

PERSEPOLIS FORTIFICATION TABLETS

Gil J. Stein

Return of the Persepolis Fortification Tablets to Iran — A Promise Kept

In late April–early May 2004, I had the privilege of helping to work toward the fulfillment of a seventy-year-old promise made by the Oriental Institute to the people of Iran by returning 300 clay tablets from the larger body of Persepolis Fortification Tablets that had been on long-term loan to the Oriental Institute for study and publication. The texts on these tablets have extraordinary importance for our understanding of the Persian empire and ancient Iran.

The Persepolis Fortification Tablets: A Brief Overview

One of the greatest accomplishments of the Oriental Institute is surely its excavations during the 1930s at Persepolis, the 2,500 year old monumental capital of the Achaemenid Persian empire. In the first season of excavations, Ernst Herzfeld and his team from the Oriental Institute discovered a deposit containing tens of thousands of tablets and tablet fragments impressed with writing in the cuneiform script; the trove was found in one of the rooms of the northern fortification wall surrounding the palaces, treasuries, and temples of Persepolis.

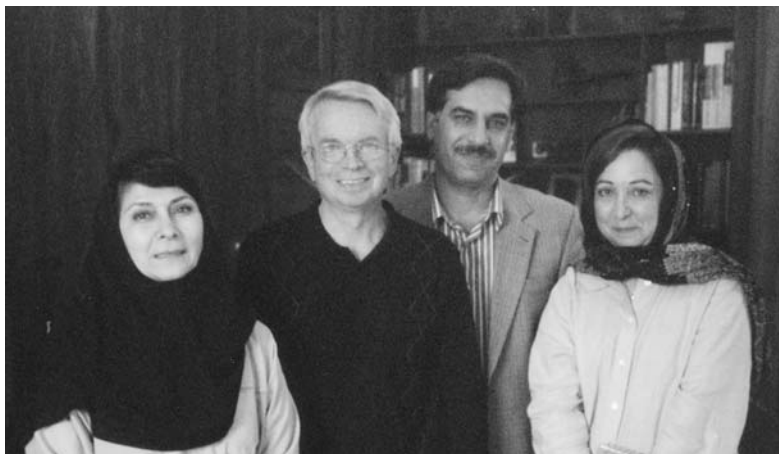
In 1937, the Iranian government allowed the tablets to be brought to the Oriental Institute on a long-term loan for purposes of translation, analysis, and publication. The tablets were recovered from the ground in an extremely fragile and often fragmentary state, greatly adding to the difficulty of their preservation and translation. The massive quantity, fragile physical condition, and the challenges of reading the texts have made their analysis and publication a difficult, long-term project.

The Persepolis Fortification Archive quickly came to be recognized as a uniquely important find from the philological, historical, and art historical points of view. As scholars such as George Cameron and Richard Hallock began the arduous task of translation, they discovered that the texts were actually written in an extremely difficult dialect of the Elamite language, with numerous Old Persian loanwords also incorporated into the documents. In fact, the texts are one of our most important single sources for understanding Old Persian. A significant number of the tablets also bore Aramaic texts, incised and written in ink alongside the Elamite cuneiform impressed script. The mix of languages, scripts, and writing media used on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets mirrored the multi-cultural character of the Persian empire itself. At the same time, the complexity of the Elamite dialect is so great that no more



Sharokh Razmjou and Madame Zahra Jaffar-Mohammadi, of the Iranian National Museum, and the Oriental Institute's Laura D'Alessandro examine the Persepolis Fortification Tablets after their return to Tehran. Photograph by William Harms

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Madame Zahra Jaffar-Mohammadi, William Harms, Director of the Iranian National Museum Mohammed Reza Kargar, and Laura D'Alessandro. Photograph by Gil J. Stein

than a handful of scholars in the world can actually read the texts.

