

Representation of Children in Sasanian Rock Reliefs

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Abstract

Archaeology of children and childhood is rather a new field of study within archaeology and anthropology. However, it is very difficult to trace the presence of children in archaeological material. Their manifestation is mainly limited to mortuary, artefacts or objects considered to be toys or built environment that too may have been either in connection with specific items used by or were in relation to children or iconographic evidence from past. The present study tries to examine depictions of children in Sasanian rock reliefs which have long been the subject of extensive research, nevertheless it seems such depiction on art objects was not a matter of attraction by itself. On the other hand, lack of coherent literary evidence about social status, roles and realm of children and childhood in the Sasanian society leave many questions unanswered. Hence, despite a large number of researches in the field of Sasanian history and archaeology, one cannot postulate a coherent research background specific to the aforementioned subject. Children are displayed in a number of Sasanian rock reliefs which are introduced and presented in chronological order. Identity of these children and purpose of their depiction is discussed based on available works. Although, the historical identity of these children may never be certainly established, but those shown in investiture and parade reliefs of Ardashir I, Shapur I and Narseh at Firuzabad, Naqsh-e Rostam and Naqsh-e Rostam are certainly the children of high status or having royal lineage. In two of Shapur I reliefs, a *putto* is depicted and a probably captive child –enemy's son- are seen in Bahram II/Shapur II relief in Tang-e Chogan.

Keywords: Sasanian; Rock Reliefs; Children.

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Introduction

Interest in children of past societies or the one known as the archaeology of children and childhood is rather a new field of study. Clearly, children were and are a major part of any human society. However, the absence of diverse material remains that could reflect this portion of population in archaeological contexts has, to some extent, led into some sort of negligence. Archaeologists, hence, sometimes forget that past societies were composed of both children and adults with the former playing important roles in different aspects of social life. It is very difficult to trace the presence of children in archaeological material. Their manifestation is mainly limited to three category of archaeological records: mortuary contexts (Chamberlain, 2000 after Baxter, 2008: 161), artefacts such as miniature objects or objects considered to be toys or built environments that in some cases may have been in connection with specific items used by or were in relation to children (Baxter, 2008: 162, 169-70) and lastly iconographic evidence from past.

In the present study, depictions of children in Sasanian rock reliefs is examined. Sasanian rock reliefs have long been the subject of extensive research, nevertheless it seems that the question of children depicted on Sasanian art objects was not a matter of attraction by itself. On the other hand, lack of coherent literary evidence that explains and clarifies social status, roles and realm of children and childhood in the Sasanian society leave many questions unanswered. Sporadic hints and remarks can be found in Middle Persian literature attributed to the Sasanian period, however their scope is restricted and is mostly limited to the subject of children education and upbringing rather than their whole social and personal life (Miri

and Jalali, 2016). Despite a large number of researches in the field of Sasanian history and archaeology, one cannot postulate a coherent research background specific to the subject of the present paper.

Children are displayed in a number of Sasanian rock reliefs. But the historical identity of these children will remain a matter of speculation and may never be certainly established, although their depiction in royal scenes in some cases clearly point to their royal lineage or high social status. In few cases even this assumption cannot be made.

Ardashir I Rock Reliefs (Fd II, NRb III, NRm I)

Chronologically, the first rock relief discussed here is Ardashir I (224-241 AD) investiture relief in Firuzabad known as Firuzabad II. It is believed that this is the second relief created by Ardashir I after his victory over Artabanus IV and the first manifestation of his claim as the king. Here, Ardashir I is standing to the left side of the scene in front of Ahura Mazda and receiving a royal diadem with his right hand from him. Behind Ardashir I, three persons including crown prince Shapur I and two other members of the royal family or court are standing (Fig. 1). We identify Shapur I on the basis of his distinctive emblem –a ring on a T shape base with a crescent on the top– on his headwear. Just behind Ardashir I, a seemingly very young person holds a fly whisk above Ardashir's head while his left hand rests on a sword. Hinz following Ghirshman believes that this figure is shown smaller than others due to his low status (Ghirshman, 1962: 131; Hinz, 1969: 119).

