

Archives from the Achaemenid heartland

by Mark Tamerus

Introduction

In the 1930s archaeological work undertaken at the site of Persepolis, ancient Pārsa, by an expedition of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago led to the discovery of large numbers of written clay tablets and other related objects the significance of which can hardly be underestimated. They have turned out to be indispensable sources of information on the Achaemenid Persian Empire, especially with regard to the administration of the empire's heartland, but their importance reaches much further than that. An epitome of a lecture held by the excavator for the Royal Asiatic Society in September 1933 includes the statement that the tablets, mostly written in Elamite cuneiform, "will require years of labour and study to be deciphered." This was, indeed, hardly an exaggeration: the publication of the archival materials is still ongoing, and much about them remains to be studied. At the same time, however, we can also say that a lot of progress has been made, especially in recent times, and our understanding of the archives' contents and the implications they bear for our understanding of the organisation of the empire are rapidly increasing. The archival materials have indeed fundamentally influenced the study of Achaemenid history.

Discovery and publication of the archives

"Hundreds Probably thousands business Tablets Elamite Discovered On Terrace Herzfeld"

This is the text of a telegram received by James Henry Breasted (the founder of the Oriental Institute) on the 4th of March, 1933. The message reported on the find of the tablets that we now refer to as the Persepolis Fortification archive. They were discovered during excavations directed by Ernst E. Herzfeld. They were found with some luck: in order to be able to remove debris of the excavation work at the site the excavators were creating a transporting route that was to run through the northeastern fortification wall. It was there, in two chambers in the defense wall, that Herzfeld discovered the tablets. It has been considered in the past that they served merely as fill in the wall, but in fact the tablets seem to have been deliberately deposited there, in spaces that were sealed off already in antiquity. In 1935 the tablets, unbaked and fragile as they were, were shipped to Chicago on a long-term loan, where the study of the Fortification archive started soon after and continues to this day. Most of these tablets are currently still at the Oriental Institute, where the Persepolis Fortification Archive Project works on the publication of the unpublished part of the archive. Unfortunately a

full excavation report was never published by Herzfeld, so that much about the find remains unclear.

According to current estimates the extant tablets and fragments represent some 15,000 or more original documents, though the number of texts sufficiently preserved to allow meaningful analysis is 6-7,000. The archive as we have it is nevertheless only a fragment of the total number of Elamite texts that must have been produced in the period to which the extant Fortification archive pertains: there may have been up to 100,000 texts, or even more. Fortification texts were first published by Richard T. Hallock in his 1969 *Persepolis Fortification Tablets* (2,087 texts) and in an article published in 1978 containing an additional 33 texts. In 2008 A.M. Arfaee published another 167 Elamite tablets, most of which had been sent back to Tehran already in 1948. A small number of additional texts have been published in recent times in a variety of scholarly contributions.

Herzfeld was removed from his directorship of the Persepolis expedition by the Oriental Institute in 1934, and was succeeded by Erich F. Schmidt. During excavations under Schmidt in the years 1936-1938 clay tablets were found in multiple rooms of the “Treasury” building elsewhere on the Persepolis terrace. This much smaller find, the Persepolis Treasury archive, consists of 746 tablets and fragments, of which 139 tablets (138 written in Elamite as well as one written in Akkadian) were published by George G. Cameron in his 1948 *Persepolis Treasury Tablets*, as well as in articles published in 1958 and 1965. In addition 199 clay bullae and unwritten tablets were found. These are referred to in Schmidt’s excavation report, published in 1957 (see below under “Further Reading” for references to these publications). Alongside the discovery of the Fortification and Treasury archives another discovery was made, this time east of the Persepolis terrace. There, in what is referred to as the “Mountain Fortification”, some sixty bullae (all sealed) as well as clay tags and a few seals were found.

Languages of the archive

The Elamite tablets referred to above are written in a variety of the Elamite language called Achaemenid Elamite. The use of Elamite for administrative purposes under the Achaemenid Persians indicates continuity in administrative practice in an area that had previously been part of Elam. But it is also clear that the language we find in the archives had undergone significant changes. We can thus see the effects of centuries of Elamite-Iranian language contact. The texts also contain a large number of Iranian (loan)words represented in Elamite writing. Most scribes of Persepolis texts were in fact Iranian speakers. ‘Iranian’ here means a vernacular form of Old Iranian that was closely related to the Old Persian of the Achaemenid royal inscriptions, which is an archaizing form of the language. The intricacies of the Elamite language – a language isolate, meaning it cannot be (definitively) related to any other languages – and the lacunae in

our knowledge of the Elamite lexicon as well as part of the Iranian lexicon sometimes complicate the study of the texts. Yet the language is understood sufficiently well to allow the archival materials to be studied properly, and great progress is being made indeed.

