

Daya Cave: A Place of Worship of Mesopotamian and Persian Gods in the West Central Zagros Mountains, Iran

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In the winter of 2021, a previously unknown and almost inaccessible cave called Aškawt-i Daya was discovered in the heart of Bakhakuh Mountain in the west central Zagros Mountains of Iran. An exceptional feature of the cave is its collection of paintings on the walls and ceiling with animal and human motifs, rendered in black pigment, both singly and in groups involved in scenes of hunting and slaughter. As with other rock paintings in Iran, establishing a date for these paintings is difficult, but there are hints both from the presence of certain motifs and from accompanying inscriptions that the paintings were probably created from the Achaemenid (550–330 BCE) to the Parthian period (247 BCE–224 CE). A depiction of a bull-man, as well as the appearance in the inscriptions of the names of divinities such as Nergal, Marduk, Sin, and Šamaš, suggest that the original gods to be worshiped in the cave were Mesopotamian. The use of the cave as a place of worship continued into the Seleucid (312–63 BCE) and then the Parthian and early Sassanian periods, by which time the cave had been transformed into the setting for a cult of Mithra.¹

INTRODUCTION

The high mountain of Bakhakuh is located 21 km northwest of the modern city of Sar Pol-e Zahab, north of the Zahab Plain and southeast of the Sar Qal'eh Plain. The mountain is a part of the Teleh Zang limestone formation, 11 km long and 7.3 km wide, its peak rising to an altitude of 1204 m above sea level and 650 m above the Zahab Plain (fig. 1). The western and eastern slopes of the mountain are steep and have towering rock faces harboring caves and rock shelters. In 2021, with the assistance of local inhabitants as guides, the authors discovered a cave on the western slope of Bakhakuh Mountain. The cave is known locally as Aškawt-i Daya or Daya Cave. On the inner walls of the cave are numerous rock paintings and inscriptions, the subject of this article.

Daya Cave overlooks both the Darvan Zard valley and the eastern part of the small plain of Sar Qal'eh. On the western side, a deep canyon runs

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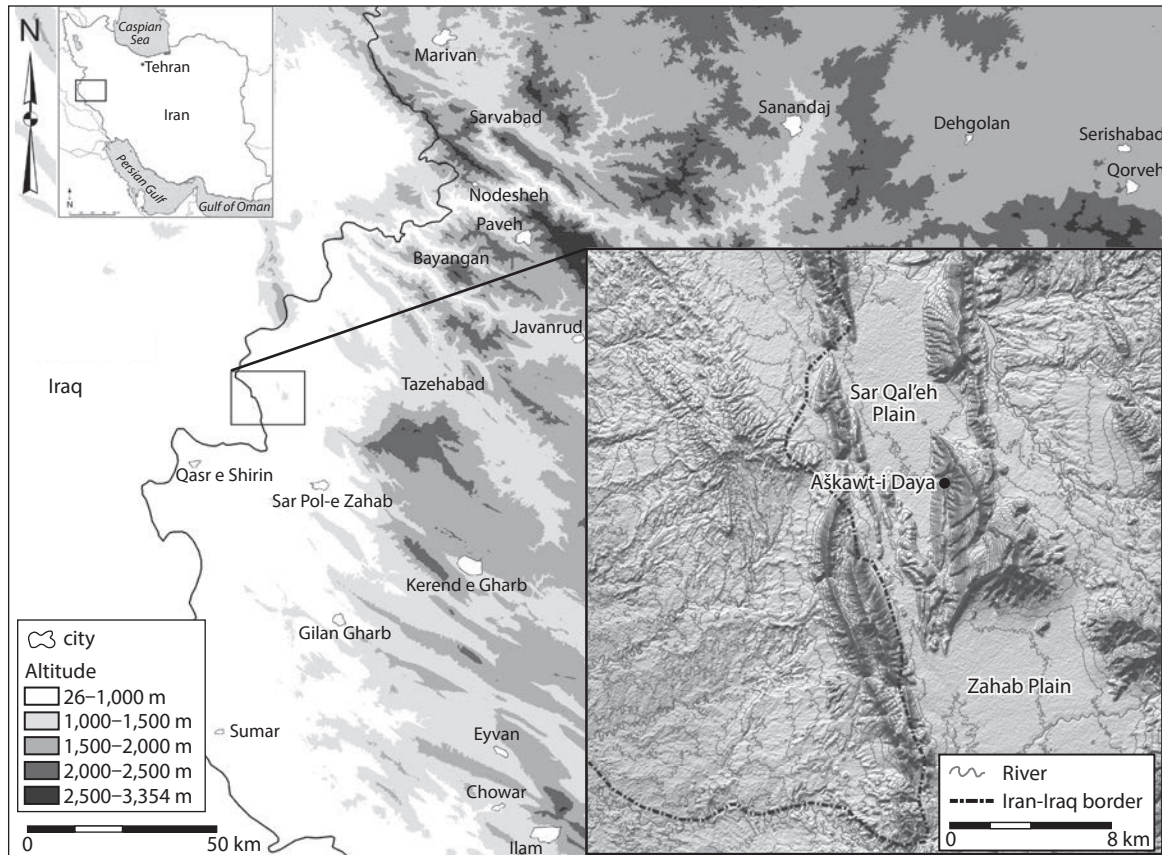


FIG. 1. Map of the area and location of Aškawt-i Daya Cave (courtesy S. Bahramiyan).

from the foot of the mountain almost to the center of Bakhakuh (online fig. 1). The cave's location is at the beginning of one of the five ravines that lead to the Darvan Zard valley, at an altitude of 670 masl, and about 200 m above the Sar Qal'eh plain. Although the entrance faces south, due to a projection of the mountain it is often in the shade, especially in the afternoon, and is generally poorly lit (online fig. 2). The cave, which was formed by the dissolving of the natural limestone and has numerous deep vertical fissures, has two separate but related parts, both of which are aligned north-south. The lower part, which is quite accessible, is an irregular space 6 m long, a maximum of 3 m wide, and approximately 3 m high. The condition of any archaeological floor deposits could not be ascertained due to collapse, animal droppings, and recent debris. On one wall is a modern contemporary inscription in Kurdish giving the name of the cave, Aškawt-i Daya. The presence of this inscription, the animal waste, and signs of illicit digging all indicate that the existence of the cave has been known to locals for some time.

