Forging Links with the Centre for Achaemenid Studies, National Museum of Iran

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Introduction

In August 2004, Elisabeth Pamberg (Insitute of Archaeology (IoA), UCL) and I were granted a visa to visit Iran at the request of staff from the National Museum in Tehran. The purpose of our two-week visit was to volunteer in the museum and gain an understanding of the resources available to staff, researchers and the general public. The long-term aim was to create a mutually beneficial academic arrangement, whereby IoA students could have the opportunity to carry out valuable research on material in the collections, while keeping museum staff updated on the latest ideas and practices within the fields of archaeology and museum studies in the UK.

The National Museum of Iran

The National Museum of Iran (Fig. 1), also known as the Archaeological Museum, is an impressive piece of architecture in its own right. Designed by the French architect André Godard, it is modelled on a Sassanian palace. The displays span the Palaeolithic to the end of the Sassanian period, with the majority of the objects coming from excavations at the sites of Persepolis, Sialk, Shush, Rey and Turang Tappeh. A number of the text labels are in both Persian (Farsi) and English and many of the artefacts are of exceptional quality; however, the displays themselves remain somewhat basic, not having been updated for several decades.

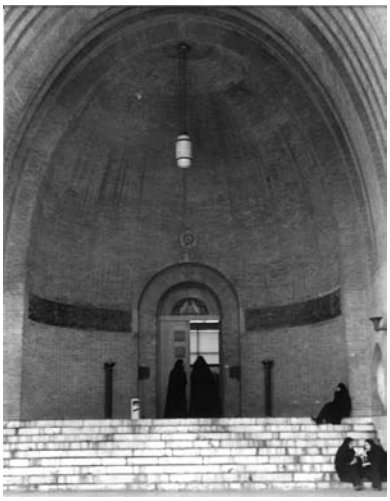

Figure 1. National Museum of Iran, entrance.

The museum staff are very keen to increase their understanding of new museological principles. This is particularly relevant as plans are afoot to improve the museum's facilities by building a further two storeys onto the present building in order to increase both exhibition and office space. Work will commence during the museum's temporary closure whilst many of its most prized objects are on loan to a temporary exhibition at the British Museum, London, entitled "Forgotten Empire: The World of Ancient Persia", which runs from 9th September 2005 to 8th January 2006.

The National Museum has set up in-house centres of expertise, which were opened in 2001. Curators Shahrokh Razmjou, Fereidoun Biglaris and Saman Heydari have cre-

ated a Palaeolithic Centre consisting of visible storage for the lithic collection, and an Achaemenid Centre. The latter includes of a study room and separate workroom which is used to store glazed bricks from Susa, carved stone fragments from the sites of Persepolis, Susa and Farmeshgan, and clay tablet fragments from Persepolis. The majority of the tablets housed in the Achaemenid Centre are 'treasury' tablets (see below) but there are also a number of 'fortification' tablets, returned to the museum in 2004 by the Oriental Institute of Chicago, which conducted excavations at the site in the 1930s. These include a seal impression dating to the reign of Cyrus I (600-580 BC), possibly the earliest surviving example of Achaemenid art. The first ever exhibition of 'fortification' tablets opened in May 2005.

Achaemenid Centre Projects and Aims

There are currently a total of nine ongoing research projects. These include the digital reconstruction of museum collection artefacts and virtual reality simulations of various Achaemenid sites and buildings. The Persepolis clay tablet fragments have already been sorted according to which part of the tablets they are from (Fig. 2), although their refitting presents another lengthy process which will ultimately involve the translation of the texts and a study of the seal impressions in preparation for publication (Razmjou 2002).

Figure 2. Sorting tablet fragments from Persepolis.

The Treasury Tablets

I spent some of my time working on the 'treasury' tablets from Persepolis, looking for fragments containing seal impressions and categorising them according to the type of scenes depicted. These texts were found in the north-eastern room of the Treasury of Xerxes and are written in Elamite. They were preserved as a result of the conflagration which ensued from the sacking of the city in 331 BC by Alexander the Great (Dandamayev 2005), and date from the 30th year of the reign of Darius I to the seventh year of the reign of Artaxerxes I (492-458 BC).

The form of the tablets themselves (Fig. 3) is standardised: they are U-shaped and pierced either side at the top for suspension. In some instances where the tablets are broken in half, carbonised remains of the suspension thread still survive. If seal im-

pressions are present, they are normally located either at the end of the text or on the curved surface of the top of the tablet. The majority of the impressions I looked at were of a standardised type and similar to those on the fortification tablets (Root and Garrison 2001). They depict a central 'hero' holding two winged bulls, human-headed bulls or griffins, often flanked by a palm tree below a winged disk symbol of the god Ahuramazda, with a number of vertical or horizontal lines of cuneiform framing the scene.

