

**The Oriental
Institute**

Persepolis and Ancient Iran

Compiled by Ursula Schneider



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Note

Persepolis and Ancient Iran, containing about 900 photographs printed from the original field negatives, gives a comprehensive pictorial chronicle of archaeological sites in ancient Iran. Some of the photographs were taken during 1931–34 under Professor Ernst Herzfeld, but most date from 1934–39, when Professor Erich F. Schmidt was field director of the Oriental Institute's expeditions to Iran.

A large number of photographs included in this Text/Fiche have never before been published. Others have been included in Oriental Institute publications.

The material is organized according to the order of the following Oriental Institute publications: Erich F. Schmidt, *Persepolis I: Structures, Reliefs, Inscriptions*, OIP LXVIII (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); *Persepolis II: Contents of the Treasury and Other Discoveries*, OIP LXIX (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); *Persepolis III: The Royal Tombs and Other Monuments*, OIP LXX (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Alexander Langsdorff and Donald E. McCown, *Tall-i-Bakun A, Season of 1932*, OIP LIX (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942); Erich F. Schmidt, *The Treasury of Persepolis and Other Discoveries in the Homeland of the Achaemenians*, OIC 21 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939); and Erich F. Schmidt, *Flights over Ancient Cities of Iran* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940).

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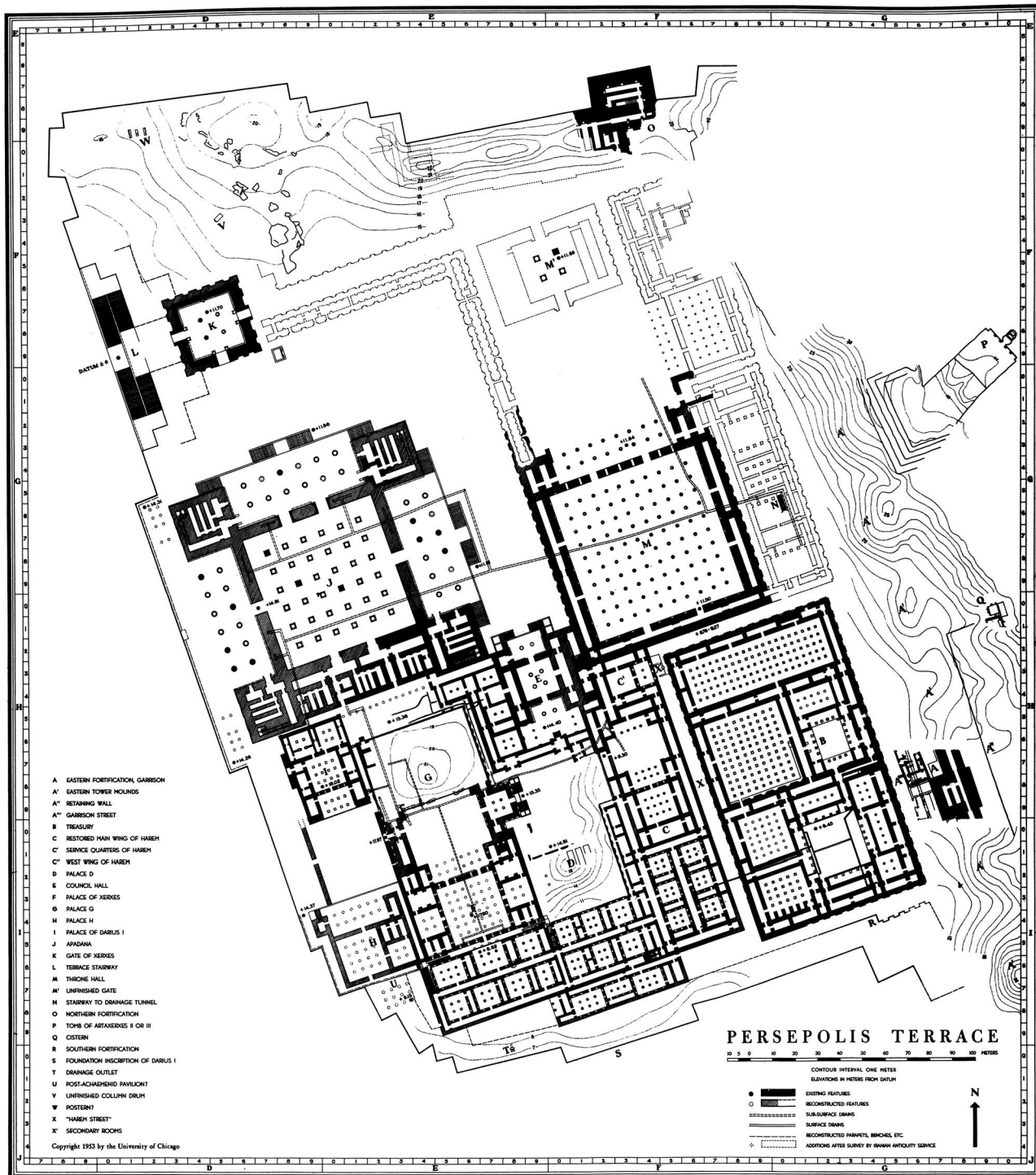
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Introduction

