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MUSEUM REVIEW

Achaemenids Conquer London

ELEANOR BARBANES WILKINSON

FORGOTTEN EMPIRE: THE WORLD OF ANCIENT PERSIA. THE BRITISH MUSEUM, 9 SEPTEMBER 2005–8 JANUARY 2006, organized by John Curtis.

FORGOTTEN EMPIRE: THE WORLD OF ANCIENT PERSIA, edited by *John Curtis* and *Nigel Tallis*. Pp. 272, b&w figs. 50, color figs. 480, maps 2. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 2005. \$49.95. ISBN 0-520-24731-0.

A comprehensive exhibition devoted to the material culture of the Achaemenid empire may seem logical (and even long overdue) to archaeologists of the ancient Near East and others who are familiar with the period from about 550 to 330 B.C.E., when a series of Persian kings based in Fars (southern Iran) created the largest territorial empire the world had ever seen. Known as the Achaemenids, these kings developed a unified state across three continents, from Arabia north to the Aral Sea, and from the Indus River westward into Libya and Macedonia. Linked by a complex trade and road network, the Achaemenid empire brought about a period of economic and political stability that allowed for advances in science, culture, and administration. In art and architecture, a distinctly Persian tradition emerged and produced some of the great masterpieces of Near Eastern arts and crafts. Nonetheless, the scope of the Achaemenid achievement may have been a revelation for many who viewed the stunning exhibition of art and artifacts from ancient Persia that was held at the British Museum in autumn 2005. Presented in association with the Iran Heritage Foundation, the show was a supreme example of the ways in which skillful curating and judicious presentation can propel an exhibition beyond the confines of mere object display into the realm of public enlightenment.

One of the chief aims of the exhibition was to redress the negative Eurocentric view of the ancient Persians that has resulted from the exclusive reliance on classical Greek sources throughout history. To many people, Persia is best remembered from the Graeco-Persian wars beginning in the early fifth century B.C.E., and for having been routed by Alexander of Macedon during his invasions of 334–330 B.C.E., but under the Achaemenid kings the Persian empire became a global superpower characterized by diversity, inclusiveness, and cultural tolerance. Despite the fact that Iran does not figure in the title, no viewer of this show will have left its sumptuously bedecked halls with anything less than profound respect for the Achaemenid accomplishments and, consequently, with a deeper understanding of Iran and its contributions to the world's

political and cultural heritage. On the international stage, Iran has remained mostly out of the spotlight since 1979. There is no doubt that this exhibition will go far in bringing that country closer to the forefront of public consciousness, as well as providing fascinating insights into its past. For Iran, and also for those of us on the outside looking in, it could not have come at a better time.

John Curtis, Keeper of the Department of the Ancient Near East, should be applauded for initiating the exhibition and, along with the many other scholars who joined him in curating the show, commended for crafting a narrative structure that allowed for varying degrees of interaction with the objects and their accompanying didactic material in the galleries. The result was an enjoyable and thought-provoking experience no matter what level of knowledge one might already possess about ancient Persia. The British Museum certainly had a lot to work with; the rich array of objects, ranging from imposing stone reliefs and architectural elements (fig. 1) to delicate pieces of gold jewelry (fig. 2), was nothing less than spectacular. For this, credit must be extended to the representatives of the institutions who generously allowed many of the key pieces to be transported to London. With one exception (the Oriental Institute in Chicago), every significant collection of Achaemenid material found in Iran has contributed to this exhibition: the National Museum in Tehran, the Persepolis Museum, and the Louvre all submitted impressive and iconic pieces, a number of which have never been seen outside of Iran and many only known from publications. The British Museum tapped its own extensive holdings, and a considerable number of objects obtained from places outside of Iran were also interspersed throughout the cases and galleries. This meant that some of the most outstanding Achaemenid-period objects from the heartland sites of Pasargadae, Persepolis, and Susa shared pride of place with intriguingly unfamiliar entries from more far-flung regions that fell within the imperial sphere of influence, such as Greece, Turkey, the Caucasus, and Tajikistan. This approach of combining material from both central Iran and provincial territories underlined several important aspects of the Achaemenid empire. Most obviously, it illustrated the extensive and complex geographical network, with its diversity of artistic traditions and wealth of resources and talent that existed, which could be exploited by the authorities to further imperial objectives. The great variety of objects of different function also highlighted significant aspects of Achaemenid culture, and the curators made good use of this idea as an organizational device in the exhibition.