It is important to note that even if the Elamite tablets receive most attention, the term ‘archive’ here does not refer to these texts only. The Fortification archive also contains tablets written in other languages, and these were found together with the Elamite ones. In addition to some 250 Aramaic epigraphs on Elamite tablets (usually adding some information not made explicit in the Elamite text), the Fortification archive also contains about 800 tablets written in Aramaic, sometimes incised in the clay, sometimes written on it in ink. These texts may also have served to provide additional information, in combination with other documents, but we do not yet fully understand how the Elamite and Aramaic texts (or indeed sources of information unknown to us) interacted within the Persepolitan administrative system.

There are also tablets in Old Persian, Greek, Akkadian and – presumably – Phrygian, but only one of each. It seems that the Akkadian text does not actually belong to the Fortification archive proper, but the other tablets in all likelihood do. The discovery of the Old Persian tablet showed that it is not true that Old Persian writing was only used for the royal inscription, which is what many scholars thought.

Alongside these written tablets, there are also up to 5,000 uninscribed tablets. These are not merely lumps of clay: they are recognisable by their shape (which is the same as that of many written tablets), they were found together with the written tablets, and all of them are sealed with one or several seals, just like most of the Elamite tablets and all the Aramaic ones. They evidently served a particular function, most likely in combination with other (written) documents.

Seal impressions (from more than 3,000 different seals) provide vital information. Many individuals in the administrative system used seals to impress on the written records of



The reverse of a Fortification text, showing the impression of a cylinder seal (copyright Persepolis Fortification Archive Project, Oriental Institute, Chicago)

transactions. These were not just people at the Persepolis offices but many others as well, varying from, for example, officials at local storehouses elsewhere in the heartland to travellers traversing the royal roads throughout the imperial heartland. The sealing was not quite done randomly: seals were impressed according to a number of fixed sealing protocols. As a means of conveying information they served to express jurisdictions, and for those to

whom it concerned seal usage served the purposes of identification and verification. As such even seal impressions can be said to be a “language” that – visually – people could “read”. So it is really a combination of Elamite texts, Aramaic texts, seal impressions, and document types and shapes that together represent the Fortification archive.

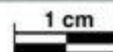
The Persepolis Fortification archive

Currently edited Fortification texts date to the years 13 to 28 of the reign of Darius I (509-493 BCE). The archive as we have it is only a fragment of the total number of written (and other) documents that must have been produced. But it is not only a large number of documents that we do not have (which includes document types that are simply gone, such as Aramaic texts written on perishable materials). The attested archive also reflects only the work of a part of the Persepolis administrative system. The Treasury archive reflects another administrative branch, but there must have been other such branches as well which go unattested.

The central Persepolis administration was the focal point of a regional household economy that we commonly refer to as the “Persepolis economy”. The area it covered is roughly that of the modern province of Fārs in southwestern Iran. The Fortification archive documents (the organisation and control of) the intake, storage and distribution of foodstuffs that were locally produced throughout the area under the administration’s purview. Particularly frequent are texts that record the disbursement of food commodities to a variety of recipients. These include rations and remunerations for workers, travellers, officials and elite Persians, contributions to the so-called “table of the king” (as well as food products for other members of the royal house), offerings for deities, but also fodder for animals. Such transactions are recorded in documents commonly called “memoranda”, but there are also letter-orders through which, for instance, officials gave out orders to carry out a particular food disbursement. Scholars generally assume that the memoranda were written locally, rather than centrally at Persepolis. That means that they were written and sealed at the locations where transactions took place, such as the many way stations (along the roads), craft centres, ‘fortresses’ with some local administrative functions,



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A ‘memorandum’-type text from the Fortification archive (copyright Persepolis Fortification Archive Project, Oriental Institute, Chicago)

estates, villages, and so on. These primary records would be periodically collected and taken to the central offices at Persepolis, where the information was processed into registers (often called “journals”) and – together with relevant data obtained otherwise, such as information from “inspectors” or the like travelling the area – into accounts.

The archive is not only a source on the intake and distribution of food products. It also provides information on, for example, the organisation and management of labour (notably including the presence of large numbers of workers from other parts of the empire), the management of livestock (at least partly through a system of local livestock stations), landed property, the position and status of high officials, interaction between the regional Persepolis economy and the royal domain, food consumption at the itinerant royal court (the “table of the king”), the royal road system, aspects of religion, interaction with (semi-)autonomous population groups, and indeed taxation. Last but not least there is evidence for interaction between the Persepolis administration and other (regional) administrations in Iran, but there are also signs that there are connections on a broader imperial scale, suggesting the streamlining of bureaucratic practice in the context of the development and management of regional economies.