Persepolis

The magnificent ruins of Persepolis lie at the foot of Kuh-i-Rahmat, or “Mountain of Mercy,” in the plain of Marv Dasht about 400 miles south of the present capital city of Teheran.

The exact date of the founding of Persepolis is not known. It is assumed that Darius I began work on the platform and its structures between 518 and 516 B.C., visualizing Persepolis as a show place and the seat of his vast Achaemenian Empire. He proudly proclaimed his achievement; there is an excavated foundation inscription that reads, “And Ahuramazda was of such a mind, together with all the other gods, that this fortress (should) be built. And (so) I built it. And I built it secure and beautiful and adequate, just as I was intending to.”¹ But the security and splendor of Persepolis lasted only two centuries. Its majestic audience halls and residential palaces perished in flames when Alexander the Great conquered and looted Persepolis in 330 B.C. and, according to Plutarch, carried away its treasures on 20,000 mules and 5,000 camels.²

From the time of its barbaric destruction until A.D. 1620, when its site was first identified, Persepolis lay buried under its own ruins. During the following centuries many people traveled to and described Persepolis and the ruins of its Achaemenid palaces. Many of their observations were later condensed and published by George N. Curzon in *Persia and the Persian Question* (London and New York, 1892). But scholarly and scientifically planned work was not undertaken until 1931. Then Ernst Herzfeld, at that time Professor of Oriental Archaeology in Berlin, was commissioned by James H. Breasted, Director of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, to undertake a thorough exploration, excavation and, if possible, restoration of the remains of Persepolis. Thus, Herzfeld, in 1931 became the first field director of the Oriental Institute's Persepolis Expeditions. In 1931–34, assisted by his architect, Fritz Krefter, he uncovered on the Persepolis Terrace the beautiful Eastern Stairway of the Apadana and the small stairs of the Council Hall. He also excavated the Harem of Xerxes. When Herzfeld left in 1934, Erich F. Schmidt took charge. He continued the large-scale excavations of the Persepolis complex and its environs until the end of 1939, when the onset of the war in Europe put an end to his archaeological work in Iran. During the last years of excavating, the University Museum in Philadelphia and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston had joined the Oriental Institute in order to cope with the tremendous work at hand.³

1. Erich F. Schmidt, *Persepolis I: Structures, Reliefs, Inscriptions*. OIP LXVIII, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 63.

2. Alexander, 37.

3. After the departure of the Persepolis Expedition, the Iranian Antiquity Service continued excavating on the Persepolis Terrace. The structures they found, prior to 1953, are included on the reconstructed plan of the Persepolis Terrace, and are indicated by broken lines. In 1964, preserving and restoring of the monuments were entrusted to the Italian Institute of the Middle and Far East, Rome. A report of their work (Ann Britt Tilia, *Studies and Restoration at Persepolis and Other Sites in Fars* [Rome, 1972]) adds significantly to our knowledge of the structures on the Persepolis Terrace.

Schmidt's expedition staff, though varying from year to year, consisted mainly of his assistant Donald E. McCown, architect John S. Bolles and assistant Elliot F. Noyes (both later replaced in 1937 by Richard C. Haines), photographer Boris Dubensky, and various draftsmen, recorders, mechanics, and the like. The digging crew, recruited from villagers, fluctuated from 200 to 500 men. Elaborating on this, Schmidt wrote that at the beginning of each season about 20 to 30 laborers arrived from Damghan, old-time workers, honest peasants and trusted hands, who were trained for the delicate job of excavating. They, in turn, recruited the bulk of the digging crew.

Structures, Reliefs, Inscriptions

This section deals mainly with the architecture of the palace complex, and its buildings and embellishing reliefs. These date entirely from the Achaemenian period (518–331/30 B.C.) except for a few remnants of post-Achaemenid structures.