Contrary to this streamlined view, there are evidence indicating that this person was in fact a child or teen and is shown smaller because of his age. First of all, this young boy

wears a distinctive headwear, on which a bud-shaped emblem is recognizable. As evident from other examples of Sasanian rock reliefs, similar types of headwear with an animal-shaped projection was worn mainly by members of royal family or court members. Therefore, it seems that his hat is a distinctive type indicating he was not of a low status. The second point is his physical appearance: he is clearly stretching his hand to keep the whisk above Ardashir's head, and unlike other three men behind him who are looking forward is raising his head to look up; a realistic gesture due to his short height. The last but not the least is the identity of this teen fly whisk bearer. Interestingly, the aforementioned bud-shaped symbol is shown on the headwear of the fly whisk bearer on two other reliefs of Ardahir I at Naqsh-e Rajab and Naqsh-e Rostam as well (NRb III and NRm I) (Figs. 2-3). Here, this person is shown as a young adult, so the reason for his smaller size in Firuzabad II relief cannot be related to his low status and unimportant position; if this was the case, as an iconographic rule, holder of this position should be always shown in smaller size in Sasanian rock reliefs. Hence, what seems more plausible is that this person is very young, and in fact, a high status child from an important family who had been trained to accompany and serve the king. Shahbazi introduces the young fly whisk bearer of Naqsh-e Rostam relief as a member of the Karen family who is about 17 years old and following Lukonin (1971: 305-309), believes this same person is shown behind Ardashir in Naqsh-e Rajab as well (Shahbazi, 2014: 161-2).

Overlaet has a more compelling view; according to him considering the chronological order of Ardashir I reliefs, all three reliefs show the same person who had

been a child/teen during the early years of Ardashir (as in Firuzabad II), turning to a young male during his later years (as in NRb III and NRm I) (Overlaet, 2013: 328). It should be noted that a similar sign is visible in the third battle scene at Firuzabad I relief. Here, one of Ardahir's men is grasping enemy from behind. The bud-shape emblem is recognizable on his headwear and horse footcloth. If this was a first relief of Ardashir I, clearly Firuzabad II child cannot be identical with him as believed (Shahbazi, 2014: 161 following Lukonin, 1971: 309). Nevertheless, putting all these evidence together, we may conclude that a certain family with this familial emblem (Karen according to Shahbaz, 2014: 161-2 or Suren family according to Kalani, 2017) held a special position at least in the early Sasanian period; their members assisted Ardashir I in his rise to power (Firuzabad I), and accompanied him since in the symbolic position of the king's fly whisk bearer and were portrayed in his reliefs just behind him as a child or a young man (Fd II, NRb III and NRm I).

Ardashir is portrayed in yet another investiture relief in Naqsh-e Rajab (NRb III). Here also Ardashir I is standing in front of Ahura Mazda and receiving a royal diadem from him with his right hand. Two adults are shown behind Ardashir I, his fly whisk bearer, about whom we already discussed above, and the crown prince Shapur I. Behind Ahura Mazda and in a seemingly detached space two royal women are shown. Between Ardashir I and Ahura Mazda, two small figures are standing (Fig. 4), whose identity were the matter of controversy among scholars. According to Sarre, these "two child figures" are both Ardashir's sons and his heirs to the throne and here significance of their presence in the

investiture ceremony is documented (Sarre and Herzfeld, 1910: 94-5). Here again however, Hinz believes these figures are adults who are shown smaller due to their status (Hinz, 1969: 123), a view that is not followed here. Herzfeld identifies the naked small figure to the right in front of Ahura Mazda as “surely a Greek divine figure” because of his unclothed appearance (Herzfeld, 1941: 311). According to Hinz, although his nudity is not an Iranian concept but Barsom in his hand has given him an Iranian character. He identifies him as Hercules, represented as his Iranian counterpart Vrthragna/Bahram (Hinz, 1969: 123; Levit-Tawil, 1992: 192; Luschey, 1986: 377-80). Overlaet also has introduced him as Hercules-Vrthragna (Overlaet, 2013: 324). Identity of this figure as Bahram, benefits the identification of the other small figure. Herzfeld identified him as Hormozd-Ardashir (Hormozd I), Ardashir’s beloved grandson (Herzfeld, 1941: 311). Hinz rejects this idea; according to him, Hormozd-Ardashir could not have been born at this time and hence identifies this figure as Bahram, Shapur I’s eldest son who later succeeded Hormozd I (Hormozd-Ardashir) (Hinz, 1969: 124). Hence, here Bahram I is portrayed along with his namesake deity. This view is acknowledged by other scholars as well (Shahbazi, 2014: 333, 343-4). This identification in its turn help identifying one of the two female figures to the right side of the relief as Shapur’s wife and Bahram’s mother (Hinz, 1969: 126). Bahram I is later depicted in Shapur I’s parade relief at Naqsh-e Rajab (NRb I) as a young adult in the third row behind the king (Fig. 5). Just behind king Shapur I in the same relief, a young figure is recognizable. Both Sarre and Hinz believe he is Hormozd-Ardashir, who is now Shapur I’s crown prince and must have been