The upper part of the cave can be accessed in two ways (online fig. 3). The first is by crawling through a dark narrow hole in the ceiling of the lower part, which can only be done by someone who is small, thin, and agile. The second is by climbing up the outside face of the cave, which also requires great agility and skill—indeed the risk of falling makes this very hazardous. The entrance to the upper part of the cave is 9 m vertically above the surface of the lower entrance. It is therefore very difficult to access the upper chamber of the cave without specialist skills and equipment. The entrance of the upper cave is 3.5 m high and 3.0 m wide. The height of the roof of the upper cave varies between 2.0 and 3.5 m. The floor of the cave, which measures 6.5 m long by 3.8 m wide and slopes down toward the mouth, has been damaged by illicit digging. Henceforth in this article, we use Daya Cave to refer specifically to the upper chamber.

BACKGROUND

The region where Daya Cave is located has been visited several times by archaeologists and is not

unexplored. Areas close to this region were first visited archaeologically by Jacques de Morgan in the late 19th century. In his map, de Morgan identifies Tapeh Gerdanu as the most significant mound in the area.² In 1967, Massoud Golzari surveyed the area, identifying the rock-cut tomb of Bard-e Asheghan, 5.5 km southeast of the cave.³ A year later, a delegation headed by Ali Akbar Sarfaraz surveyed the slopes of Bakhakuh Mountain.⁴ In 2005, Tapeh Gerdanu was registered as site no. 12171 in the national list of monuments of Iran. The area was surveyed again twice at the beginning of this century—at which time it was part of the county of Salas-e Babajani—in 2004 by Yaghoub Mohammadifar⁵ and in 2009 by Aref Biglari.⁶ In those surveys several sites, including Tapeh Gerdanu, were resurveyed, and the two sites of Darvan Zard Cemetery and Darvan Zard Cave, only a kilometer away from Daya Cave, were identified.⁷ In the report published on the 2009 survey, seven caves and rock shelters in the region are mentioned, but Daya Cave is not among them.⁸ In 2009, Fereidun Biglari surveyed the adjacent region and identified a number of Middle Paleolithic-period caves and rock shelters in the more northern parts of this area, especially in the margins of the Sar Qal'eh and Bawisi plains.⁹ None of these surveys mentions Daya Cave, which was apparently unknown to archaeologists until our present visit.

THE PAINTINGS AND INSCRIPTIONS DESCRIBED

On the ceiling of Daya Cave, and especially on the smoother parts of its walls, are a number of paintings and inscriptions executed in black pigment either singly or in groups.¹⁰ A key importance of these discoveries is the light they can shed on the use of the cave. The following documentation describes each tableau and inscription and includes transliterations and translations of the inscriptions. It starts with the eastern wall

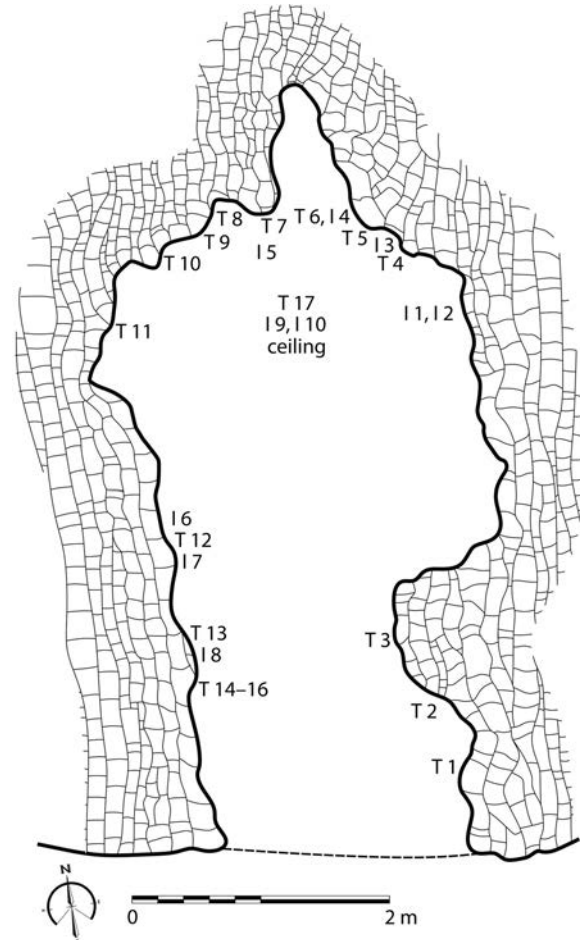


FIG. 2. The plan of the cave and the approximate positions of the inscriptions and paintings on the cave walls; I = inscription, T = tableau of images (H. Nosrati).

of the cave, moving to the end of the western wall, and finally to the cave ceiling (fig. 2).

Tableau 1

Near the entrance of the cave, in the middle part of the upper right wall, 80 to 130 cm above the floor, is a tableau made up of a combination of motifs painted within an area of 50 cm high x 40 cm wide. At the top is a figure on horseback (fig. 3[a]), possibly holding reins with his left hand and wielding a mace or, more likely, throwing a spear with his right hand. The person's legs hang down from the horse's abdomen, resting in stirrups. In front of the horse is a small animal (3[b]), possibly a fox given its long tail and ears. Slightly below, there is a faded image of two people close to each other (3[c]). The person on the left is depicted from the side, drawing a bow pointing to the left and with a halo

² de Morgan 1895.

³ Golzari and Jalili n.d., 29.

⁴ Sarfaraz et al. 1968.

⁵ Mohammadifar 2004.

⁶ Biglari 2009; Biglari et al. 2013.

⁷ Biglari 2009.

⁸ Biglari et al. 2013, 79.

⁹ Biglari and Shidrang 2013.

¹⁰ In view of the difficult access and poor lighting conditions, it cannot be ruled out that other paintings and inscriptions await discovery, but we believe this does not vitiate the validity of our conclusions.

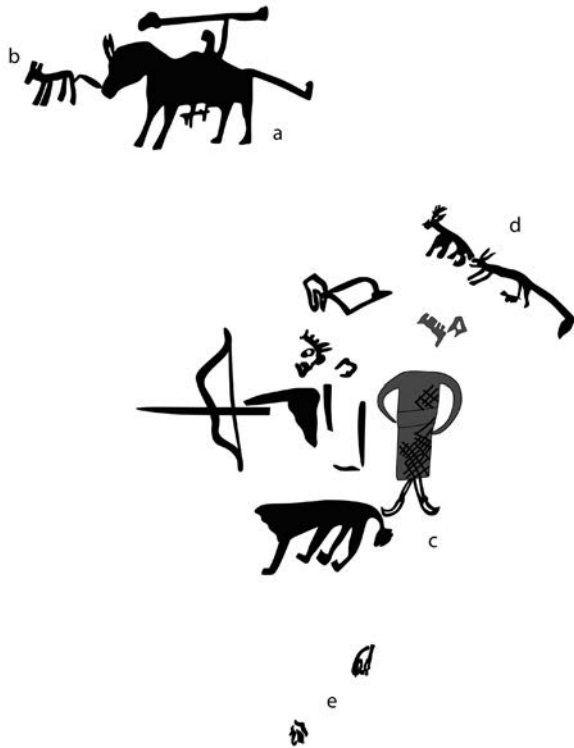


FIG. 3. Drawing of Tableau 1.