The Persepolis Treasury archive

The attested Treasury archive dates to the period 492-457 BCE, that is, from the 30th year of Darius to the 7th year of Artaxerxes I. The only exception is the single Akkadian text found together with the Elamite Treasury tablets, which dates to the year 502 BCE (and is therefore contemporary with the Fortification archive). The fact that the earliest known Treasury text dates to Darius’s 30th year does not mean that this (sub)branch of administration did not exist at the time of the Fortification texts. They may well have co-existed.

The Elamite Treasury texts mostly record something we do not see in Fortification texts, namely the remuneration of craftsmen and others by payments in silver. These were payments in lieu of payments in kind, sometimes in addition to them. Again, this does not mean that one should assume that silver payments necessarily did not exist prior to the 30th year of Darius. In fact, such payments may well have existed before that year, but simply go unattested because we have no Treasury records from that time. Thus, unlike what some scholars assumed, the earliest Treasury text does not mark a change in the way workers were remunerated by the Persepolis administration.

References

The text from the 1933 Royal Asiatic Society lecture epitome quoted in the introductory paragraph is cited in Wouter F.M. Henkelman, 2008, *The Other Gods Who Are. Studies in Elamite-Iranian Acculturation based on the Persepolis Fortification Texts*

(Achaemenid History 14), Leiden, p. 69. The text itself is published by an anonymous author as 'Recent discoveries at Persepolis', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society 1934*, pp. 226-232.

The text of Herzfeld's telegram to Breasted presented under "Discovery and publication of the archives" is also quoted in Henkelman, *The Other Gods Who Are*, p. 69, as well as in an entry on the Persepolis Fortification Archive Project's weblog, at <http://persepolistablets.blogspot.com/2013/03/eightieth-anniversary-of-discovery-of.html> (accessed on September 16th, 2015).

Further Reading

Recent, detailed descriptions of the archives can be found in Wouter F.M. Henkelman, 2013, 'Administrative realities: The Persepolis archives and the archaeology of the Achaemenid heartland', in: D.T. Potts (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran*, Oxford, pp. 528-546, and in chapter 2 of his aforementioned book *The Other Gods Who Are* (pp. 65-179). Henkelman also recently published a brief but informative encyclopedic entry "The Persepolis tablets", in: R.S. Bagnall et al. (eds.), 2011, *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, Chichester, pp. 5179-5181.

The standard work on the Persian Empire is Pierre Briant's 2002 book *From Cyrus to Alexander. A History of the Persian Empire*, Winona Lake (a translation of his 1996 monograph *Histoire de l'Empire perse*). Chapter 11 of this book makes ample use of the Persepolitan archives. Amélie Kuhrt's 2007 book *The Persian Empire. A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period*, London & New York is an indispensable source for those wishing to acquaint themselves with primary sources on the Persian Empire. It includes translations of a significant number of Persepolis texts. The volume *L'archive des Fortifications de Persépolis. État des questions et perspectives de recherches*, edited by Pierre Briant, Wouter Henkelman and Matthew Stolper and published as volume 12 in the series "Persika" (Paris 2008) includes specialised contributions (in English) on a variety of topics pertaining to the Fortification archive, including the number of tablets it consists of, its discovery, seals, Aramaic tablets, uninscribed tablets, multilingualism in the archives, the geography of the administrative province, toponyms and the royal roads, among other topics.

Fortification texts are published in Richard T. Hallock, 1969, *Persepolis Fortification Tablets*, Chicago and, by the same author, "Selected Fortification Texts", *Cahiers de la Délégation archéologique française en Iran* 8 (1978), pp. 109-136. Additional Fortification texts have been published in A.M. Arfae, 2008, *Persepolis Fortification Tablets, Fort. and Teh. Texts*, Tehran. The Persepolis Fortification Archive Project is

making available (preliminary) editions of new texts at the “OCHRE” online environment. See their website at

<https://oi.uchicago.edu/research/projects/persepolis-fortification-archive>.

Treasury texts are published in George C. Cameron, 1948, *Persepolis Treasury Tablets*, Chicago, as well as in two articles by the same author: “Persepolis Treasury tablets old and new”, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 17 (1958), pp. 161-176, and “New tablets from the Persepolis Treasury”, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 24 (1965), pp. 167-192. The bullae and unwritten tablets are mentioned in Erich F. Schmidt, 1957, *Persepolis II. Contents of the Treasury and Other Discoveries*, Chicago.

Images and descriptions of a part of the Persepolitan seals are published in a first of several volumes on these seals: Mark B. Garrison and Margaret Cool Root, 2001, *Seals on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets. Volume I: Images of Heroic Encounter*, Chicago (2 volumes).