about 10 years old (Herzfeld 1928: 132; Hinz, 1969: 137-9; Sarre and Herzfeld, 1910: 93; Vanden Berghe, 1966: 24). So here we have another royal child depicted on a rock relief.

Shapur I Rock Reliefs (NRb I, BŠ II, III)

Shapur I’s relief in Naqsh-e Rajab and the depiction of his very young crown prince, Hormozd I behind the king was already discussed above.

A different representation of children is noticeable on two triumph reliefs of Shapur I in Tang-e Chowgan, near the ancient city of Bishapur (BŠ II on the left bank of Shapur River and BŠ III on the right bank) (Figs. 6-7). Here Shapur I displays his three glorious victories over Romans in a single scene. Gordian III is fallen dead beneath Shapur’s horse feet, Philip the Arab is kneeling in front of Shapur I for his mercy, while he is holding Valerian’s wrist as a sign of his captivity and Philip the Arab is kneeling in front of him. In both scenes, Shapur is receiving the royal diadem from a putto, a Hellenistic icon, who is flying toward the king. According to Keall, this is “an obvious borrowing from western iconography” (Ghirshman, 1962: 157; Keall, 1989: 288). Babies with or without wings can be rarely seen on other mediums of the Sasanian art including seals and silver vessels, mainly in relation to Anahita myth or Dionysus victory scenes in case of silver vessels, which is itself a loaned Greek/Roman mythical theme. In Parthian art, winged Nike in form of a woman or baby was borrowed from Hellenistic art and was displayed mainly on coins (Sellwood, 1980: 54.6).

What makes such display of baby Nike or simply a putto in Shapur I’s reliefs fascinating is the context in which such scenes were viewed. It is well known from historical records and Shapur’s inscription (ŠKZ, 22, 30) that captives of wars with Rome, were

settled in cities of Fars and Khuzestan. The nearby city of Bishapur was one of major cities in Fars, which became home to many Roman captives. Thus, considering the potential Roman visitors of these rock reliefs, the depiction of putto as a familiar symbol of victory in western eyes, would certainly had a huge propagandist effect: no one but a non-Iranian persona, a putto is honoring the victorious king with the royal diadem. Absence of this figure in his similar victory relief at Naqsh-e Rostam (NRm VI), which was located in an environment with a different population composition further attests to this postulation.

Narseh Rock Relief (NRm VIII)

An investiture scene was commissioned by Narseh (293-305 AD) in about 293-295 AD near Darius' tomb in Naqsh-e Rostam. This is the last Sasanian relief in the site from the east, where the main entrance to the site was once located and hence is called NRm VIII (Shahbazi, 2014: 28) (Fig 8). Narseh is shown receiving royal diadem from a lady; two other figures are standing behind him; the second one is unfinished. Most scholars believe the lady is Anahita (Ghirshman, 1962: 176; Lukonin, 1971: 321; Mostafavi, 1964: 30; Musavi Haji and Mehrafarin, 2009; Sarre and Herzfeld, 1910: 84-8; Vanden Berghe, 1966: 25). Other scholars however identify her not as Anahita but as Queen Shapur Dokhtan, Narseh's wife (Brosius, 2010; Levit-Tawil, 1992; Overlaet, 2013: 314-5; Shahbazi, 1983: 265-8).

