Susa (Finn, 2014; Arrian, *Anab.* 3.16.7-8). While such removals have been interpreted as motivated by the statues' aesthetic or ideological appeal (Gruen, 2011, p. 51), a better explanation lies in the ANE conception of images. As contended in relation to the Mesopotamian practice of deporting divine and royal statues, such acts constituted a form of magical and psychological warfare. In this view, statues were not mere representations but potentially the very same beings they depicted. Their seizure was thus a powerful means of disempowering a people, either by removing a divine presence, or by asserting dominance over the divinity embodied in the image (Bahrani, 2003, 185-201). Thus, when considered alongside the performative function of *patikara*, such acts underscore the continued relevance of the Mesopotamian concept of *ṣalmu*, the performative image, within the Achaemenid worldview.

Crime and Punishment

Scholarly interpretations of the Behistun reliefs have generally understood the complex as a triumphal scene: a quintessential representation of the victorious military ruler. Pierre Briant, for example, describes it as " *le roi en sa qualité de 'vainqueur', sous la forme d'un message métaphorique et réaliste à la fois*" (Briant, 1996, p. 138). Root, in her seminal study of Achaemenid art, similarly asserts that "the Behistun relief is, strictly speaking, the only extant Achaemenid victory monument" (Root, 1979, p. 225). Feldman reinforces this view, describing the monument as one "of military triumph" (Feldman, 2007, p. 265).

As it turns out, Root also interprets the monument as a site of "cosmic adoration of Darius himself along with the great god Ahuramazda," shifting the emphasis from message to ritual significance and performance (Root, 2013, p. 50). In this perspective, the monument's function is not limited to commemorating a triumph but extends to cultivating and affirming divine kingship through ritual expression (Stavis, 2020, p. 107). Such reading allows for a richer understanding of Behistun, not merely as a static symbol of victory, but as a dynamic and sacred space integral to Achaemenid imperial ideology. Within this framework, it is reasonable to interpret the monument as enacting a divine ratification of the king's dispensation of justice. Conceived as a "sealed" verdict (Root, 2013, pp. 47–48), Behistun functions as the very embodiment of justice.

Scholars often note that the Achaemenids would have had access to the Anubanini reliefs on the Khurasan Road and the Naram-Sin Stele at Susa, which they would have employed as prototypes in the draft composition of the Behistun reliefs (Root, 1979, p. 196-202; Ahn, 1992, p. 170). Importantly, the Persian ideologues also had access to another important artifact from the Mesopotamian tradition that was taken to, and preserved at, Susa – the Hammurabi Law Stele (Root, 1979, p. 27; Westbrook, 2003, p. 16-18; Feldman,

2007, p. 276-277). The importance of the Hammurabi Law Stele as a prototype to the drafters of the Behistun monument cannot be neglected, since it provided a venerable old tradition to render the king as a wise and just ruler (Root, 2013, p. 36).[2]

Unlike other Mesopotamian images of ruler and patron god, which represent "the sovereign power in terms of violence and of the ruler's physical control over life and death," Hammurabi's power "is more subtly expressed" (Bahrani, 2008, p. 118), as is also the case in the Behistun reliefs. Thus, more than a scene of military violence, the Behistun reliefs show Darius summoning each rebel, whereas the "defendants" wait calmly in line, with their clothes on and no sign of desperation – as if their gruesome fate was still to be decided, in a liminal moment of delivering verdicts. The exception, of course, is the figure of the "crushed" Gaumāta, whose punishment is reproduced as an inchoative process that is meant to transmit the idea of a legal procedure split into different phases – summon, judgment, and punishment (Root, 2013, p. 35; 2021, p. 1383). The bow that Darius carries with his left hand, placed upon his foot – which appears as such just in Behistun and on his tomb –, seems to stress the particular motive of *truth-cum-justice*. As explained by Edrisi Fernandes (2015), the arrow and the bow were often associated with the concept of truth in Ancient Persia, and an arrow well shot was an allegory of Ṛta in the Zoroastrian religion (Fernandes, 2015, p. 111-112; Hdt 1.136) – truth being the path for justice and righteousness (Ṛta = Avestic Aša, "Truth", "Harmonious Order" or "Righteousness"; see e.g., Y 30 4; Y 31 1-12; Y 32 10; Y 33 1; Y 51 8; Kellens; Pirart, 1988).