An inscription carved on the southern face of the Terrace proves that Darius the Great was the founder of Persepolis. Work was started about 518 B.C., although the tremendous task was not completed until about 100 years later by Artaxerxes I. Before any of the buildings could be erected, considerable work had to be done. This mainly involved cutting into an irregular and rocky mountainside in order to shape and raise the large platform and to fill the gaps and depressions with rubble.

According to tablets inscribed in Old Persian and Elamite found at Persepolis, it seems that Darius planned this impressive complex of palaces not only as the seat of government but also, and primarily, as a show place and a spectacular center for the receptions and festivals of the Achaemenian kings and their empire. Darius lived long enough to see only a small part of his plans executed. His brilliant and grandiose ideas were taken up and followed by his son and successor Xerxes, who, according to an excavated foundation inscription, said: "When my father Darius went (away from) the throne, I by the grace of Ahuramazda became king on my father's throne. After I became king . . . what had been done by my father, that I also (did), and other works I added."⁴ Actually, the Persepolis we know is mostly the work of Xerxes.

In dealing with the Persepolis platform, we have to understand that the northern part of the Terrace, consisting mainly of the Audience Hall of the Apadana, the Throne Hall, and the Gate of Xerxes, represented the official section of the Persepolis complex, accessible to a restricted public. The other part held the Palaces of Darius and Xerxes, the Harem, the Council Hall, and such. Following is a brief enumeration of the buildings, and their most outstanding features, that constitute the Terrace complex.

The Apadana. By far the largest and most magnificent building is the Apadana, begun by Darius and finished by Xerxes, that was used mainly for great receptions by the kings. Thirteen of its seventy-two columns still stand on the enormous platform to which two monumental stairways, on the north and on the east, give access. They are adorned with rows of beautifully executed reliefs showing scenes from the New Year's festival and processions of representatives of twenty-three subject nations of the Achaemenid Empire, with court notables and Persians and Medes, followed by soldiers and guards, their horses, and royal chariots. Delegates in their native attire, some completely Persian in style, carry gifts as token of their loyalty and as tribute to the king. These gifts include silver

4. Ernst Herzfeld, *A New Inscription of Xerxes from Persepolis*, SAOC No. 5 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932), p. 5.

and gold vessels and vases, weapons, woven fabrics, jewelry, and animals from the delegates' own countries. Although the overall arrangement of scenes seems repetitive, there are marked differences in the designs of garments, headdresses, hair styles, and beards that give each delegation its own distinctive character and make its origin unmistakable. Another means by which the design achieves diversity is by separating various groups or activities with stylized trees or by using these trees alone to form ornamental bands. There is also an intentional usage of patterns and rhythms that, by repeating figures and groups, conveys a grandiose ornamental impression.

The Throne Hall. Next to the Apadana, the second largest building of the Persepolis Terrace is the Throne Hall (also called the "Hundred-Column Hall"), which was started by Xerxes and completed by his son Artaxerxes I (end of the fifth century B.C.). Its eight stone doorways are decorated on the south and north with reliefs of throne scenes and on the east and west with scenes depicting the king in combat with monsters. In addition, the northern portico of the building is flanked by two colossal stone bulls. In the beginning of Xerxes' reign the Throne Hall was used mainly for receptions for representatives of all the subject nations of the empire. Later, when the Treasury proved to be too small, the Throne Hall also served as a storehouse and, above all, as a place to display more adequately objects, both tribute and booty, from the royal treasury. Concerning this, Schmidt wrote of the striking parallel in a modern example of a combined throne hall and palace museum where the Shah of Iran stores and exhibits the royal treasures in rooms and galleries adjoining his throne hall in the Gulistan Palace at Teheran.

The Gate of Xerxes. To the north of the Apadana stands the impressive Gate of Xerxes, from which a broad stairway descends. Xerxes, who built this structure, named it "The Gate of All Countries," for all visitors had to pass through this, the only entrance to the terrace, on their way to the Throne Hall to pay homage to the king. The building consisted of one spacious room whose roof was supported by four stone columns with bell-shaped bases. Parallel to the inner walls of this room ran a stone bench, interrupted at the doorways. The exterior walls of the structure, made of thick mud brick, were decorated with numerous niches. Each of the three walls, on the east, west, and south, had a very large stone doorway. A pair of colossal bulls guarded the western entrance; two assyrianized man-bulls stood at the eastern doorway. Engraved above each of the four colossi is a trilingual inscription attesting to Xerxes having built and completed the gate. The doorway on the south, opening toward the Apadana, is the widest of the three. Pivoting devices found on the inner corners of all the doors indicate that they must have had two-leaved doors, which were probably made of wood and covered with sheets of ornamented metal.

