

## Rediscovering Ancient Persia The Oriental Institute Achemenet Project

by TYTUS MIKOŁAJCZAK, PROJECT RESEARCHER, PHD CANDIDATE,  
NEAR EASTERN LANGUAGES AND CIVILIZATIONS, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

The Oriental Institute contains one of the largest collections of ancient Iranian objects in the Western Hemisphere, and objects originating from the Achaemenid Persian empire (ca. 550–330 BC) are particular highlights of this collection. Many of the most important pieces of sculpture, stone vessels, seals, and inscriptions are displayed in the Robert and Deborah Aliber Persian Gallery (fig. 1). Many other objects remain in storage within the museum. These objects are the focus of a new research project at the Oriental Institute that began this spring in collaboration with the Musée du Louvre and the Collège de France, Paris.

### Persepolis Rediscovered

The Oriental Institute has in its collections over 2,600 objects produced during the Achaemenid period in various regions that were under Persian rule (including Turkey, the Levant, Egypt, Iraq, and Iran). More than 1,900 of these objects were found in a former capital of the empire, Persepolis (near modern-day Shiraz, Fars province, Iran), during the Oriental Institute's Persian Expedition, 1931–1939. The value of the Persepolis collection is that most of these objects come from well-documented excavations, making them indispensable for any serious study of the period.

From April 2014, the objects from Persepolis in the Oriental Institute Museum have been the main focus of the Achemenet Project. Already within the first few weeks of the project, it turned out that the Achaemenid collection of the Oriental Institute Museum had many treasures waiting to be rediscovered. For years since the artifacts arrived in Chicago in the 1930s, the registered collections were only of occasional interest to scholars, who

have since assumed that the most interesting or important objects were already published by Erich F. Schmidt in a series of Oriental Institute Publications in the 1950s.

While documenting the museum collection as the newly assigned project researcher, I soon noticed that many of the objects in the collection, while registered, were not previously mentioned by Schmidt in his publications. Dozens, possibly hundreds, of objects await more thorough documentation.

Those which are already published lack color photographs, which can add a further layer of understanding of the material culture of Persepolis.

One of the most spectacular rediscoveries includes stone blocks featuring Greek inscriptions. Initially found by Ernst Herzfeld, the first director of the expedition to Persepolis, these were presumed lost by the classicists who were republishing them on the basis of Herzfeld's notes. Now they have been "rediscovered" in the Oriental Institute Museum and can be subsequently reclassified for the purposes of future research and publication. The inscriptions are thought to have been made for Alexander the Great, or his satrap Peucestas, who was residing in Fars until 316 BC.

The project also brought to light numerous Persian inscriptions. In addition to the well-known peg of Egyptian blue inscribed with trilingual text displayed in the Aliber Persian Gallery (fig. 2), fragments of other inscribed pegs were also found, with inscriptions of Kings Darius I and Xerxes I. The stone blocks and fragments of column bases inscribed in Old Persian, a prestigious language of the Persian kings, were also found. Although some of those objects were mentioned by Herzfeld in 1938, they had never



1 Column capital depicting human-headed bull, Persepolis, Iran. ca. 522–486 BC. OIM A24066. Photo by Anna Ressman

been fully documented. In addition, I also found unpublished fragments of glazed bricks from Persepolis, the decoration of which has close parallels to glazed bricks found in Susa, now in the Louvre.

The classification of some of the objects was also corrected; for example, among objects classified as “amulets,” a horse-harness strap divider was found. While all objects from Persepolis were assigned an Achaemenid date in the museum records, it turned out that among them there are many that have a later date: the aforementioned Greek inscriptions, several stamp seals of Sasanian date (AD 224–651), as well as objects found in the so-called Fratarakā Temple, of Seleucid date (323–64 BC).

## The Achemenet Project

The idea for the Achemenet Project at the Oriental Institute came from Professor Pierre Briant of the Collège de France, Paris. The wealth of the Achaemenid collection of the Oriental Institute Museum induced him and Dr. Yannick Lintz, director of the Islamic Art Department at the Louvre, to approach the Oriental Institute with a proposition to collaborate between their institutions. They did not know at that time that the project would lead to fantastic rediscoveries.

Professor Briant, a leading historian of the Achaemenid Persian empire, is also the director of Achemenet.com, the reference online platform for scholarly research and public interest in ancient Persia. Several years ago he embarked on the ambitious task of collecting digital documentation of the Achaemenid-period era objects from the museums around the world, and making it available through the [www.achemenet.com](http://www.achemenet.com) website under the patronage of the Musée du Louvre. The natural step was to initiate the Oriental Institute’s contribution to Achemenet through cooperation with another leading museum with Achaemenid era collections, the Louvre Museum in Paris.

Thanks to a generous grant from the Roshan Cultural Heritage Institute, and matching support from the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, it was possible to initiate the project in April 2014. The project is co-supervised at the Oriental Institute by Matthew W. Stolper, John A. Wilson Professor Emeritus of Oriental Studies, whose research interests include the history, languages, and art of the Achaemenid empire and Dr. Jack Green, chief curator of the Oriental Institute Museum. Because my PhD research on Achaemenid seals and sealings is closely aligned with the material culture of the Achaemenid world, I was selected as the project researcher. Dr. Jack Green selected Austin Kramer to be the project photographer and provided funds from the museum toward new photographic and lighting equipment for the project. Austin prepares the photographic section of the project and works closely with me to ensure that the photography meets the desired research requirements. The work of the project would not be possible if not for the kind assistance of the staff of Museum Registration and Conservation departments.

It seems that objects that have not yet been processed by the project will yield many additional surprises and rediscoveries. This important collection, which researchers may not have previously been fully aware of, will soon be available for study in digital form for anyone who is interested. In the remaining months of this one-year period of research, the Oriental Institute Achemenet Project will continue its work. The result will be the sharing of photographs of approximately 300 objects, and updated documentation for hundreds of additional objects. This will provide a new flexible tool for scholars studying the Achaemenid empire and will likely inspire new scholarly insights, research, and publications.

**2** Ornamental peg with trilingual Text of Darius I (522–486 BC). Blue frit. Southeast Palace, Persepolis, Iran. OIM A29808b. Photo by Anna Ressiman

**3** Project photographer Austin Kramer at work using new photographic equipment. Photo by Austin Kramer