The objects were indeed splendid to look at; most were complete, showing little or no indication of the damage



Fig. 1. Stone relief from Persepolis showing gift bearers with a vase (AN00044543) (on loan from the Persepolis Museum, Iran, cat. 44).

or scruffiness characteristic of artifacts recovered through archaeological excavation. While the excellent condition of the material was impressive, it also reflected one of the more problematic issues of the exhibition, which is that a large number of the objects lacked a firm provenance. For many viewers, this issue was probably not of great significance, since the knowledge of where an object was originally found may not seem all that crucial in appreciating the object in isolation. For archaeologists, however, this presents a problem. A great number of object labels contained the type of vague descriptions that archaeologists dread: “*Said to come from Alexandria,*” or “*Believed to come from Halikarnasos,*” or “*Probably from Elephantine, Egypt.*” Archaeologists wring their hands in despair when they see this sort of thing on an identification label, since it means the object is stripped of any meaning other than its intrinsic qualities. It opens the door to speculation about an object’s function, it throws the date of the object into question, and it allows no interpretation to be drawn about relationships between objects or the object and its temporal and spatial context. The combining of unprovenanced with systematically excavated material in the same context—while at first somewhat jarring to the informed viewer—did work in this exhibition, however. The excavated objects formed a kind of chronological structure within which the unprovenanced material floated, while serving to complement,

enlarge, and enrich the overall picture of the Achaemenid empire and its material culture. Many of the objects were obtained by the different institutions decades ago, before the existence of standardized export regulations and exchange agreements for objects of cultural heritage, and many seem to have been acquired through a combination of means that do not necessarily include systematic excavation, although it must be acknowledged that there were no objects in the show that did not have pre-1970 documentation. A case in point is the assortment of objects constituting the gold and silver hoard known as the Oxus Treasure, the acquisition of which involves a lengthy and spottily documented set of confusing circumstances predating the 20th century (fig. 3). A bit more information on the archaeology of Achaemenid Persia would have been valuable in a show such as this, and it is surprising that in a museum that has historically been at the center of western investigations into ancient Persia, the archaeological history of at least the key sites was virtually omitted from the exhibition. It is the subject of an excellent chapter written by Curtis in the exhibition catalogue, however; therefore, the publication and the exhibition are best viewed as complementary components of the show.

However difficult it may have been for the curators, the decision to exhibit unprovenanced material ultimately can be justified in this context. It would have been a pity to have missed the opportunity to view many of these



Fig. 2. Gold earring found at Pasargadae. In the center are three bars from which pendants hang in the form of pomegranates; the large pendant at the bottom of the earring is lapis lazuli (AN00044537) (on loan from the National Museum of Iran, cat. 174).



Fig. 3. Silver statuette from the region of Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan, partially gilded, showing a bearded man in Persian costume, possibly depicting a king. Achaemenid Persian, fifth–fourth century B.C.E. (AN00023309) (© British Museum, cat. 260).

objects; the curators no doubt recognized the limitations and dangers involved but wagered validly that the drawbacks would be counterbalanced by the undeniable advantages of viewing such exquisite and significant material in a unified exhibition. Visitors met some of the most splendid and well-known works of Achaemenid-period art in existence. The “faience” glazed brick panels of archers from Susa, with colors more vibrant than any publication will ever convey (fig. 4), stood close by some of the most refined silver and gold works known in the ancient Near East, including the now-famous tableware from Persepolis and other equally well-known and sublimely beautiful pieces from elsewhere (fig. 5).

In a show such as this, where artifacts were carefully interwoven with a narrative, one of the biggest curatorial challenges is to hit the right note in terms of the selection of didactic material. Once again, the curators succeeded. From the larger text panels to the smaller and simpler object labels, the writing was clear, informative, and without scholarly jargon. Considering the scholars who are responsible for this show, it is not surprising that both the didactic material and the catalogue were authoritatively written and based upon the most current research. Of course, the exhibition text panels were not attributed to specific authors, but if the catalogue may be

taken as an indication of the scholarship behind this show, then it is clear that its intellectual content was a combined product of some of the most respected scholars in the field. Like the objects themselves, the didactic material was impressive in its breadth as well as detail. The presentation of some of it, unfortunately, was at points less than impressive, a fact best explained by describing the layout of the exhibition.