The Treasury. Adjacent to the Throne Hall is the Treasury, part of which served as an armory and especially as a royal storehouse of the Achaemenian kings. The tremendous wealth stored here came from the booty of conquered nations and from the annual tribute sent by the peoples of the empire to the king on the occasion of the New Year's feast. Before the Throne Hall was finished, the most spacious room of the Treasury was used as a Court of Reception. Two large stone reliefs were discovered here that attested to its function. These depict Darius I, seated on his throne, being approached by a high dignitary whose hand is raised to his mouth in a gesture of respectful greeting. Behind the king stands Crown Prince Xerxes, followed by court officials.

The Palace of Darius. Twelve columns supported the roof of the central hall from which three small stairways descend. Reliefs on these stairways depict servants coming up the steps carrying animals and food in covered dishes to be served at the king's tables. On the eastern and western doorjambs are reliefs showing the king in

formal dress leaving the palace, followed by two attendants; reliefs on the northern and southern doorways depict the king in combat with monsters.

The Palace of Xerxes. Xerxes' Palace, almost twice as large as that of Darius, shows very similar decorative features on its stone doorframes and windows, except for two large Xerxes inscriptions on the eastern and western doorways. Instead of showing the king's combat with monsters, these doorways depict servants with ibexes. Unfortunately, all the reliefs in this palace are far less well preserved than those of the Palace of Darius.

The Council Hall. Access to the royal apartments was by means of a beautiful stairway which led to three entrances. Two were for official purposes; the third was a secret doorway which led into the Harem.

The Harem of Xerxes. The Harem, where the royal ladies lived, was constructed in an L-shaped form. The main wing was oriented north-south; the west wing extended westward from the southern portion of the main wing.

The nucleus of the main wing was a large centrally placed columned hall with a portico facing a spacious courtyard on the north. The hall had four doorways whose jambs were decorated with reliefs. On the jambs of the southern doorway Xerxes is depicted entering the hall. He is followed by two attendants; one is carrying a fly whisk and the other is holding a parasol over the king's head. On the jamb of the eastern doorway there is a relief showing Xerxes fighting a lion-headed monster. The reliefs on the western doorway show the king in combat with a lion. The queen's quarters are not definitely known, but this impressive central section was probably reserved for her and her retinue.

South of the columned hall, the main wing contained six apartments arranged in two rows. Each apartment consisted of a large pillared room and one or sometimes two smaller rooms. The west wing contained sixteen additional apartments, similarly laid out.

In addition to the access from the Council Hall to the northern part of the main wing of the Harem, two stairways connected the west wing with the Palace of Xerxes. There were also two exits to courtyards or enclosed gardens. A third exit at the eastern end of the western wing may have led to an open area or perhaps to an enclosed area whose limits have been destroyed.

The main wing of the Harem was excavated and restored by Herzfeld. A large part of the building, besides serving as living quarters for the expedition staff, was converted into workrooms, where the cleaning, labeling, and restoring of objects were undertaken. Finally, the front of the Harem was restored and made into a museum to display some of the objects found at Persepolis.

Contents of the Treasury and Other Discoveries

What early historians wrote about the wealth of Persepolis certainly was not exaggerated. Thus we learn from the reports of the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus that Persepolis was the wealthiest city under the sun and her houses were full of gold and silver and all sorts of riches. On the basis of his and others' accounts, one would have expected the Oriental Institute's expeditions to find an enormous yield of objects. Unfortunately, Alexander and his army did a very thorough job of looting and burning Persepolis in 331/30 B.C. What the Oriental Institute recovered were objects either overlooked or dropped accidentally by the Macedonians.

By far the largest number of finds were from the royal storehouse in the Treasury. Additional objects—far fewer—came from other buildings of the Terrace. Many of these finds were pieces of booty from wars with foreign nations, such as Greece, Egypt, and India, or tokens of tribute from the subject nations of the empire. Some native objects clearly show foreign cultural influences. We know from excavated tablets that Darius I had called to

his court many foreign artists and workers whose skill and inspiration were utilized, but never copied, by the Persians.