In this relief, again a child is standing between the king and the lady (Herrmann and Howell, 1977; Sarre and Herzfeld, 1910: 87-8) (Fig. 9). Upper part of his body and face are relatively damaged. He reaches to the waist of adult figures and due to its size seems to a child. As most research about this relief

were concentrated on the identity of the lady and historical significance of the scene, very little attention has been paid to this child and his identity. His pose and outfit is nearly identical to Narseh's; he is wearing a royal robe and apparently a similar crown but without corymbes and holds a sword in his left hand. His general representation indicate that he must have been a member of royal family and perhaps a beloved son or grandson of Narseh. Some scholars identify this boy to be Narseh's son Hormozd II, whose presence in the investiture scene is a testimony to his position as Narseh's crown prince (Sarre and Herzfeld, 1910: 87; Schmidt, 1970: 134). Others, however, believe that he is Narseh's grandson, Azar Narseh (Musavi Haji and Mehrafarin, 2009:78; Shahbazi, 1983: 268). This latter view seems more plausible as the figure standing just behind Narseh wears as a crown prince and seems to be Narseh's son, Hormozd II (Lukonin, 1971: 312; Shahbazi 2014: 224; Musavi Haji and Mehrafarin, 2009: 78). The presence of the king's grandson in the investiture scene, as discussed above, was already testified in Ardashir I's relief in NRj III as well and hence seems to be a tangible iconographic code in early Sasanian rock reliefs.

Bahram II/Shapur II Rock Relief (BŠ VI)

The sixth relief of Tang-e Chowgan has been a matter of controversy among scholars. While some identify the seated king as Bahram II and his victory over Hormozd Kushan Shah (274-291 AD) (Lukonin, 1971: 316, 319-320, Musavi Haji and Sarfaraz, 1396: 139-142), other believe it belongs to Shapur II (309-379 AD) and his victory over Kushans (Ghirshman, 1962: 184-5; Herrmann & Howell, 1981; Vanden Berghe, 1966: 56). Further discussion on the identity

of the king and interpretation of depicted scene is out of the scope of the present paper. The general theme of the scene is about the victory of the seated king, captivation and submission of his defeated nation who are bringing him some gifts. What makes this relief worthy of mention here is depiction of a child in the lower register to the right of the relief (Fig. 10). Unlike the aforementioned examples, this child seems not be a member of the Sasanian court but might be a member of the defeated enemy family. He is depicted behind the first person in the row who is apparently presenting to heads to the Sasanian king. The relief is not well-finished and eroded as well, so it is not possible to determine the exact gesture of this child. Nevertheless, it seems he is holding the garment of the first person and is looking up to the king. If this king is, in fact, Bahram II and this relief commemorates his victory over his rebel brother, Hormozd Kushan Shah, could this child be Hormozd's son–Bahram's nephew– or son of one of those beheaded enemies who is now brought to the Sasanian court as a captive? We may never know.

Discussion and Conclusion

Studies show that child and childhood were defined differently in past societies; no common definition of childhood existed in the past and each culture and society had a different definition of child and childhood on the basis of its own unique experiences and cultural criteria. It is now clear that in the past societies, biological and social ages were not necessarily in line with each other as in modern times (Spencer-Wood 2017). Literary evidence –both in Middle Persian and Islamic historical texts- attributed to Sasanian period point to two important biological ages in the social life of a person,

seven and fifteen (Miri and Jalali, 2016: 164-5). It seems that by age seven, a new period of formal and social education began for a child and he/she entered a larger sphere of social life until age of fifteen when his genuine adult independent life as a man or woman began.