around the head. At the person's foot is another animal, facing left, which is difficult to identify but whose tail and size probably indicate a large feline such as a lion. To the right of the first person is another person, wearing a garment decorated with cross-hatched lines similar to armor that extends to the knees, and also curved pointed shoes. The body of this person is depicted frontally, with the hands on the waist; the face is not well defined, but there are rays of light emanating from the head. We believe these rays denote Mithra—the same style of representation of Mithra with rays of light around his head can be seen, for example, in the relief of Ardashir II at Taq-e Bustan¹¹ and in the relief at Nemrut Dağ,¹² as well as in other art works of the Parthian (247 BCE–224 CE), Kushan (30–375 CE), and Sassanian (224–561 CE) periods.¹³ This depiction is reminiscent of the relief from the Mithraeum at Osterburken in Germany in which Mithra is shown armed with a bow and accompanied by a lion and Sol.¹⁴

It seems that an inscription was written running between the two figures. Perhaps this was a tag identifying these people, but unfortunately the traces are not legible. At the top right of this group are two more animals in a line (3[d]), perhaps a fox chasing a deer. At the bottom of the tableau (3[e]) are two small, incomprehensible motifs.

Tableau 2

Located 45 cm to the right of Tableau 1 and 150 cm above the floor is the faded image of a camel facing right, 6 cm high x 8 cm wide.

Tableau 3

A short distance to the right of Tableau 2, 152 cm above the floor, is a badly eroded image of an ibex (fig. 4[a]).

Inscription 1

(see Inscriptions Transliterated and Translated, below)

At a distance of 3.20 m to the right of Tableau 3, 170 cm above the floor, is an inscription of seven lines written in Aramaic in an area measuring 8 cm wide x 9 cm high (fig. 5; online fig. 4).

Period: Achaemenid or Post-Achaemenid (Early Hellenistic), fourth–early third century BCE

Language: Aramaic

Notes:¹⁵

Line 1: Although the traces of *nrgwl* are faint, the reading is certain given the comparison to line 1 of Inscription 3.

Line 2: *Nbwyšlm* could be the Aramaic name Nabû-yašallem, or a direct rendering of the Akkadian name Nabû-ušallim.

Line 3: The shape of the letter of the second {l} of *ʾllyzḥ* differs a little from that of the other {l}s. *Ellil-yzḥ* seems a theophoric name containing Ellil (= Enlil), but we cannot explain *-yzḥ* or *-ywh*; the reading of {y-z/w} is in any case uncertain. “His father” can be either human or divine.

Line 4: The interpretation of this line is tentative. *Swkt* seems to derive from the root SWK “to anoint”

¹¹ Ghirshman 1963, 190; Hinnells 1997, 99.

¹² Ghirshman 1963, 67, fig. 80; Hinnells 1997, 28.

¹³ Grenet 2006.

¹⁴ Vermaseren 1960, 74–75, fig. 27.

¹⁵ In discussions of the inscriptions, italics indicate our reading, and curly brackets indicate specific characters under discussion. Words transcribed with capital letters represent Aramaeograms, which are words spelled in Aramaic but read in a Middle Iranian language such as Middle Persian. See also “General Remarks on the Inscriptions: Groups 1 and 2,” below.



FIG. 4. Drawings of individual different motifs on the cave walls, from Tableaux 3–7, 9–10, 13, and 15 (not in scale to one another).

(Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic). One of two ‘*yds* in “*ydy* looks superfluous.

Line 7: Although there appears to be a small letter between {b} and {m}, we take it as a part of {m}. Aramaic *m’rh* “cave” is a feminine noun, so the expected form would be *m’rh* or *m’rt’*; but this *m’r* is a masculine form without an ending. Line 7a is written to the left of line 6. *Br syn’... n* could be a personal name, Bar-Sin... n, or “son of Sin... n.”

Inscription 1 is more understandable than the other inscriptions discussed here. The reading presented here is, however, still quite preliminary and tentative.

Inscription 2

Inscription 2 (fig. 5; online fig. 4) is a five-line inscription written over an area measuring 8 cm high x 6 cm wide, just 4 cm below Inscription 1.

Period: Early Sassanian, third century CE

Language: Middle Persian

Notes: The shapes of the letters of this inscription are similar to that of Middle Persian inscriptions found at Dura-Europos.¹⁶ If the era indicated here is the era of

Ardashir I, the seventh year would be 229/30 CE; and if it is that of Shapur I, 245/6 CE.¹⁷ The three words below are extremely difficult to read and interpret.

Line 1: The reading *rgpys* and its meaning are uncertain. The word must refer to a month, but we cannot find an appropriate word in the Zoroastrian, Macedonian, or Babylonian calendar. The first two strokes make two letters such as {r/z-g} or one letter {’}. The next letter can be {p} or {s}; though this shape of {p} is not attested in Sassanian Middle Persian sources, it is similar to the {p} of *NPŠH* in an early (Arsacid) Middle Persian text on a silver bowl.¹⁸ *Rgpys* might be a corrupt form of a Macedonian month name, *Gorpiaios*, but many other readings are also possible.

Line 4: The reading *kph* is uncertain. It is difficult to determine whether the vertical line just to the left of ‘L is an independent letter or the extension of the next line {l}; if the former, then the letter would be {n} or {k}. The next stroke(s) of the word are also not easy to identify; it may be {p}, or {w/y/z-y/g}. The last part can be read as {h}, {c} (= {š}), or {g-n}.

¹⁷ The dates for these reigns are based on Sims-Williams and de Blois 2018, 40–42.

¹⁸ Skjærvø 1997/2000.

¹⁶ Frye 1968; Daryaei 2010.

Inscriptions Transliterated and Translated (NB: these readings are preliminary and tentative)

Inscription 1:

1	'l mr'y (nrgwl)	to My Lord Nergal (Nergol)
2	'bdk ḥyty nbwšlm (.....)	brought your slave, Nabû-yašallem...
3	'lly(z)ḥ dkyr 'bḥ	Ellil-yzḥ, to be remembered(,) his father
4	ḥyty swkt "ydy 'bḥ	brought anointment(s) of fests of his father
5	dywmt syn	of the days of Šin
6	wšmš	and Šamaš
7	bm'r	in cave
7a	br syn'... n	Bar-Šin... n

Inscription 2:

1	BYRHrgpys	In the month ...
2	QDM ŠNT	on the year
3	(I)III III IC lwgn	7. 100 (pieces of) oil/fat
4	'L kph	to ...
5	HL'	...