Tablets. Uncovered in the debris of the Treasury were hundreds of clay tablets with inscriptions in Elamite cuneiform. These tablets, originally sundried, were baked in the heat of the immense fire that destroyed the building, so that many were found intact instead of having crumbled to dust long ago. These tablets, written for the most part in Old Persian and its corresponding translations of Elamite and Babylonian, were of great value to the excavators. We learn from them of the presence in Persepolis of skilled workmen from many parts of the empire, of stone-relief and inscription workers from Egypt, goldsmiths from Caria, and ornament makers from Susa. Some tablets also mention the month and year of the reign of either Darius or Xerxes when a particular work was executed and the amount of compensation—either in kind or in money—the workers received. Other tablets bear records of sales, of land deals, of taxes to be paid, or of the amount of money borrowed from the treasury. Finally, some tablets give instructions about how much haoma, the sacred intoxicating drink, could or should be used at a cult service.

Seals and Seal Impressions. The chronology of the Persepolis finds was traceable largely through the inscriptions on seals, wall pegs, and foundation slabs, that were discovered. Each usually bore the name of the Achaemenid ruler of its time. Cylinder seals, generally made of stone, often depict, among other subjects, martial or hunting scenes, rituals and offerings, or fights between animals. The royal seals of Darius and Xerxes always depict a king victorious in his fight with ferocious animals or monsters, a scene also depicted in the royal reliefs.

Miscellaneous Finds. Fragments of vessels, whose inscriptions indicate that they were used at the king's table, were also found in the debris. Other finds were ritual objects, mortars and pestles, weights, and tools. Finally, hundreds of pieces of martial equipment were found in the Treasury and in the garrison quarters, e.g., arrowheads, scabbard tips, and bridle ornaments.

Since Alexander's men were so thorough in destroying and looting Persepolis, only a few pieces of jewelry, several gold and silver coins, and some silver buttons were found; not one vessel of precious metal was recovered. However, several alabaster bowls and bottles were excavated, some with inscriptions and dates that prove them to be tribute sent to Persepolis from Egypt during the reigns of Darius and Xerxes. Other vessels were made of a bluish-green artificial compound of copper-calcium-tetrasilicate known as "Egyptian blue." These were a much-valued import from Egypt, where the secret of manufacturing this paste had been known since the Fourth Dynasty.

Sculpture. As far as is known, there were few freestanding monumental statues at Persepolis. Sculpture in the round was mainly used in connection with or attached to architecture—for instance, the guardian bulls of the Throne Hall, the double-headed bull capital, or the entrance sculptures of mastiffs. A few small sculptures were found, however; a unique bronze pedestal of three lions from the Treasury, probably used to support the legs of a throne, and a few small bronze figurines and a baked clay head of a Persian. In addition, there were also sculptural ornamentations—winged griffins, swans, and lions applied to metal vases and stone trays.

The Royal Tombs and Other Monuments

About 4.8 kilometers northwest of Persepolis lies the imposing site of Naqsh-e Rostam in the mountain range of Husain Kuh, where Darius the Great and his successors had their monumental tombs carved into the cliff. Here

in 1933 Herzfeld conducted a short survey and made soundings, but it was not until 1936 that Schmidt started to clear and document the royal tombs and to excavate the Ka'bah-i-Zardusht.

Although Naqsh-i-Rustam had long been a sacred area, Darius the Great was the first to choose it as a burial place. His successors not only imitated his idea of a cliff tomb but also copied the layout of the tomb itself. The dramatic façade of the tomb is constructed like a cross. An entrance leads into the tomb chamber, cut deep into the rock. In the panel above this façade is a relief depicting the king standing on a three-stepped pedestal in front of an altar. His hand is raised in a gesture of worship. Above him floats the winged disk of Ahuramazda, god of the Zoroastrian religion. This scene is supported by throne bearers representing the twenty-eight nations of the empire. On the side panels are the king's weapon bearers and the Persian guards. The trilingual cuneiform inscriptions on three panels of the rock wall either enumerate the twenty-eight nations upholding the throne or glorify the king and his rule. Some traces of pigment found on the façade of the royal tombs suggest that all or most of the stone reliefs had been painted.