We may never know the exact identity of those children depicted on the Sasanian rock reliefs, but clearly those shown in investiture and parade reliefs of Ardashir I, Shapur I and Narseh at Firuzabad, Naqsh-e Rostam and Naqsh-e Rostam are certainly children of high status or royal families, be it the king's son or grandson, most likely between age 7 and 10, who are now present at the court, attending formal ceremonies and learning royal. Apart from reading and writing skills, according to Middle Persian texts such as *Karnamak-i Ardashir Papakan* or *Tarikh-e Tabari* and many other texts royal and high status children of the court were thought skills such as hunting, games, chess, riding, battle tricks, etc. since the start of their formal education at age seven (Miri and Jalali, 2016: 154-5). It worth noting here that an important genre of Middle Persian texts is a genre known as *Andarznameh* or *Andarz* literature. "As a literary designation, the term *andarz* denotes the type of literature which contains advice and injunctions for proper behaviour, whether in matters of state, everyday life, or religion", and "made by a prominent person, such as a king or a high priest, to his son, his courtiers, people of the world, etc., and commonly indicates a spiritual testament" (Shaked and Safa, 1985). Again these texts are full of comments about the upbringing of children of royal family and court. Hence it is not surprising to see children about 7-10 in Ardashir I's investiture relief (Bahram I, NRb III), Shapur I's parade relief (Hormozd-Ardashir, NRb I), and Narseh's investiture relief (Azar Narseh,

NRm VIII) are present in a such a scene and the fly bearer of Ardashir I accompany him since a very young age.

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Fig. 1 Ardashir I Investiture Rock Relief at Firuzabad

([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Sasanian_reliefs#/media/File:Ardashir_i%27s_relief_at_Firuzabad](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Sasanian_reliefs#/media/File:Ardashir_i%27s_relief_at_Firuzabad,_Fars,_Iran.JPG),_Fars,_Iran.JPG)



Fig. 2 Ardashir I Investiture Rock Relief at Naqsh-e Rajab

(https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/77/Ardeshir_Babakan_and_Ahuramazda_Photo_From_Sah_and_Ace.jpg)

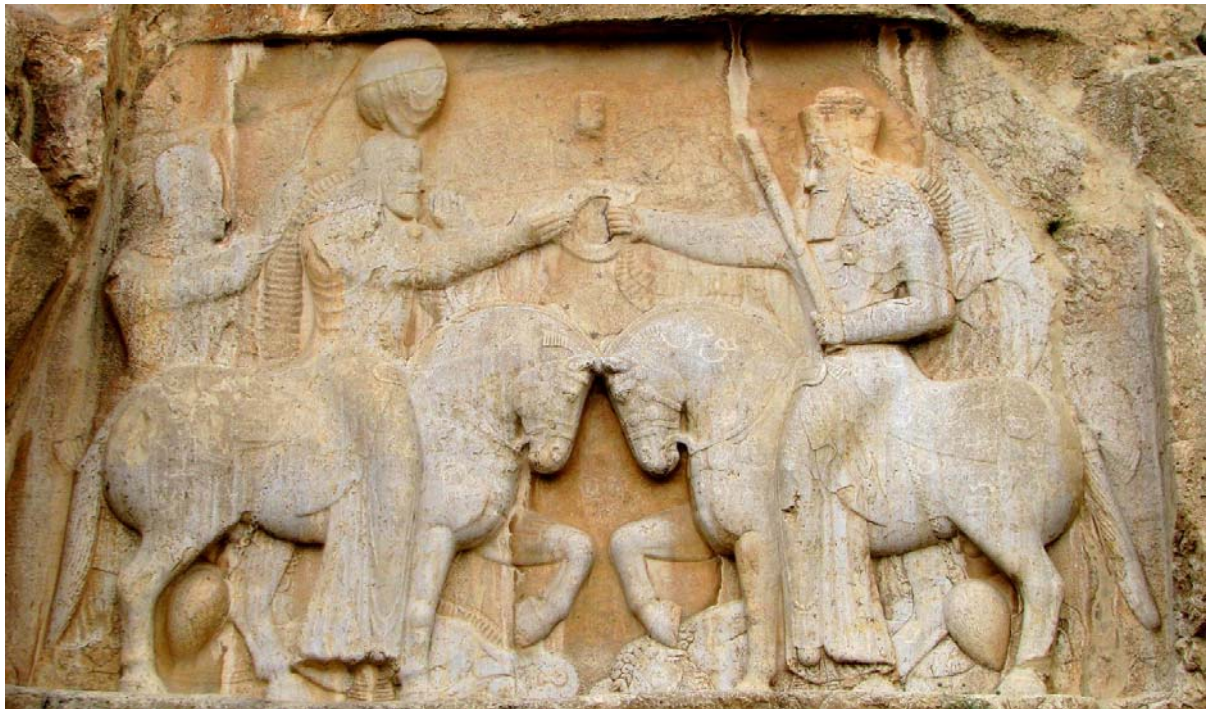


Fig. 3 Ardashir I Investiture Rock Relief at Naqsh-e Rostam

(https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/41/Naqsh_i_Rustam._Investiture_d%27Ardashir_2.JPG)