Inscription 3:

1	'l mr'y nrg[w]l 'bd(k) .	to My Lord Nergal, your slave .
2	'yty nbw w'h' ..n b'l...	there is/are Nabû and the brother ..n, master (tor Ba'al) ...
3	dd/ryt mrdwk mr(y) bbl b...	...Marduk, lord of Babylon...
3a	šmš	Šamaš
4	wnbw nny (.)	and Nabû Nanaya (.)
5	'...l(?

Inscription 4:

1	bwh
2	'bpn' 'h ššs....

Inscription 5:

1	'l mr'y	To my lord
2	'(ml)k sy..	..malik Ši[n?]
3	b'ly b...	Lords in ...
	vertical line ṭ? s?	?

Inscription 8:

1	šmn	oil (or Šaman)
2	nbwšlmn	Nabû-Šulmān

Inscription 9:

gsym	?
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Inscription 10:

m..ssn	M..sāsān
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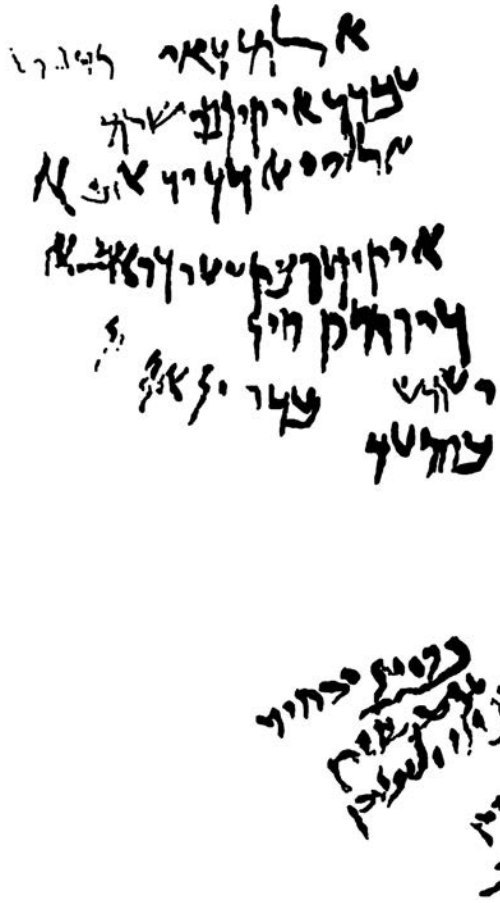


FIG. 5. Drawing of Aramaic Inscriptions 1 and 2 (S. Haruta).

Line 5: *HL'*. The most intriguing point about this line is that in Middle Persian the letter {h} was replaced with {ḥ} except in the final position of the Aramaeogram.¹⁹ Thus, this cannot be a usual spelling. If we read the word backwards, as *LH*, it would make sense, meaning “god,” /bay/ in Middle Persian. The other two words discussed above might be spelled cryptographically as well.

The shapes of the letters of this inscription are similar to that of Middle Persian inscriptions found at Dura-Europos.

Inscription 3

Inscription 3 (figs. 6, 7) consists of five lines of Aramaic written within an area measuring 20 cm wide x 10 cm high located at the end of the right wall of the cave, 150 cm above the floor and 110 cm to the right of Inscriptions 1 and 2.

Period: Achaemenid or Post-Achaemenid (Early Hellenistic), fourth–early third century BCE

Language: Aramaic

Note:

Line 3: The {y} of *mry* is overwritten with {b}, the first letter of the next word. The scribe may have thought the spelling *mry* was incorrect.²⁰

Tableau 4

Drawn 30 cm to the right and below the corner of Inscription 3, 120 cm above the floor, is a single figure of a standing human depicted frontally, 10 cm high x 5 cm wide (see fig. 4[b]).

Tableau 5

A single image on the edge of the rock, 110 cm above the floor and measuring 7 x 7 cm, depicts an individual on a horse and holding a spear (see fig. 4[c]).

Inscription 4

At the end of the eastern wall of the cave, on the edge of a projection of the rock, is part of a short two-line inscription (fig. 8). The left part of the text has been lost due to rock fall.

Period: Hellenistic or Early Parthian? third–second century BCE

Language: Aramaic?

Notes: Much of this text is uncertain. The shapes of some letters have unique features among the inscriptions in the cave; in particular, the last strokes of {'} and {h}, if that is their correct reading, extend very long.

Line 2: The ending {'} in *'bpn'* seems to be the marker of the emphatic state in Aramaic. The word could be a loanword from Iranian ending with *-pāna*, “who guards” such as **abipāna*, “guardian,” though the prefix *abi-* attached to the root *pā-* < **paH¹*, “to protect,” in Iranian languages is not known so far.²¹ For 'h, the use of the letter {h}, not {ḥ}, probably denotes that the scribe of this inscription belonged to a scribal tradition that was distinct from that of Inscriptions 1, 3, 5, and 8 (see discussion of Group 1 texts below). The 'h might be an abbreviated form of Ahuramazdā (Ahurmazd) or Ahriman, though this is a mere guess. In the next word, {š} seems to be overwritten with {s}. It might

²⁰ For the spellings of the singular form of *mr'*, see Muraoka and Porten 2003, 24–25.

²¹ Cheung 2007, 288–89.

¹⁹ Skjærvø 1996, 516.