The Sasanian Rock Reliefs at Naqsh-i-Rustam and Naqsh-i-Rajab. The rock reliefs at Naqsh-i-Rustam and Naqsh-i-Rajab, quite impressive and well-known works of art, date from the third century A.D. There are two groups of these reliefs in the Persepolis area. Nine reliefs are hewn into the rock below the royal tombs at Naqsh-i-Rustam; each relief is set in a rectangular recess. There is another group of four reliefs at Naqsh-i-Rajab, about three kilometers north of Persepolis. These reliefs are carved into three sides of a grottolike bay at the foot of the Mountain of Mercy. The exact purpose of this recess is not known, but it seems to have been a place of religious significance even before the Sasanian kings came to power. Since interpretations of the rock reliefs, both at Naqsh-i-Rustam and Naqsh-i-Rajab, are still varied and disputed, and since only a few of these reliefs have inscriptions, their identification—that is, dating—has had to be based mainly on depictions of specific kings on coins of the Sasanian period. Thus it seems that the earliest of these reliefs is one at Naqsh-i-Rajab. It shows an investiture scene of Ardashir I, founder of the Sasanian Empire (226–40 A.D.) by the god Hormizd (Ahuramazda), who is represented here in human shape. God and king are both standing and are of equal height. Only the fact that the god holds the diadem and the king reaches for it shows the dependence of the mortal king on the favors of the highest god. What makes this relief historically so important is its inscription by the priest Kartir, who was not only the founder of the Sasanian state church but also played an important role in politics. This inscription, proclaiming his personal beliefs, shows Kartir with hand raised in a gesture of homage to the god and the king. Another relief at Naqsh-i-Rajab depicts the investiture of Shapur I (241–72 A.D.), son and successor of Ardashir I. In an adjoining relief Shapur I is shown on horseback, followed by nine court attendants on foot.

Of the nine reliefs carved into the rock below the royal tombs at Naqsh-i-Rustam, the most important depicts the victory of Shapur I over the Roman emperor Valerian, whom he defeated and captured at Edessa in 260 A.D. The relief shows the king seated on his horse and Valerian kneeling in front of him. To the right of this scene is another inscription by Kartir, attesting to the victory and triumph of the Persian king over the Roman army—an unparalleled event in the reign of Shapur I. The rest of the Naqsh-i-Rustam rock reliefs deal mainly with equestrian scenes, showing various kings, e.g., Bahram II and Hormizd II.

The Ka'bah-i-Zardusht. Facing the cliffs of Naqsh-i-Rustam and their royal tombs stands the Ka'bah-i-Zardusht, which was probably built in the first half of the sixth century B.C. This square tower, forty-one feet high and twenty-four feet square, rises from a terraced platform. It is constructed of large blocks of limestone

joined without mortar and held together by means of iron cramps. Stone steps lead up to the entrance, which opens into a large single room. Scholarly opinions about the purpose of the Ka'bah are divided. Some think that it was the burial place of an early Achaemenian king; others, that it was later used as a fire temple of the goddess Anahita, where the Sasanian kings were crowned.

In 1936 excavations of the tower uncovered a Sasanian trilingual inscription, in Middle Persian, Greek, and Parthian, that Shapur I had had engraved on three sides of the structure. In it he described his three victorious campaigns against Rome (between 243 and 260 A.D.). Scholars today accept this description as historical fact. It is also an important record, for this was the last time that Greek was used in Iranian inscriptions.

Tall-i-Bakun A

Three kilometers south of Persepolis, in the plain of Marv Dasht, lies the prehistoric site of Tall-i-Bakun, consisting of two flat hillocks. Here in 1928, Ernst Herzfeld, of the University of Berlin, decided to undertake a trial excavation of the western mound, where he had previously discovered many prehistoric sherds lying about on the ground. Later, in 1932, he conducted more extensive excavations, subsequently continued by Erich F. Schmidt (1935–37).

The main deposits of the western hill produced a large quantity of ceramics with unusually beautiful painted patterns dating mostly to the fourth millennium B.C. Unexpectedly, many rooms of the settlement contained a substantial number of unbroken vessels, many of them standing on the floors of the houses, sometimes nested one in another. A great wealth of designs and variations are seen in this cream-colored ware. Many show different geometrical patterns, some simple, some intricate. Fewer have beautifully stylized animal designs depicting either ibexes or mouflons. These vessels manifest a remarkable artistic balance between geometric ornament and animal design. Large jars, usually made in two parts, show distinct markings characteristic of a vessel turned by hand.

Besides these pottery vessels, numerous painted clay figurines of humans and animals were discovered. Other ceramic objects consisted of scrapers, in the form of stirrups, which were used for smoothing and decorating vessel surfaces before the vessels were fired. These scrapers—although made of clay—were so strong, and their scraping edges so sharp, that they were also used for scraping hides. In addition to this vast amount of pottery, there were large quantities of knives, blades, and copper daggers. There were also many button seals, mostly made of green stone, showing beautifully incised designs. Finally, some well-preserved clay labels and seal impressions were excavated.