Figure 3. Treasury tablet from Persepolis. Elamite, 5th century BC.

The Ceramics Store

There are several on-site stores at the museum, although due to time constraints we were only able to visit the ceramics store. A huge programme of re-packing is underway to process a substantial backlog of finds – some dating to the 1930s – that have been deposited from excavations around the country and have yet to be unpacked. A recently created pottery reference collection is divided by both period and provenance and provides an invaluable research tool. Elisabeth Pamberg spent some time in this store looking for examples of terra sigillata, the imitations of Roman Samian ware manufactured in the imperial provinces. She also demonstrated the method for reconstructing a vessel using plaster to museum staff.

Disseminating Knowledge

In response to the museum's thirst for new ideas and approaches, we each gave a short presentation, open to all museum staff. Elisabeth discussed the different techniques museums use to conserve and reconstruct archaeological ceramics, and I talked about recent trends and practices in collections care and management. Both presentations were well received, despite our being unable to deliver them in Persian. We also gave some relevant articles on museum theory and practice to the museum's library for both staff and students to consult.

Post-Achaemenid Graffiti at Persepolis

As part of our trip we flew to Shiraz and spent three days at Persepolis with Shahrokh Razmjou, who is in the process of writing his PhD on the topic of ritual practices at the

site. Persepolis was one of the capitals of the Achaemenid Empire and building was begun by Darius I, probably in 512 BC, to replace the old capital at nearby Pasargade. It was a privilege to be able to stay at the site, and a wonderful experience to see the scenes of gift-bearers carved on the Apadana stairway (Fig. 4) at close quarters.

Figure 4. Detail of tribute procession. Stone relief on the west wing of the northern stairway of the Apadana (audience hall), Persepolis

The Persepolis museum is, somewhat controversially, housed in a full-scale reconstruction directly on top of the foundations of an original building, incorporating the doorjambs and lintels. At the time of excavation, this building was dubbed the 'Harem' of Xerxes but its true function remains a matter for academic debate. The museum contains a range of objects that were discovered during the excavations. On the limestone blocks of both the 'Harem' and the *Tachara* (Palace of Darius) a number of examples of very thinly incised Sassanian graffiti were first noted by the German archaeologist Ernst Hertzfeld (1935: 80). The depictions include princely male figures mounted on horseback whose similarity to the images on Sassanian rock-reliefs has been noted (Callieri 2003).

Ultimately, Shahrokh Razmajou's aim is to publish all of the examples of graffiti discovered to date together in one volume; however, due to the shallowness of the incisions, it is incredibly difficult to photograph them. We managed to produce a better image using a flatbed scanner against the limestone lintels (Fig. 5).

Collectively, we also found several other previously undiscovered examples of graffiti. I found a possible depiction of an ibex, a separate ibex head and two other crudely scratched quadrapeds. Shahrokh found a horse and a deer's head and one of the museum attendants found a male human head in profile facing left, with a long, round-tipped beard and wearing a tall curved cap with ear-flaps and a neck-shield (Fig. 6). It can be identified as a depiction of a Sassanian king by the presence of a diadem on top of the cap. As in the preceding Parthian period, this was a kingly prerogative (Callieri 2003: 5).

There are clearly many more examples to discover and since our visit, the director of Persepolis, Maziar Kazemi, has granted permission for conservators to remove a deposit that covers part of the surface of the limestone blocks in the 'Harem' in the hope of revealing further examples.

Figure 5. Sharokh Razmjou and the author recording Sassanian graffiti using a flatbed scanner.

Figure 6. Graffito depicting a Sassanian king's head in profile, recorded using the method.

Conclusion

The wealth of material held by the National Museum is quite staggering and although there is no shortage of staff, the potential for research and study is, as in most museums, far in excess of the resources available. Shortly after we visited, another IoA student was granted a visa to carry out research in the National Museum, and we hope that further collaboration will be possible in the future.

Acknowledgements
Many thanks are due to Shahrokh Razmjou for showing us the work undertaken by the Achaemenid Centre and the contents of its storerooms. He also made the arrangements for our trip to Persepolis and supplied Figs. 2, 3, 4 and 6. Thanks must also go to Roya Arab (IoA) for her tireless work over a number of years helping with applications to the foreign ministry of Iran and her constant liaison with staff at the museum, all of which enabled us to be granted visas. Finally, our thanks to Ms Seppid Nameh who acted as our guide in Tehran, to the staff of the ceramic store for showing us around and assisting in Elisabeth's searches of the collections, and to the rest of the staff at the National Museum and Persepolis who made us so welcome.

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