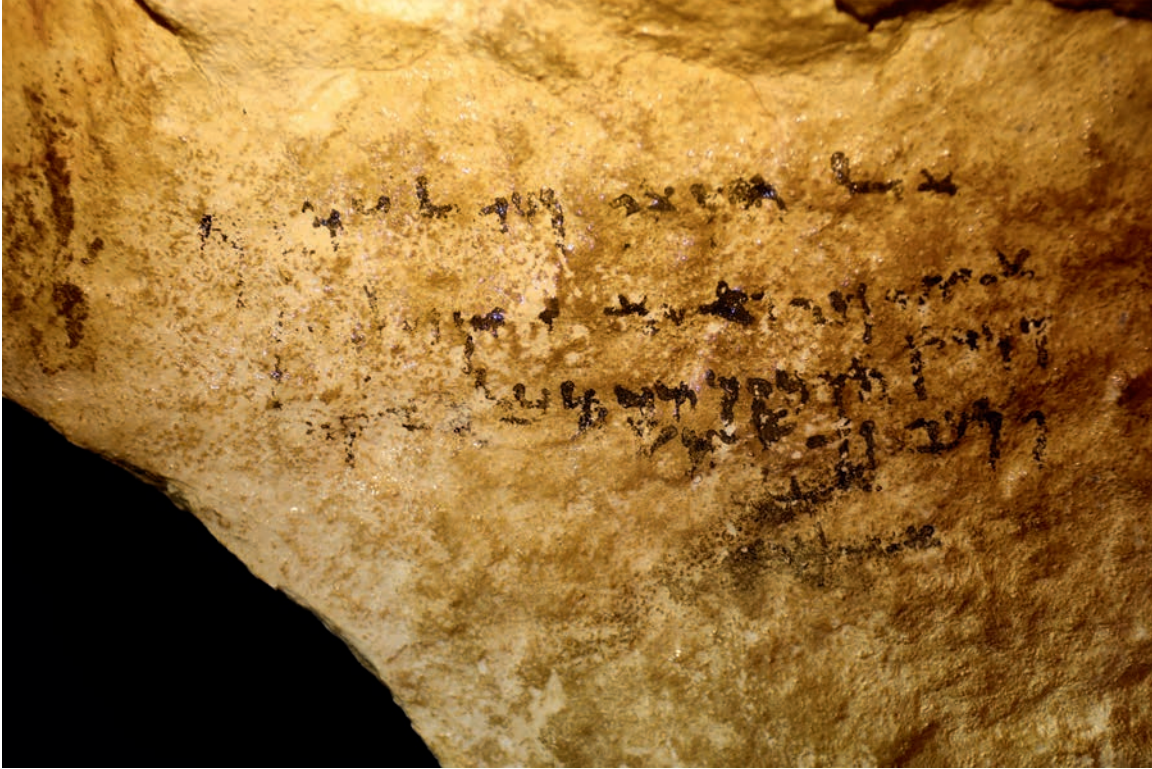


FIG. 6. Aramaic Inscription 3.

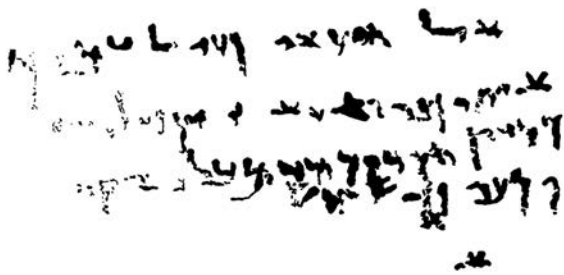


FIG. 7. Drawing of Aramaic Inscription 3 (S. Haruta).

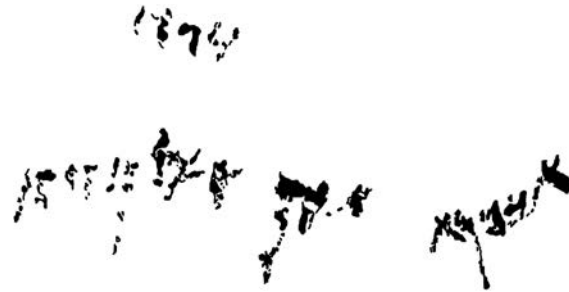


FIG. 8. Drawing of Aramaic(?) Inscription 4 (S. Haruta).

be a kind of spell; the reading proposed here remains speculative, however.

Tableau 6

Located 40 cm below Inscription 4 is a depiction of a human standing with hands on the waist (see fig. 4[d]).²² To the right is an animal that may be a fox, and beyond this a motif that is not comprehensible.

²² For Tableaux 6–8, 13, and 15, measurements are not available at this time.

Tableau 7

This scene contains three motifs: a horse with a saddle or a rider; below to the left, a person depicted frontally holding a spear; and to the right, a stylized image of an ibex (see fig. 4[e]; online fig. 5a).

Tableau 8

This scene (fig. 9) is partly illegible due to fading. Two ibexes (9[a]) are depicted next to each other in left profile; in contrast to elsewhere in the cave, these ibexes are not drawn poised to leap. Perhaps their drooping necks indicate lifeless bodies after being

hunted. Below them is a person with a long spear resting on the shoulder (9[b]), probably a hunter returning from the hunt. The figure is apparently dressed in a shirt and a skirt that reaches to the knees. In front of the figure is what appears to be a scorpion (9[c]) and above that a large feline and an unidentified animal (9[d]).

Tableau 9

At the end of the cave there is a single image (see fig. 4[f]; online fig. 5b) that seems to represent a hybrid creature with a human head and the body of a four-legged animal (probably a bovine). The hands of the creature are raised, possibly holding an object. The figure is 14 cm high x 10 cm wide, with the animal part drawn in profile and the human part drawn frontally. There is no sign of horns or wings. This image is exceptional for being the only depiction of a hybrid creature in Daya Cave. The figure is reminiscent of the bull-man of Mesopotamia, a motif that first appears in the Early Dynastic II period (ca. 2900–2350 BCE). In the art of the Old Babylonian (1894–1595 BCE) and Kassite (1531–1155 BCE) periods, the bull-man appears as an attendant of the sun god of Šamaš. In the Neo-Assyrian period (911–612 BCE) this association continues, with the bull-man frequently appearing as a supporter of the winged disc, but the repertoire also expands to include a new function as a beneficent being warding off evil. These attributes carry on into the Neo-Babylonian (626–539 BCE) and Achaemenid periods (550–330 BCE).²³ The bull-man is also seen in the art of later periods such as the Sassanid period.²⁴ However, we believe that the bull-man of Daya Cave is an Assyrian-Achaemenid motif.

Tableau 10

This tableau, which covers an area 55 cm high x 45 cm wide, is painted at the end of the eastern wall, almost touching the rock projecting from the roof. The scene depicts two human figures close together, each carrying a bundle, perhaps firewood or the corpse of a person or animal (see fig. 4[g]; online fig. 5c).

Tableau 11

This painting is not very clear due to fading but appears to depict two ibexes.

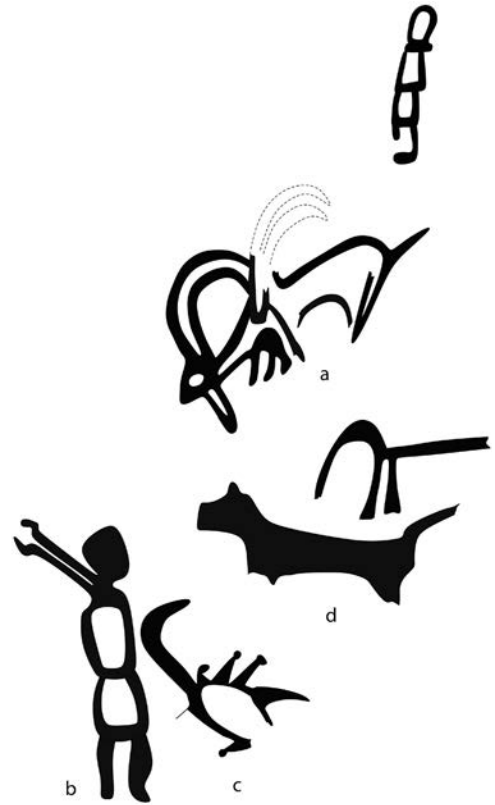


FIG. 9. Drawing of Tableau 8.