Istakhr

The large mound of the Islamic city of Istakhr lies five kilometers north of Persepolis at the end of the Pulvar Valley, where it opens into the plain of Marv Dasht. The exact date of the founding of Istakhr is not known. Historical and archaeological evidence points to the importance of the city in Sasanian and Islamic times (beginning of the third century to the end of the ninth century A.D.) and to its prominence as a fire sanctuary of the goddess Anahita.

Istakhr suffered extensive damage and capitulated to the Arabs in 648 A.D. When Shiraz was founded in 684 A.D., Istakhr was finally replaced as capital of the province of Fars.

The Islamic town was enclosed by fortification walls with rounded towers. The geographer Istakhri wrote that in the tenth century, its houses were built of clay, stone or gypsum—according to the wealth of their owners.

The ancient trash pit at Istakhr proved to be a very valuable source of finds. The entire site is perforated by a number of refuse, sewage or storage wellholes. The holes are often “locked” by caps of brick or stone, and therefore an approximately contemporaneous mixture of broken and discarded pots, personal ornaments, stone and bronze objects, and a large amount of coins was preserved in them.

Among the kinds of pottery excavated from the Islamic stratum, molded ware is found very frequently. These light-green vessels were not only of very high quality but also manifested a unique method of pottery making. The upper and lower halves, with their sculptured decorations, were always molded separately; the two halves, often showing the same pattern, were then joined together. Also from the Islamic period, but less frequent, are pitchers with floral designs in red, yellow, and black. Unfortunately, excavations of the site produced only a few of the famous and very rare lusterware vessels with their metallic sheen over a golden-yellowish body. There is considerable controversy about this pottery and whether it was produced in Iran or imported from Mesopotamia.

Among other finds were clay figurines of animals. There were also stone and bronze objects, such as lamps, small vessels, and a number of utensils used in daily life. Also found were objects of iridescent glass and personal ornaments ranging from clay to gold.

The numerous copper, silver, and gold coins found at the site indicate Istakhr’s importance and prosperity as a provincial capital and as a mint town. Of the 1,050 coins excavated from four ten-meter squares in the center of the mound, 900 were Islamic coins (sixth to ninth centuries A.D.). The rest were Sasanian coins (third to fifth centuries A.D.).

Aerial Survey Explorations

In 1935, when Mary-Helen Schmidt presented her husband, Professor Erich F. Schmidt, then field director of the Persepolis, Rayy, and Luristan expeditions, with an airplane for the purpose of aerial survey, she could not have made a more important and valuable contribution to archaeology. There had been pioneer work in aerial photography in the past,⁵ but this was the first time that a thorough and well-planned aerial survey exploration was to be undertaken on such a large scale.

It was not until 7 August, 1935, when permission was finally granted, that the Aerial Survey Expedition under the directorship of Erich Schmidt could begin its work. Commenting on the many months of waiting and preparation, Schmidt writes: "There is no need to speak of our personal feelings, then and afterwards. Enough to say that happy satisfaction of accomplishment accompanied the immeasurable broadening of the scope of our work."⁶

The airplane, christened *Friend of Iran*, was flown by Lewin B. Barringer in 1935-36 and William G. Benn in 1937. Frederick Lillich was its mechanic and technical assistant. The photography was done by Erich Schmidt and his assistant Boris Dubensky.

The aerial photographic operations were divided into three parts: (1) flights over excavations already in progress, such as Persepolis and Rayy; (2) aerial documentation and mapping of sites under consideration; and (3) reconnaissance and exploration flights over archaeologically unknown areas of Iran.

Aerial photographs of work in progress not only gave an overall view of the extent and layout of the excavations but also often sped up ground operations. Documentation and mapping helped to lay the groundwork for and to pinpoint areas where digging could begin, while the reconnaissance flights facilitated the mapping of ancient sites, mounds, or fortresses that had been mentioned in ancient writings but had never been explored. These aerial survey photographs, especially those of structures above ground at an excavation in progress, could be used to achieve positive results only when coordinated with the plans of the field architect.

Before the *Friend of Iran* could start its photographic flights over sites being excavated, mapped, or documented, the ground had to be prepared in such a way that the aerial photographs could be easily applicable to the ongoing excavations or to selecting new ones. Base points were marked on the ground, using quadrants of 100-meter squares subdivided into excavation plots of 10 x 10 meters. To make them more easily recognizable from the air, these base points were marked by white cloth circles, two to three meters in diameter, with black

5. For example, Père Antoine Poidebard's aerial survey of Roman walls in Syria; Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh's and Alfred V. Kidder's discovery from the air of Maya ruins in Central America.