The actual content of the texts is no less remarkable than their language. The Persepolis tablets derived from an imperial administrative archive — providing a unique first look at how the Achaemenids actually ruled their empire. Although the texts were written in an extremely abbreviated format, they

nevertheless provided a wealth of information. We can date the texts with great precision to a very narrow time frame — a short period from ca. 509 to 494 B.C., the thirteenth to twenty-eighth years of the reign of Darius I. The texts record the disbursement of food rations for officials and other individuals who were traveling on official business within the boundaries of the empire. The range of names and nationalities of the people who were receiving these rations show clearly the impressive scale and diversity of the Persian empire, which ruled vast territories in the Near East from Egypt to India, including parts of Greece, Anatolia, and central Asia. In some cases, the names of government officials, such as governors of the Persian Satrapies (provinces) actually match the names listed by the contemporary Greek historian Herodotus. Nothing like this had ever been found before. In 1969, Richard Hallock published the landmark book *Persepolis Fortification Tablets* (Oriental Institute Publications 92), which made available to the scholarly community the first set of systematic analyses and translations of more than 2,000 of these texts. The continuing analysis and publication of the (many) remaining texts are proceeding under the direction of Matthew Stolper, John A. Wilson Professor of Assyriology at the Oriental Institute, working closely with colleagues such as Oriental Institute Research Associate Charles E. Jones and Iranian scholar Majid Arfaee. Most recently, the Chicago Persepolis team has embarked on a long-term project in collaboration with XML System for Textual and Archaeological Research (XSTAR) to develop a comprehensive digital publication program integrating high quality digital images of the Persepolis Fortification Tablets and seal impressions with reliable transliterations and editions of the texts. We believe this is an important first step in making the entire corpus available to the scholarly community.

The Persepolis Fortification Tablets emerged as a uniquely valuable resource for art historians as well. Scholars studying Achaemenid art, iconography, and symbolism had always been limited in their studies to a relatively small group of monumental reliefs such as the Bisitun Inscription or the magnificent reliefs on the walls of Persepolis itself. However, the Persepolis tablets provided a new corpus of art — cylinder seal impressions. These miniature masterpieces impressed into the clay of the Persepolis Tablets have dramatically expanded the range of examples of Achaemenid art, often depicting motifs and scenes unknown on the larger-scale carved stone reliefs. Most importantly, the fact that each seal impression is on a well-dated tablet from a secure archaeological context enabled art historians Mark Garrison and Margaret Cool Root to develop a more solidly based understanding of the nature of Achaemenid art than ever

before, its relationship to its Near Eastern antecedents, and its connections with contemporaneous glyptic in Mesopotamia and other lands conquered by the Persians. Mark Garrison, Margaret Cool Root, and Charles E. Jones have published the first two volumes of their path-breaking research as *Seals on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets, Volume 1: Images of Heroic Encounter* (Text and Plates; Oriental Institute Publications 117; 2001).

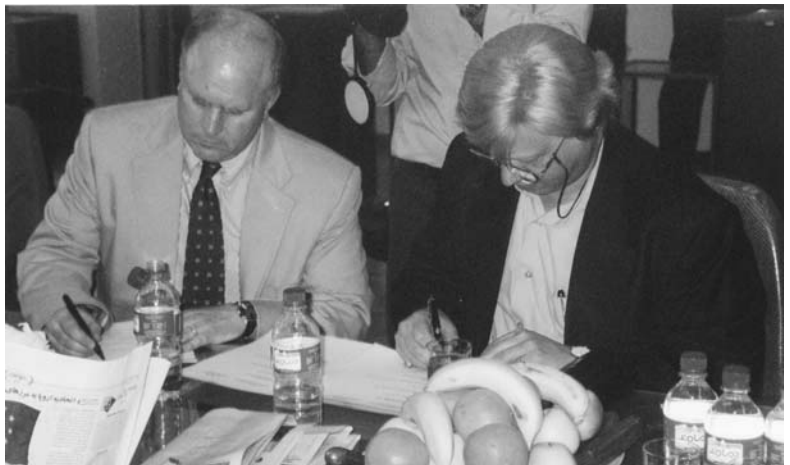
Return of the Tablets

From the time the tablets first arrived in Chicago, researchers at the Oriental Institute were keenly aware of the their importance as the cultural patrimony of the Iranian people, and of their scholarly responsibility not only to publish the texts but also to ensure their return to Iran once their analysis, recording, and publication were complete. George Cameron returned the first set of 179 tablets in 1948. A second shipment of more than 37,000 tablet fragments followed in 1951. As described above, the analysis and publication of the texts proceeded apace through the 1960s and 1970s, although international scholarly contacts with Iran became more sporadic and difficult during the first two decades after the Iranian revolution of 1979.