Inscription 5

On the descending edge of the rock at the back of the cave, 135 cm above the floor and 150 cm to the right of Tableau 10, is a short, three-line Aramaic inscription written over an area measuring 5 cm high x 10 cm wide (fig. 10; online fig. 6).

Period: Achaemenid or Post-Achaemenid (Early Hellenistic), fourth–early third century BCE

Language: Aramaic

Note: All the readings except line 1 and line 3 *b'ly* are uncertain.

Tableau 12

The most detailed tableau among the paintings is a hunting scene 60 cm high x 120 cm wide drawn on the smoothest part of the western wall (figs. 11, 12). The lower part of the tableau is 60 cm above the floor of the cave. The scene shows a large number of people and various animals such as deer, lions, and ibexes. We describe these from right to left. First is a small animal (see fig. 12[a]), likely a dog or a fox: this is either on its own or accompanying a rider on a galloping horse (12[b]), on the chest of which is some writing

²³ Black and Green 1992, 48–49; Gane 2012, 81–82.

²⁴ See Brunner 1978, 67–68.



FIG. 10. Drawing of Aramaic Inscription 5 (S. Haruta).

(Inscription 6, described below), which is now very difficult to read. Immediately below the horseman is a stag (12[c]) apparently wounded or killed in the hunt. To the left of the horseman is an ibex (12[d]), in front of which is a rider (12[e]) with a spear in his hand chasing two large cats (12[f and g]) having strong, elongated bodies and long, curling tails with round ends, presumably lions. Some way above these is a bird (12[h]). Below the lions to the left is a standing archer (12[i]) shooting at a stag with large antlers (12[j]) that is already penetrated by arrows. Immediately to the left are three kneeling archers, facing right, the lowermost of whom (12[k]) is shooting at the stag, with the upper two (12[l and m]) shooting at the lions. Behind the uppermost archer is what appears to be a large bird (12[p]), and behind the lower two an ibex (12[o]), below which is another animal (12[n]), possibly another ibex. At the left edge of the tableau is a horseman (12[q]) wielding a spear and facing back toward the scene of action. Below the main scene are an animal (12[r]) of which only the rear half is preserved, but whose curling tail may mark it as a lion, and traces of an animal (12[s]) provisionally interpreted as a fox. Above the main scene are a large ibex (12[t]) (perhaps escaped from the hunting area) and a standing archer shooting to the left (12[u]).

Tableau 12 is reminiscent of the scene of Mithra hunting from the Mithraeum in Dura-Europos,²⁵ where Mithra is depicted riding on horseback and shooting with a bow at animals that include deer, gazelle, lion, and boar. This motif is repeated, with slight differences, in the carved scene at the Sassanian

complex at Bandian of Dargaz.²⁶ One specific point of comparison is the depiction of two powerful animals together—the lion and the boar at Dura-Europos, and the two lions in Daya Cave. At the same time, Daya Cave also shares with Bandian the fact that it is the ungulates (the deer and gazelle) who are the main object of the hunt. We therefore believe that Tableau 12 depicts a Mithraic hunting scene. The scene can be regarded as magical, as every arrow that Mithra shoots hits its target without exception.²⁷ In verse 102 of the *Mihr Yasht*, Mithra is introduced riding on a white horse: it is possible that this is the horse depicted in outline in Tableau 12's image b.

Inscription 6

This inscription is virtually illegible: indeed, even the direction of writing is difficult to ascertain.

Period: ?

Language: ?

Notes: The writing may run right to left or left to right. If we read it from right to left, that is, in the manner of Aramaic or Parthian, one of the possible readings would be:

dwz yqḥ Dwz (will/should) take(s)/conquer(s)

If we read it from the left to right, in the manner of Greek or Latin, the reading would be:

HPCI... or HPEI...

which does not make clear sense.

Inscription 7

Above Tableau 12 on the western wall is a four-line inscription (online fig. 7) written over an area measuring 9 cm high x 4 cm wide, which may be related to Tableau 12, 16 cm above. Uniquely, this inscription is written vertically.

Period: Early Sassanian? third century CE

Language: Middle Persian?

Note: The script of Inscription 7 looks similar to that of Inscription 2. Thus, these two inscriptions were probably contemporary and in the same language. It is difficult, however, to decipher Inscription 7; thus, we have not transliterated it.

Inscription 8

On the edge of the rock, on a somewhat rougher part of the cave wall, 70 cm to the right of Tableau 12

²⁵Rostovtzeff 1939.

²⁶See Rahbar 1998; 1999; 2004; 2008; 2017, 232, fig.10.

²⁷Vermaseren 1960, 71.



FIG. 11. Tableau 12.



FIG. 12. Drawing of Tableau 12.

and approximately 132 cm above the cave floor, is a short, two-line inscription written over an area measuring 12 cm high x 7 cm wide (fig. 13).

Period: Achaemenid or Post-Achaemenid (Early Hellenistic), fourth–early third century BCE

Language: Aramaic

Notes:

Line 1: The reading as {šmn} is not certain.

Line 2: Nabû-Šulmān is a name. We regard it as a theophoric name; both Nabû and Šulmān are Mesopotamian gods. The name Šulmān(u) is incorporated into Shalmaneser, Šulmān(u)-ašāred, a name of several Assyrian rulers.

Tableau 13

About 60 cm to the right of Inscription 7 is a drawing of two animals, an ibex with long horns in left profile and a small fox and a dog(?) following (fig. 4[h]; online fig. 5d).

Tableau 14

This scene depicts a running ibex measuring 7 cm high x 12 cm wide and a small fox.

Tableau 15

This scene depicts an ibex with long horns and, some distance in front of it, a running kid (fig. 4[i]).

Tableau 16

The motif depicted in this scene is illegible but may be an animal.