The overall arrangement of the objects within the galleries was logical and even creative, with a structure defined by the overarching theme of aspects of empire. (The show finished with two small areas illustrating the legacy of the Achaemenids through to today and the decipherment of cuneiform.) The organization may have been generated by the prevailing interests of the curators, but one suspects that the availability of objects may have been an equal or even deciding factor in the selection of the thematic groupings. After a strangely dark introduction section, each of the main halls was devoted to one specific theme, including royal palaces, the royal table, administration, luxury in life and death, and the end of empire. Embedded within this layout were specialized treatments of more specific themes within individual cases or a set of cases, such as the relationship between Persia and Greece, the Persian military, mortuary traditions, and



Fig. 4. Glazed brick relief panel from Susa, southwest Iran. Achaemenid Persian, late sixth century B.C.E. (PS042129) (© British Museum, cat. 51).

many others. One of the great successes of this exhibition was that it conveyed the grandeur of Achaemenid imperial symbolism, especially in the realm of monumental art and epigraphy. This was done in large part through the incorporation of plaster casts of stone reliefs at Persepolis along with other elements of monumental art and architecture, including the well-known statue of Darius found in Susa. While some might question such a strategy, in this case the casts provided visual information of a dimension and scale that would be virtually impossible to achieve through photographs or other two-dimensional illustrations alone. The casts actually were not merely an effective visual device; each was a kind of archaeological artifact, albeit one from the 19th century. The reliefs, for example, were created by the Weld-Blundell expedition to Persepolis in 1892, when details of the sculptures were still fairly well preserved, and the crisp detail and refined workmanship would truly surprise anyone who had only experienced the original reliefs in photographs. The casts were positioned thoughtfully for maximum effect. A doorway relief with Xerxes enthroned and supported by the peoples of his empire from the Hall of 100 Columns graced the exhibition entrance; visitors walked through opposing reliefs of the royal hero in combat with a monster from the Palace of

Darius; and the main hall given over to the theme of royal palaces was flanked by casts of the rows of delegations on the north elevation of the Apadana on one side, and on the other a relief of a lion attacking a bull from a staircase on the west facade of the Palace of Darius. Together with numerous architectural elements, including some magnificently carved and polished fragments of stone column capitals, many smaller but equally magnificent relief fragments from several key sites, the panels of glazed brick with Persian archers from Susa, and other architectural elements such as pivot stones, bronze gate decoration, tiles, wall pegs, and balusters, the casts elucidated the theme of royal palaces. In turn, this theme served as the backbone of the exhibition, and by placing it early on in the show, the curators created a rich and comprehensive spatial context for the many smaller artifacts on view in the galleries. The prominence accorded to royal palaces in the exhibition was appropriate, given the central role of palaces in imperial life during the Achaemenid period.

Supplementing the artifacts in the royal palaces gallery was a constant-play video about Persepolis, which included both footage of the site and a very effective virtual reality model of the architecture. It is unfortunate that in accommodating the monitor in the gallery, the preparators had to position it in such a way that anyone bending over to view a case of lovely seals obstructed the view of the film; there was in general a bottleneck as people filtered around it and a nearby partition wall and benches. Small problems in presentation are inevitable in exhibition design, and considering the overall high caliber of this show it seems gratuitous to itemize the ones that existed here since they were more than compensated for by so many excellent qualities in the display, content, and object selection. For the sake of future exhibitions, however, it is perhaps worth noting that the object labels inside the cases were not particularly suc-



Fig. 5. Gold bowl with trilingual inscription of Xerxes the King (AN00044553) (on loan from the National Museum of Iran, cat. 97).

cessful. Confusion among fellow visitors was palpable as some struggled to relate a certain object to its appropriate label within many descriptions included on Lucite panels mounted vertically at each end of the case. This is only a small flaw in an otherwise elegant exhibition design. Even the colors seem thoughtfully chosen to highlight the objects to their best advantage. The objects glowed in cases lined with maroon, turquoise, and wheat-colored fabric, playing well against the subtle yet sumptuous oxblood red walls. The gallery furniture, too, was elegantly contrived, with cutouts in partitions leading the eye through to new spaces and with benches (apart from one by the video) placed strategically yet unobtrusively. The darkness that was no doubt due to conservation issues may have been off-putting to some, but it worked well to increase the drama.

On the whole, in terms of visual appeal, spatial configuration, and techniques of display, this was one of the most enjoyable museum presentations one might hope

to experience. Then again, given the remarkable corpus of artifacts assembled by the Iranian and European institutions collaborating in this show, if the British Museum's art handlers had simply cracked open the crates and unloaded the artifacts on the floor of the gallery, they would still have had a blockbuster show. Thanks to the British Museum's vision and creativity, the combined efforts of all of the collaborating institutions, and the many contributors to the extremely valuable compilation of scholarly research that constitutes the exhibition catalogue, the field of Iranian archaeology has experienced a significant and positive advancement.

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