Additionally, the redundant manifestation of Šamaš, not only in the king's and the god's heads – symbolized by the eight-pointed stars –, but also materially and physically, as the sun would shine directly over the cliff, was meant as a visual re-enacting of justice (Root, 2013, p. 48) – which, in the ANE, was not corporified by a blindfolded woman, but by the all-seeing sun (Slanski, 2012, p. 97; 2021). Remarkably, Bruno Jacobs has suggested a tendency to conflate Ahura Mazda with the attributes of solar divinities in the Achaemenid Period, as inferred by some indirect evidence – mainly the classical tradition – and the exceptional depiction of four-winged symbols, apparently indicating a mix of the winged sun-disc with the traditional anthropomorphic winged symbol (Jacobs, 1991, 56; 65; see, e.g., fig. 3). Besides, as pointed by Root, the Behistun monument assumes the aspect of the output of a cylinder seal pressed over clay (Root, 2013, p. 47-48; see also Barnea, 2022), which could allude to the sealing of an unappealable legal decision. Finally, it should be noted that the "ring" emblem in Mesopotamia is also linked to measuring devices and associated to the principles of righteousness and just rule in the ANE (Slanski, 2007).

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[2] The iconographic parallels between the Behistun reliefs and the Hammurabi Law Stele include the serene encounter of king and god receiving "royal investiture" with the "ring" symbolizing divine approval (Winter, 2008, p. 83; Slanski, 2012, p. 105-106; 2019; Root, p. 2013, p. 35-36); the allusion to numinous mountains, evoked by the stele's shape and the image of a footstool under Marduk; and in Behistun, by the very mountain in which Ahura Mazda and Darius have been carved, as well as by Darius' crenelated crown (Slanski, 2012, p. 106; Root, 2013, p. 40); the stress on the kings' physical attributes, even if they are not shown in military combat – in the Hammurabi Law Stele, stressed through the ruler's muscular right arm (Slanski, 2012, p. 106), while Darius' physical attributes are emphasized through the rendering of a light drapery "in such a way that the material stretches thinly across the [king's] back leg and buttocks, revealing the well-defined musculature swelling beneath it" (Feldman, 2007, p. 271).

Figure 3 – Four-winged anthropomorphic figure between two Persian spearmen, and under the winged disc. Achaemenid VA 3022.

Source: Photo by Olaf M. Teßmer. Courtesy of the Vorderasiatisches Museum.

The Achaemenid concept of justice was also closely linked to deities like Ahura Mazda – often seen as the source of legal order, *dāta-* (see XPh §6; Wiesehöfer, 2013; Pirngruber, 2021, p. 1088) – as well as Šamaš and Mithra. Although *Ṛta* itself does not appear in the Behistun Inscription (DB), terms related to justice, such as *dāta-* ("law", DB/OP §8) and *ṛšta-* ("righteousness", DB/OP §63), do. Both are rendered in the Akkadian version (DB/AB) as *dīnātu* (Schmitt, 2014, p. 239), the same Akkadian term used to denote legal decisions by Hammurabi (Démare-Lafont, 2006, pp. 16–17), indicating a shared conceptual framework of divinely grounded justice through royal sentences for concrete cases. Throughout DB, Darius emphasizes his role in punishing wrongdoers and rewarding the just, and he exhorts his successors to uphold this dual ethic. DB (§63) also mirrors a broader ANE concern with "protecting the weak against the strong," famously expressed in the Hammurabi Law Stele (Skjærvø, 1999, p. 46).

As already noted, the monument of Behistun was dwarfed by the cliffs, being difficult to contemplate, and impossible to read from a distance. Very few people would have been able to give a clear look at it, even with colors and ornamentation. Contrary to the usual treatment of the monument itself as a sort of propaganda or royal rhetoric, it is clear that it was not intended to be directly reached by many viewers. Accordingly, only the performative approach can help us understand a monument that was not primarily meant to be contemplated. Given the Persian concept of image as *ṣalmu*, the scene must be understood as a way of enabling the embodiment of justice itself into the cliff. In accordance with the Mesopotamian legal tradition of listing casuistic decisions, this divine principle was epitomized by the king's verdicts concerning singular cases of capital relevance, such as the punishment of the rebels (Westbrook, 2003, p. 17; Wiesehöfer, 2013, p. 54). The mountains were chosen as the locus to build this monument, since by their material properties and ability to endure time, they would also prevent the effacing of these just verdicts delivered by the highest of earthly judges – the king of kings, Darius (Pirngruber, 2021, p. 1087-1090).