Tableau 17

Near the roof of the cave, at a height of 250 cm above the floor, is a group of three (possibly unrelated) scenes drawn in an area measuring approximately 40 cm high x 30 cm wide (fig. 14; online fig. 8). The uppermost of these scenes depicts a horseman (fig. 14[a]) holding reins in his left hand and throwing a spear with his right at an ibex (14[b]) in front of the horse. The middle scene depicts a man (14[c]) carrying a shield in his left hand and resting a spear on his (right?) shoulder, to the left of whom is a running ibex (14[d]). The lowermost scene is composed of a central image of two people (14[e]) standing facing each other engaged in slaughtering (perhaps sacrificing) an animal (14[f]), possibly a boar, whose legs are tied. To the left and right are two figures facing toward the central scene (14[g]). All four people wear garments extending to the knee, in three cases with belts. The



FIG. 13. Drawing of Aramaic Inscription 8 (S. Haruta).

leftmost figure wears a hood, and two of the other figures also have headdresses, perhaps rounded caps. The fourth person has lines coming up out of his head (14[e, right]), which we interpret as rays of light. The two outer figures are drawn in profile, the two inner ones frontally. To the left of the left-hand central figure is a four-letter legend (14[h]; Inscription 9), and to the right of the right-hand central figure a five-letter legend (14[i]; Inscription 10).

In our opinion, a number of the scenes depicting hunting and sacrifice, for example Tableaux 1, 12, and 17, are related to one another. After the hunt—which Vermaseren believes in Mithraic imagery represents the battle between Mithra and the forces of evil—a sacrifice is offered to the god. As mentioned in the *Avesta*, boars were one of the animals that could be sacrificed for Ahriman, the source of evil.²⁸

Inscription 9

Period: Parthian, mid third century BCE–third century CE

Language: Parthian or Hatran Aramaic?

Note: Both the reading {g-s/h-y-m/p} and its meaning are uncertain. Other readings are possible.

Inscription 10

Period: Parthian, mid third century BCE–third century CE

Language: Parthian or Hatran Aramaic?

²⁸Vermaseren 1960, 76.



FIG. 14. Drawing of Tableau 17.

Notes: The inscription appears to end with {-ssn}. Both Iranian Sāsān and Semitic Sesen, or Sīsin, are divine names; Sāsān seems preferable by the spelling without {y}.²⁹ It is not impossible to read this word *m(tr)ssn* /Mihr-Sāsān/, a well-attested theophoric name with two deities, Mihr and Sāsān.

GENERAL REMARKS ON THE INSCRIPTIONS: GROUPS 1 AND 2

The texts can be classified into two groups: Group 1 (Inscriptions 1, 3, 5, and 8) and Group 2 (Inscriptions 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, and 10).

The letters of the texts we classify as Group 1 are similar to those of the Aramaic texts of the Achaemenid and Early Hellenistic periods from Egypt,³⁰ Idumea,³¹ and Bactria.³² We propose that Group 1 texts broadly date to the Late Achaemenid–Early Hellenistic period.

There are two distinct features in the spellings of these texts. Firstly, {h} was used for {h}, for example in *hyty* for *hyty*, and *'bh* for *'bh*. This usage is not attested in Achaemenid or Hellenistic Aramaic, nor in

Nisa Parthian. It is previously known from Parthian (e.g., Avroman Parchment No. 3) and early Middle Persian.³³ This new evidence seems to show that the usage may date back to the Late Achaemenid–Early Hellenistic era. Secondly, in line 5 of Inscription 1, *d(y)*- was used for the relative particle (later *ezafe*) instead of *zy*. This use is only rarely attested in Achaemenid Aramaic and does not appear in formal documents nor other texts from Iran.³⁴ Moreover, only *ZY* (*zy*) is used in Aramaeograms (*Hozvaresh*) in the Middle Iranian languages (Parthian, Middle Persian, Sogdian, and Khwarezmian), and in inscriptions of Elymaean Aramaic and those from Armenia and Georgia (Armazian) from the second century BCE to the third century CE.³⁵ A few informal Achaemenid Aramaic texts, and later Aramaic (e.g., biblical Aramaic, Palmyrean) sources, employ the spelling *d-* or *dy*. Accordingly, the present text seems to belong to informal Late Achaemenid–Early Hellenistic Aramaic. Since the spelling *dywmt* could result from **dy ywmt* with haplography, we need not infer that the sound change /di/ > */di/ > /da/³⁶ had already occurred.

Group 1 texts are distinguished by the appearance of Mesopotamian divine names—whether the divinities themselves or in personal names—that clearly relates to the Mesopotamian cultural milieu. The deities include Nergal, Šin, Šamaš, Marduk, and Nabû; Enlil may possibly be added to this list if the reading of the name in line 3 of Inscription 1 is indeed a theophoric name compounded in Enlil (Ellil). These are all major Mesopotamian gods. Nergal, Nergol in Aramaic, is a chief god of the underworld. He was also venerated in Hatra during Parthian times, when he was assimilated with Herakles.

We classify all the other texts as Group 2, with the exception of Inscription 4, which may belong to Group 1. These texts seem to have been written later than Group 1 texts. Inscriptions 2 and 7 were probably written at the beginning of the Sassanid period in Middle Persian. Inscriptions 4 and 10 could contain an Iranian element in a title or a personal name, if the readings presented here are correct.

²⁹ Cf. Colditz 2018, 459–61, no. 486 “syn.”

³⁰ See Porten and Yardeni 1986–99.

³¹ See Porten and Yardeni 2014–20.

³² See Naveh and Shaked 2012.

³³ Cf. Skjærvø 1996, 516.

³⁴ Folmer 1995, 49–62.

³⁵ Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995, 1:310–18 “zy”; Skjærvø 1996; Gzella 2015, 278.

³⁶ Cf. Gzella 2008, 111.

OTHER MATERIALS FROM THE CAVE

Terracotta Figurine

On the slope in front of the cave, in addition to some potsherds, a broken figurine was found. It is the upper half of a hollow human figure of soft, well-fired pea-colored clay made from a mold; it measures 50 mm high x 36 mm wide x 22 mm thick (online fig. 9). The preserved part includes the head, shoulders, and chest of a clean-shaven young man wearing a Phrygian cap, a short-sleeved garment, and a shawl around his neck. Both the cap and the shawl are characteristic of the iconography of Mithra. The piece is similar to Roman figurines of Mithra and is typical of votive gifts offered at Mithraea.³⁷ Its presence here is suggestive that Daya Cave may have been a site of Mithraic worship.