6. Erich F. Schmidt, *Flights over Ancient Cities of Iran*, Special Publication of the Oriental Institute (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), p. 5.

centers. With an aerial photograph in hand clearly showing the base points, one could draw white lines on the photographs to connect corresponding points. The result would be a grid of squares from which the excavator could determine quickly and accurately where to start digging.

In addition to these ground preparations, additional means had to be employed to achieve the most accurate results through aerial survey. Photographs had to be taken at different hours of the day, under different weather conditions, and during different seasons. The seasonal changes in the ground cover were utilized to obtain the most versatile and conclusive photographic results. An excellent example, showing the contrasting as well as complementary results, is provided by two photographs of the Mound of Istakhr taken in two different seasons. The autumn photograph (11A8) records the relief of the fortification wall and its round towers but shows only very faint depressions of streets. In the spring photograph (11A9), the streets stand out as very distinct white lines. This is the result of a less dense ground cover over hard-tramped areas, buried walls, and foundations. These and many other details are not visible on the autumn photograph.

Another important way to detect structures covered for centuries by sand was to photograph the area in question during the first two hours after sunrise. Then the slanting rays of the sun would highlight the slightest elevations, which would be invisible to the surveyor on the ground.

In order to gain a good understanding of the topography of a site, vertical and oblique photographs were also necessary. For excavations in progress, oblique views were much more useful, for they showed certain proportions of heights of buildings or remnants of walls far more clearly. Vertical views were more valuable for the general mapping of an area, where certain formations and discolorations were visible only on an aerial photograph.

In just two short seasons, Erich Schmidt and his crew made numerous survey flights and took hundreds of aerial photographs. In the season of 1935/36, Persepolis and environs in southern Iran, including the Islamic city of Istakhr, the sacred precinct of Naqsh-e Rostam, the prehistoric mounds of Tall-e Bakun, Rayy near Teheran in the north, and sites in the valley of Rumishgan in the western mountains were photographed. Flights of the 1937 season concentrated on northeastern Iran—the Gorgan plain and the ancient defense wall, often erroneously called “Alexander’s Barrier,” which stretches from the Caspian Sea to the mountains in the east. Other flights of that season were made to northwestern Iran, including Azerbaijan, Tabriz, and Mount Ararat, and to Luristan in westcentral Iran.

Finally, during the 1937 season exploratory flights were undertaken for the purpose of tracing and pictorially documenting many sites in the environs of Persepolis and of establishing their locations on archaeological maps for use by future excavators. About this, Erich Schmidt wrote: “In thirteen hours of flying over the environs of Persepolis we succeeded in mapping more than four hundred ancient sites in the plain of Persepolis. A task of years if carried out on the ground.”⁷

Aerial photography, a fairly new branch of archaeology, proved to be a unique tool for showing ancient sites in their topographical environment. It thus enables the archaeologist, in a very short time, to identify a site and, consequently, to assign the exact location of a forthcoming excavation.

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Persepolis and Ancient Iran

The magnificent palace complex at Persepolis was founded by Darius the Great around 518 B.C., although more than a century passed before it was finally completed. Conceived to be the seat of government for the Achaemenian kings and a center for receptions and ceremonial festivities, the wealth of the Persian empire was evident in all aspects of its construction. The splendor of Persepolis, however, was short-lived; the palaces were looted and burned by Alexander the Great in 331–330 B.C. The ruins were not excavated until the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago sponsored an archaeological expedition to Persepolis and its environs under the supervision of Professor Ernst Herzfeld from 1931 to 1934, and Erich F. Schmidt from 1934 to 1939.

PERSEPOLIS AND ANCIENT IRAN, a text/fiche record of 1000 photographs with an accompanying introduction by Ursula Schneider, presents a comprehensive survey of these archaeological sites. The account is divided into four sections, summarizing the major areas of investigation: the architecture, reliefs, and finds of the palaces at Persepolis; the prehistoric mound of Tall-i-Bakun; Istakhr, the Islamic city mound; and the aerial survey flights conducted between 1935 and 1937.

Ursula Schneider describes the vast accumulation of artifacts uncovered and the buildings reconstructed out of the ruins of this ancient Persian capital. In addition, she outlines the “thorough and well-planned aerial survey explorations,” which constituted an important contribution to archaeological research techniques. Of interest to anyone concerned with the ancient world, PERSEPOLIS AND ANCIENT IRAN will prove particularly valuable to archaeologists and students of art and architecture.

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