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Behistun speaks of justice. The king's justice – rising to the heights of the heavens – was meant to be illuminated every day by the radiant light of the sun. That alone was reason enough to have this moment eternally inscribed at that precise spot, high upon the cliffs. One cannot rule out the possibility of the monument having integrated some regular cult performed in this sacred place. Interestingly, both Herodotus and Ctesias record that the Persians used to regularly celebrate the *magophonia*, i.e., the day of the killing of the rebel *magus* Gaumāta (Hdt. 3.79; Ctes. F15; Kosmin, 2018, p. 5). As already mentioned, we know that the place where he was killed, the fort *Sikayauvati*, was most likely situated not far from the Behistun monument (DB §13; Schmitt, 1991, p. 53; Kosmin, 2018, p. 6), and therefore this celebration could make use of the monument as an instrument to reenact the justice delivered at that moment. As recently proposed by Kosmin, the chronology of the battles in the inscriptions suggests the empire could have framed DB to enact a kind of ritual calendar celebrating its many military victories. Concerning the *magophonia*, the author says:

> It seems that the *magophonia* was established on 10th *Bāgayādi/Tašrītu* to commemorate and ritually re-enact this inaugural moment, and that the festival retained this identity at least until the reign of Artaxerxes II and probably long afterward (Kosmin, 2018, 5).

In later texts from the Hebrew Bible, we recurrently hear about the immutability of the "Laws of the Medes and the Persians" (Dan 6:8; Esth 1:9; 8:8), a saying that is probably related to the king's last resort judicial decisions in particular cases – and not to the then inexistant or irrelevant statutory laws, as often misunderstood (Lefebvre, 2006, p. 99-103). A "criminal" sentence rendered by the king casuistically was theoretically "immutable" and unappealable. In the same way, Babylonian trial records from the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid periods were duly sealed to avoid the reopening of litigation (Holtz, 2014, p. 7). The Hammurabi Law Stele itself contains precepts against the changing of verdicts (HC § 5), and it is very likely that this *res judicata* principle was thought to be safeguarded in Behistun by the permanence of the rocks and their "sealing effect," under the watchful guard of the Sun. In this way, the ruling against the rebels was fixed for eternity (Bahrani, 2008, p. 125-130).

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that the Behistun Monument was not intended to be contemplated like a painting in a museum. Yet, this does not mean it failed to elicit strong emotional reactions and perhaps affective memories in its distant viewers. Set in a site imbued with sacred resonance, surrounded by the sounds of flowing springs and "birds innumerable," as recalled by Jackson (Jackson, 1903, p. 77), and possibly perfumed by the scents of *paradeisos* gardens and the distant echoes of human and natural life, the monument would have overwhelmed the senses, in a synesthetic fashion (Hamilakis, 2012; Neumann; Thomason, 2022). This multisensory impact was likely intensified by the radiant hues of blue or gold pigments that once filled the cuneiform signs (Root, 2021, p. 1385; see, however, Luschey, 1968, p. 83; Nagel, 2023, p. 131) – colors that evoked notions of power and sacredness (McMahon, 2019, p. 397-400). Perhaps precisely due to its inaccessibility and the unintelligibility of the scripts, Behistun may have also disoriented the casual viewer upon first encounter, provoking an uncanny feeling (Freud, 1918; Royle, 2003, p. 1; Didi-Huberman, 2010, p. 227-231; Root, 2013, p. 47), at least until affective and political memories could be activated.

Conclusions

The OP conception of *patikara-* is closely related to the ANE conception of *ṣalmu* as performative image. According to this performative understanding of images, it seems that Darius' monument at Behistun was devised to enable the embodiment of justice and to celebrate the king's verdicts in capital cases of utmost importance, such as the punishment of Gaumāta and other rebels. At the core of the visual composition is the idea of justice itself and the associated principles of Truth and Order. It is likely that the king sought to ritually

re-enact his victory and his judgment by fixing them into the living rocks of Behistun, therefore preserving past achievements and protecting his realm from future harm.

From the point of view of the ANE travelers who eventually met the monument, the most immediate emotion elicited by it would be a sort of uncanny fear. The monument was not clearly visible from afar and, therefore, emphasis must be laid rather on the elements that provoked intellectual uncertainty before the activation of political memories concerning the stories evoked by the monument. Finally, while DB's text undoubtedly circulated in different forms and versions and in media that could have worked as propaganda (papyri, stele, tablets, oral performance), the monument *per se* cannot be deemed as propaganda in a traditional sense.

Note: according to national and international guidelines, I inform that some parts of the text's English grammar and spelling were revised with the help of LLM ChatGPT 4.0. The formatting of the bibliographical references in accordance with the Journal's guidelines and ABNT was also done with the help of the same tool. See Rede Scielo. Guia de uso de ferramentas e recursos de IA. Disponível em: https://tinyurl.com/y36dvxcj Acesso em: 26 dez. 2024.

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Editor responsável: Waldir Souza