Architectural Remains

The area in front of the cave, which leads down to the Mama-Noor canyon, is strewn with fallen rocks, not least those resulting from the terrible earthquake of November 2017. Nevertheless, it is possible to make out some surviving masonry, which we interpret as the remains of platforms. This is reminiscent of the series of terraces found below the relief of Darius I at Bisotun, known as the Median shrine,³⁸ and at Tang-e Hamamlan in Hulailan valley.³⁹ Weapons and votive offerings found at Tang-e Hamamlan identify it as a shrine. We therefore propose that one or more platforms were erected at the entrance of Daya Cave for a purpose related to its ritual use, possibly for the presentation of offerings prior to entering the cave. As yet, it has not been possible to establish the date of construction of these structures.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings discussed in this article, results of initial survey, are preliminary. Undoubtedly they will be refined by further work, in particular excavation and the application of absolute dating methods. Nevertheless, the combined evidence of the iconography and the inscriptions allows us to make some proposals. Firstly, due to its impassability, it is clear that the cave had a function beyond daily practical use such as for dwelling or storage. Secondly, the presence of the bull-man, common in Mesopotamia into the first

millennium, at least into the Achaemenid period, together with the Group 1 texts, which clearly relate to a Mesopotamian cultural framework, suggest a ritual use of the cave in the Achaemenid to Early Hellenistic period. More specifically, if we are right about the association with Nergal, this site would add to the extant evidence for the worship of Nergal, sometimes syncretized with Herakles, in Iran during the Seleucid period that has come from Karaftu Cave,⁴⁰ the shrine of Masjid Suleiman,⁴¹ and the figure of Herakles at Bisotun.⁴²

A number of the paintings depict hunting scenes. Many of these are relatively small vignettes (Tableaux 1, 7, 8, 10, 17). However, Tableau 12 is a major composition portraying a large-scale hunting scene of a type well known in Iranian cultural contexts. Given the other evidence for the presence of Mithraic practice in Daya Cave—the figures with rays of light coming from the head and the terracotta figurine—we suggest that Tableau 12 portrays Mithra at the hunt. In fact, the natural location of the cave, inaccessible and hidden from view, is typical of Mithraic places of worship. In some cases where natural caves have been used as Mithraic places of worship, a structure has additionally been built in front of the entrance in order to conceal it; examples of this are the entrance of the tomb of Baba Qodrat (actually a Mithraic shrine) in Esfarayen, North Khorasan;⁴³ the so-called Qal'eh Maryam (or Qal'eh Manijeh) in Sar Pol-e Zahab;⁴⁴ and both Pergamon and Castrum Zerzevan in Turkey.⁴⁵ Another important feature of Mithraic shrines is their confined space, linked to rites only being conducted in small, intimate groups.⁴⁶ This is true of the two chambers of Daya Cave. All these factors support the thesis that Daya Cave was the site of a Mithraic shrine following its use as a site for the worship of Nergal.

All the figures of people on the walls of Daya Cave appear to be men; there are apparently no female figures among them. In this respect, the iconography of Daya Cave is in the tradition of cave art in Iran, including the Zagros region, going back to prehistoric times,

³⁷ Schwertheim 1979.

³⁸ Lushey and Kleiss 1996.

³⁹ Thrane 1965.

⁴⁰ von Gall 2010.

⁴¹ Ghirshman 1976, 1:101.

⁴² Bivar 1983, 33.

⁴³ Vahdati et al. 2015.

⁴⁴ Khosravi et al. forthcoming.

⁴⁵ Engels 2019; Coşkun and Oğuz-Kirca 2022.

⁴⁶ Schwertheim 1979.

as at Dushe, Mir Malas, and Houmian.⁴⁷ It may be that this is (in all periods) related to certain cultic practices. In the case of Daya, the lack of female depictions would be consistent with our interpretation of the setting as a Mithraic shrine, as the understanding is that women were not permitted to participate in any principal role in Mithraic rituals.⁴⁸ The character of Mihr/Mithra as a god specifically associated with men is clearly reflected not only in the *Mihr Yasht* (17 and 84) but also in *Rig Veda* (7.62.4).⁴⁹

Both the Group 2 inscriptions and the evidence of the ceramic scatter in front of the cave suggest a date in the Parthian and early Sassanian period for this phase of use. Caves are integral to the Mithraic cult⁵⁰—Mithra was indeed said to have been born in a cave in Alborz Mountain.⁵¹ The subterranean element is similarly characteristic of European Mithraism (especially in Italy), whether in the form of caves or purpose-built underground chambers.⁵²

Unfortunately, our knowledge of the history of Mithraism in Iran is still in its infancy. The cult's origins are probably lost in the mists of time. If we do not consider Nush-i Jan Cave as evidence of Mithraism, we must admit that there is no clear evidence of Mithraism in caves in Iran before the Achaemenid period, and in fact all our evidence belongs to the post-Achaemenid period—more specifically, the Parthian period. Hozhabri has discussed how, with the state appropriation of the Zoroastrian religion in the Median and Achaemenid periods, worshipers of Mithra were no longer able to freely perform their religious ceremonies.⁵³ Temples such as Nush-i Jan and Zar Bolagh were filled in by the worshipers themselves, who then turned to caves in order to worship in secret. It seems that the worship of Mithra carried on clandestinely into the Parthian period. The new evidence from Daya Cave is an extraordinarily important witness to this development. If so, the oil mentioned in Inscription 2 is worth highlighting: the oil probably had a religious use and was the same as that offered at the temples.

We know that in the temples of Mithra, on the altar where the sacred fire was kept burning, a hymn was sung and the sacrifice to Mithra was milk, honey, and oil.⁵⁴

To summarize, our first conclusion is that the paintings and inscriptions in Daya Cave bear witness to its use as a place of ritual over a number of centuries. Tentatively, we propose that this may have started in the Achaemenid or Hellenistic period, at which time the association was with gods of the Mesopotamian pantheon. In due course, probably in the Parthian and early Sassanian periods, this gave way to a Mithraic shrine. At some stage that we cannot yet date, one or more structures were built in the open space outside the mouth of the cave. There can be little doubt that Daya Cave has an important story to tell relating to religious practice in Iran in the late first millennium BCE and the early first millennium CE. It is very much to be hoped that future excavation will be able to cast light on the history and the nature of the activities performed at this important religious site.

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⁴⁷McBurney 1969; Izadpanah 1969a; 1969b; 1984; Goff 1970; Bewely 1984; Adeli et al. 2001; Remacle et al. 2006; 2007.

⁴⁸Clauss 2000, 33.

⁴⁹Thieme 1978.

⁵⁰Waldmann 1973, 148–49; Clope 1975.

⁵¹Hami 1976, 9, 55, 62. Another tradition holds that Mithra was born inside a rock; Hartman 1953, 59; Vermaseren 1960, 63.

⁵²Lavagne 1978; Schwertheim 1979.

⁵³Hozhabri 2013; 2014.

⁵⁴Perowne 1969.

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