

# PERSEPOLIS FORTIFICATION ARCHIVE PROJECT

MARK B. GARRISON AND WOUTER F. M. HENKELMAN

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March 2023 marked the ninetieth anniversary of the discovery of the Persepolis Fortification Archive (PFA) in the northeastern casemate wall of the Persepolis terrace. Duly observed among PFA Project members, the jubilee year also marks a transition in project directorship, which will henceforth be in the hands of Mark Garrison and Wouter Henkelman under the aegis of the ISAC director.

“All outcomes seem gloomy,” Matthew Stolper wrote to Henkelman in July 2006, signaling the widespread expectation that the PFA materials, on loan at ISAC since 1936 and the object of legal dispute since 2004, would be either sold or repatriated to Iran in the very near future (“We might have two years for the appeals—maybe more, maybe less”). In the months that followed, Stolper contacted prospective members of what would become the PFA Project team; submitted the first two grant proposals; and convened, with Pierre Briant, an international advisory board at the Collège de France, Paris, on November 6, 2006. By early summer 2007, a more positive, hands-on sentiment was prevalent, as reflected in Stolper’s first annual report, which described the aim of the newly founded project as “to record as much of the archive as possible, at as high quality as possible, as quickly as possible” and “to make the information available widely, quickly, and continuously” (Stolper 2007, 97). Still, at that moment no one anticipated that the PFA Project would last more than a few years. That it is flourishing in 2023 and seeing a third generation entering the fore is to some extent a function of legal providence (as described in the 2017–18 annual report) but largely the fruit of Stolper’s stewardship. As project director, he has tirelessly applied for funding, engaged and trained student workers for data processing and digital photography, drafted reports, presented on the project at numerous occasions, regularly nudged all of us about anticipated results, and—as “a river to his people”—took care of the needs and well-being of the team during the past eighteen years.

In October 2022, ISAC chief conservator Laura d’Alessandro finished the packing of 3,506 Elamite and Aramaic tablets, sealed into nine crates and waiting to be handed to representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Beyond these materials, we anticipate at least six or seven more shipments. Since this process, even under optimum conditions, will take more than a few years to complete, the PFA Project will continue to document and edit as many PFA records as possible before the last items leave the building. This perspective also explains why a change in directorship after so many years is a meaningful step at this point, and it provides us with an opportunity to take stock of the project’s overall progress and the ways in which it is developing.

As of spring 2023, the PFA Project team had cataloged, photographed, edited, and entered into databases some 12,000 discrete items (all being made available for online consultation). In addition, project editors and associated scholars had produced 10 monographs and edited volumes and 110 articles and book chapters; given 164 public lectures and conference presentations; and (co)supervised eight master’s theses and eight doctoral dissertations on PFA-related themes (with six more doctoral dissertations in preparation).

While we take some pride in these numbers, we are also aware that they spell two developments that need addressing. Documenting and publishing the PFA materials was, and is, the core of the project as it has been established at Chicago. The reported period is no different from previous ones in this regard: Young Bok Kim, the project’s technical mainstay, processed 998 surfaces of 114 Elamite cuneiform tablets

and fragments into conventional and polynomial texture mapping images and entered into the Online Cultural and Historical Research Environment (OCHRE) database the readings of 90 Aramaic texts that project editor Annalisa Azzoni had reviewed. Azzoni also advanced, with Mitchka Shahryari, her work on the Aramaic ostraca and their connection with other parts of the PFA. Stolper (re)collated about 80 Elamite texts—mostly livestock accounts (fig. 1)—while Henkelman collated and analyzed about 230 Elamite texts previously read by Stolper; Teagan Wolter continued her work of updating these texts in OCHRE and improving the thesaurus. Henkelman’s student assistants Hamaseh Golestaneh (Berlin) and Rémi Bois (Paris) massaged Word editions of about 800 registers and accounts for inclusion in the project’s analytical Filemaker database. On the glyptic front, Emma Petersen added no fewer than 300 new seal images to the corpus; she hopes to finalize her work on the archive’s uninscribed tablets by autumn 2023, working alongside project veteran Erin Daly, who returned to the project to tackle the seals on 800 memorandum-type Elamite tablets (fig. 2). Christina Chandler visited ISAC twice to finalize her study of the inscribed seals (adding 13 final drawings) and presented her work in a lecture at the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York, in November 2022; Delphine Poinot pursued her work on the catalog of 436 stamp seals depicting a single animal (adding 30 final drawings). Garrison oversaw these various subprojects and processed the new data; additionally, he identified seals on some 50 Elamite tablets and produced some 40 final collated drawings. The number of distinct and legible seals in the archive is now approaching 4,500, a figure none of us could have anticipated back in 2006. Lastly, Garrison and project editor Elspeth Dusinberre continued their work on the seals on the Aramaic tablets, more specifically producing granular indices for the upcoming print publication of this part of the archive.