However, within the last four years, relations between the Oriental Institute and our Iranian colleagues have slowly been reestablished, thanks in no small part to the patient diplomatic efforts of Oriental Institute Research Associate Abbas Alizadeh, who developed the first joint Iranian-American archaeological fieldwork (the Khuzestan Prehistoric Project) to take place in Iran since the Iranian revolution. At the same time, Alizadeh rebuilt our working relationship with the Iranian National Museum and with the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization (ICHO).

This rapprochement culminated in 2003 with the Iranian sponsorship of the First International Congress on the Relations between Iran and Ancient Western Asia in Tehran, at which the Oriental Institute was well represented by Abbas Alizadeh, Charles E. Jones, Matthew Stolper, and myself. While in Tehran for the conference, we met with Mr. Mohammad Beheshti, Director of ICHO, and his staff to brief them on the progress of the analysis and publication of the texts. We presented our colleagues with copies of our most recent publications and CDs containing digital editions of 300 Persepolis texts. Most importantly, ICHO reaffirmed its desire that the Oriental Institute continue

with its program of analysis and publication. On behalf of the Oriental institute, I gave my word that within a year we would return the first batch of 300 analyzed and published Persepolis Fortification Tablets. Over the next year, Matthew Stolper made digital images of the tablets to be returned, while Laura D'Alessandro, Head of Conservation at the Oriental Institute, and her colleagues Alison Whyte and



Gil J. Stein and Mohammad Beheshti, Director of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization (ICHO), signing the document acknowledging receipt of the 300 Persepolis Fortification Tablets by the Iranian National Museum. Photograph by William Harms

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Gil J. Stein and Mohammad Beheshti after signing the document accepting the return of the tablets. Photograph by William Harms

Vanessa Muros packed the delicate tablets in secure, acid-free archival boxes in preparation for their journey home.

On April 29, 2004, a team consisting of Laura D'Alessandro, William Harms from the University of Chicago News Office, and myself left for Iran, each of us carrying by hand a small suitcase containing 100 Persepolis tablets. On our arrival in Tehran at 1:30 in the morning, we were met and whisked through customs by Mr. Shahrokh Razmjou and Madame Zahra Jafar-Mohammadi, our colleagues from the Iranian National Museum. We drove directly to the museum and turned over the tab-

lets, which were then placed in a locked and sealed underground storeroom until the formal ceremony of their return the next day. We finally fell into bed at 3:30 AM, exhausted but relieved that the tablets had been safely delivered.

The next day, May 1, at the Iranian National Museum, along with our Oriental Institute colleague Abbas Alizadeh, we held a formal ceremony at which Mr. Mohammad Beheshti and Mr. Mohammad Reza Kargar, Director of the National Museum, signed a formal document acknowledging the receipt of the 300 Persepolis tablets. A large number of reporters from Iranian newspapers, radio, and television were on hand to record the occasion.

In addition to returning the tablets, we were committed to building new bridges of scholarly cooperation with the Iranian National Museum and ICHO. In keeping with this effort, Laura D'Alessandro gave a formal workshop presentation on May 2 to the archaeological conservators of ICHO and the museum, in which she focused on the ways that the Oriental Institute deals with the same types of conservation problems as those faced by conservators in Tehran. The workshop was lively, and we were all impressed by the resources, commitment, and skills of D'Alessandro's Iranian conservation colleagues. Over the next four years, we plan to return to Tehran to conduct further annual workshops focused on important topics in conservation and ancient studies.

The analysis and publication of the texts on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets is a difficult, long-term endeavor. By entrusting us with these tablets on a long-term loan, the Iranian people and their antiquities service have shown their commitment to have this collection properly recorded and to make it accessible to scholars worldwide. As the work of analysis of the Persepolis Fortification Tablets continues, we hope to return additional published tablets to Iran. I am happy that we at the Oriental Institute have been meeting our professional and ethical commitments to our colleagues. By building trust in this way, I think we can look forward to many years of growing cooperation in exploring together the ancient history of Iran.