

Erich F. Schmidt¹

Erich F. Schmidt may very well have been the busiest Western archaeologist working in Iran during the 1930s. He directed the excavation of the mounds of Rayy from 1934 to 1936, under the auspices of the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. With the financial assistance and support of his wife, Mary-Helen Warden, and her parents, the Schmidts established the Aerial Survey of Iran, which was intended to be a comprehensive survey of the archaeological sites in Iran—a combination of aerial photography and observations made on the ground. In 1935, Schmidt replaced Ernst E. Herzfeld as field director of the Persepolis Expedition of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, in which capacity he served through the end of 1939. In 1935 and 1938, Schmidt was also seconded to direct the Holmes Expeditions to Luristan. The records generated by the personnel of all four projects, now housed in the Oriental Institute Archives, exhibit an especially high standard of archaeological field recording for the 1930s and are noteworthy for the extensive use of photography, as well as for the production of numerous sketches and drawings of the objects found.²

Erich Friedrich Schmidt was born to Frida Loeffler Schmidt in Baden-Baden, Germany, on September 13, 1897. His father, Erhard Friedrich Schmidt, was a Lutheran clergyman, scientist, and university professor. Until the age of 10, Erich attended public schools in the nearby towns of Sasbach and Achern.

Erhard Schmidt died about 1907, and Erich was sent to the military school (Kadettenkorps) in Karlsruhe, from which he graduated in 1914 as a lieutenant in the German Army. During the first two years of the Great War in Europe, Schmidt's detachment was stationed at both the Western Front and the Eastern Front. Wounded in the fighting in Austrian Galicia in 1916, Schmidt was captured by the Russians, and he spent the next four years in a prisoner-of-war camp in Siberia. In 1920, he managed to escape overland to Murmansk and eventually found his way home to Germany, where he learned that his mother and three siblings had died during World War I or shortly afterwards.

From 1921 to 1923, Schmidt attended Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität (now Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin). In 1923, he moved to New York City; from 1924 to 1927, he continued his studies in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University and earned a Ph.D. degree in 1929. During this period, Schmidt participated in archaeological excavations in Arizona, under the auspices of the American Museum of Natural History in New York. From 1927 to 1930, he was a member of the Oriental Institute's Hittite (later, Anatolian), centered on the site of Alishar Hüyük. In 1930, Schmidt excavated at the site of Fara in northern Mesopotamia and,

¹ This brief sketch of the life of Erich F. Schmidt was written at the request of Donald Whitcomb for the catalog of the temporary exhibit, *Daily Life Ornamented: The Medieval Persian City of Rayy*, held at the Oriental Institute Museum, University of Chicago from May 15—October 14, 2007.

² This paragraph appears without author's credit as the caption for the photograph on page 15 of the exhibit catalog.

in 1931, he was digging at Tepe Hissar in Iran, both projects under the auspices of the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania.

In 1934, Schmidt married Mary-Helen Warden, whom he had met when she visited Tepe Hissar with her family in 1931. Sadly, Mary-Helen died in childbirth in Philadelphia in 1936. In 1938, Schmidt became a naturalized citizen of the United States, a process that had been delayed due to his frequent and lengthy absences in the field. In 1943, Schmidt married Lura Florence Strawn of Ottawa, Illinois; they had two children, Richard Roderick and Erika Lura. Erich Schmidt became an Associate Professor at the University of Chicago in 1954 and was promoted to full Professor in 1962. He died in Santa Barbara, California, on October 3, 1964, at the age of 67; his ashes were buried in Ottawa, Illinois.

Erich F. Schmidt will always be remembered for the beautifully illustrated Oriental Institute publications on his work in Iran: *Flights over Ancient Cities of Iran* (1940), and the three volumes on Persepolis (1953, 1957, and 1970).

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