Beyond this “core business,” however, project members continued their efforts to analyze and discuss parts of the corpus within the wider framework of Achaemenid culture and society. Stolper, for one, expanded and revised his previously reported study on livestock management, now expected to be issued as a monograph, and presented preliminary results in lectures at Harvard University (October 2022), in Los Angeles (American Oriental Society meeting, March 2023), and in Paris (as part of Henkelman’s March 2023 class on animals in the PFA). His work means a breakthrough in the understanding of the notorious animal accounts from the archive but has much wider ramifications for understanding Achaemenid



Figure 1. Livestock account PF-NN 2661 (reverse): Unique eighteen-column tabulation breaking down the annual performance of eight small flocks of sheep and goats, then combining the information into totals for which stockyard overseers were accountable.

**PF-NN 2661**

**1 cm**  




Figure 2. Emma Petersen and Erin Daly collating seal impressions in the project basement at ISAC.

economic networks. In the same vein, project alumnus Rhyne King used the PFA materials to illustrate the issue of inequality in the Achaemenid empire (King 2023) and applied his views on Achaemenid institutional impact in a lecture, with South Asia specialist Divya Kumar-Dumas, on “Roads, Seals, and Authenticity in the Indus River Valley from the Persepolis Fortification Archive to Kauṭilya’s *Arthaśāstra*” in Los Angeles (American Oriental Society meeting, March 2023). Henkelman, in a paper coauthored with Kai Kaniuth and Kourosh Mohammadkhani (2023), used the PFA to challenge the frequently supposed lack of resilience in centralized state systems. He and Delphine Poinsoot presented their recent project-related work at the 24th Journée Monde Iranien (Paris, March 2023).

Three recent contributions deal with writing at Persepolis in a broad sense. The first, a paper by Jan Tavernier and Annalisa Azzoni (2023), systematically identifies cases of orthographic and phonetic influence of Elamite on Aramaic in Persepolitan contexts, signaling a complicated contact situation in which (Iranian) scribes transported some elements from Achaemenid Elamite (such as the lack of a voiced/voiceless opposition) to their version of Aramaic. Henkelman (2022) made good use of the PFA Project’s extensive databases to chart the use of the divine determinative (AN) with month names, a particularity of Achaemenid Elamite, and related it to variations in (semantic) animacy in earlier Elamite. Miller Prosser (associate director of digital studies in the University of Chicago’s Division of the Humanities) and his colleagues at the DeepScribe Project submitted a first paper on locating and identifying sign values on tagged photographs of Elamite cuneiform tablets available in OCHRE, a promising new tool on which we will report more extensively in the future (see, for now, <https://voices.uchicago.edu/ochre/project/deepscribe/>).

The research here mentioned reflects a decisive turn in the field of Achaemenid studies over the past two decades as the PFA Project increased the impact of the Persepolitan sources. There is now broad academic consensus that new research on Achaemenid iconography, institutional economy, religion, and society necessarily should incorporate the growing evidence from the tablets. For the new project directors, this reality presents an organizational challenge. While we will continue documenting and editing, and

thus maintaining, the original PFA Project at Chicago, we have also begun to create structures that could support and coordinate further exploration of the materials in the wider context of Achaemenid studies. In Berlin, Henkelman codirects (with Kai Kaniuth) a Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft–funded project on the “Unexplored Heartland” (since 2020; renewed in 2023), which focuses on Achaemenid Fārs as an institutional landscape and draws heavily on the PFA. In the past year, Rhyne King served as a postdoctoral researcher in this offshoot project, notably drafting a highly granular description of the area between Pasargadae and Nīrīz as documented in the tablets. Longtime PFA expert Leila Makvandi (Kashan, Iran) is working with Henkelman in the same project to develop portable X-ray fluorescence analyses of tablets and clay samples to provide an additional interpretative layer to such geographical approaches. Within the same framework, Stefan Hauser, Giuseppe Labisi, and Henkelman organized the conference “Institutional Landscape of Empire in Ancient Iran” (Istanbul, July 2022), at which Rhyne King spoke about fortresses and Henkelman about lance bearers as elements in the Achaemenid institutional landscape.

In Paris, Soheil Delshad (who previously organized a successful PFA exhibition at Persepolis; fig. 3) will oversee a second offshoot aimed at editing, translating, and commenting on all records from the Persepolis Treasury Archive, studying it with the insights generated by the PFA Project and involving several project members (Chandler, Garrison, Henkelman, and King; see also Asadi and Delshad, in press).

At this point we have come full circle, as it was also in Paris that the PFA Project was conceived in November 2006. Present at that meeting, with her usual engaging participation, was Amélie Kuhrt; she passed away early in 2023. We close this year’s report by paying tribute to this scholar who was always keenly aware of the historical significance of the Persepolis archives and vigorously supported our work over the past decades.



Figure 3. Persepolis Fortification tablets on display at the Persepolis Museum, Persepolis. The ruins of the Hundred-Column Hall are visible in the reflection. The *Returning Home* exhibition, mentioned in the 2021–22 annual report, was curated by Soheil Delshad and lasted until July 22, 2022.

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