Fig. 4 Two Small Figures in Ardashir I Investiture Rock Relief at Naqsh-e Rajab (Photo by Dariush Mohammadkhani)



Fig. 5 Shapur I Parade Rock Relief at Naqsh-e Rajab
([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Naqsh-e_Rajab#/media/File:Marvdasht_-
_Rajab_Inscription_\(Naghsh_Rajab\)_-_panoramio_\(3\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Naqsh-e_Rajab#/media/File:Marvdasht_-_Rajab_Inscription_(Naghsh_Rajab)_-_panoramio_(3).jpg))



Fig. 6 Shapur I Triumph Relief at Tang-e Chowgan, to the Left Bank of Shapur River



Fig. 7 Shapur I Triumph Relief at Tang-e Chowgan, to the Right Bank of Shapur River



Fig. 8 Narseh Investiture Rock Relief at Naqsh-e Rostam

(https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ed/Naghsh-e_rostam%2C_Ir%C3%A1n%2C_2016-09-24%2C_DD_08.jpg)



Fig. 9 Small Figure Standing in Narseh Rock Relief at Naqsh-e Rostam (Photo by Dariush Mohammadkhani)



Fig. 10 Shapur II (?) Enthroned

کودکان در سنگ نگاره‌های ساسانی

نگین میری^۱

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چکیده

کودکان همواره بخشی از هر جامعه انسانی بوده و هستند؛ با این حال پیگیری، مستندسازی و تحلیل جایگاه آنان در جوامع باستانی بر اساس مدارک باستان‌شناختی بسیار دشوار است. شواهد باستان‌شناختی ملموس مرتبط با کودکان را غالباً در سه دسته شواهد تدفینی، اشیاء و فضاهای مرتبط یا بازی و فعالیت کودکان و شواهد شمایل‌نگارانه یا تصویری دسته‌بندی می‌کنند. در این نوشتار نقش کودکان در سنگ‌نگاره‌های ساسانی مورد بررسی قرار گرفته است. سنگ‌نگاره‌های ساسانی تاکنون از جنبه‌های گوناگونی مورد پژوهش و بررسی قرار گرفته‌اند اما به نظر می‌رسد مسئله کودکانی که در این نگاره‌ها نقش شده‌اند، کمتر موضوع پژوهشی منسجم و مستقل بوده است. از سوی دیگر فقدان اطلاعات مفصل و منسجم در در منابع نوشتاری درباره قلمرو و جایگاه اجتماعی کودک و کودکی در جامعه ساسانی بسیاری از پرسش‌ها را بدون پاسخ می‌گذارد. در این نوشتار سنگ‌نگاره‌هایی که بر آنها نقشی از کودکان نشان داده شده است معرفی شده و با رویکردی توصیفی-تحلیلی و با بهره‌مندی از اطلاعات تاریخی هویت و انگیزه نمایش کودک در هر سنگ‌نگاره بررسی شده است. چنین به نظر می‌رسد کودکانی که در صحنه‌های دیهیم‌بخشی اردشیر اول در فیروزآباد، شاپور اول در نقش رجب، و نرسه در نقش رستم نقش شده‌اند کودکان خاندان سلطنتی با رتبه و جایگاهی در نظام شاهی باشند. کودکان نقش شده در دو سنگ‌نگاره شاپور اول در تنگ چوگان فرشتگانی هستند که به تأثیر از هنر غربی و بنا به دلایل تبلیغاتی در این نگاره‌ها نقش شده‌اند. کودک دربند منقوش در سنگ‌نگاره بهرام دوم/شاپور دوم در تنگ چوگان با توجه به گزارش‌های تاریخی به احتمال پسر دشمن شکست خورده‌ای است که پیروزی بر او موضوع اصلی نقش است.

واژه‌های کلیدی: ساسانی، سنگ‌نگاره، کودکان.

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