

Report on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets

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A big event of the 1933/34 excavation season was the discovery of "30,000 tablets and fragments" at Persepolis. In 1937 these tablets became available at the Oriental Institute and a task force of four set to work on them, with visions of gaining quick new historical insights. These visions were soon deflated. After much grubby cleaning of tablets and struggling with the unfamiliar language we found that the texts were exclusively concerned with the minor economic activities of Darius I in the years 509-494 B.C.

The texts were in the Elamite language (except for a small percentage in Aramaic; but that is another story). The Persians had a newly invented writing for their own language but lacked the necessary army of scribes. The many types of text were thoroughly mixed. You might pick up one that said: "Halbaka received 1,000 quarts of flour. He delivered it to Susa for Muharriš to apportion. 24th year." The next might say: "1,124 sheep, supplied by Kampiya, were dispensed 'before' the king. 19th year. Harbezza took a receipt for what was dispensed." The one after that might deal with barley rations for 231 workers at Shiraz, ranging from five quarts per month for some girls and boys to thirty quarts for the men and for some of the women. In each case it would probably be a long time before a similar type of text showed up, or another reference to a place or person.

Certainly there were insights to be gained from such material. But the job would take many man-years of hard labor. When this fact became clear the task force dwindled to one, and soon that one was diverted by the war effort.

In 1947 the work resumed. By 1961, with more than 2,000 texts read and reread, it was possible to make some sense out of the material, and one could consider publication. Publication also takes time.

In 1969 *Persepolis Fortification Tablets* finally appeared, gratifying a small number of faithful souls in various lands. But that was still not the end of the story. Several years earlier the reading of new tablets resumed, and now 1,900 additional tablets have had their first reading. Perhaps a thousand more deserve attention.

Information continues to accumulate about the network of officials, high and low, busily engaged in collecting and distributing commodities over a wide area, and about ethnic work-groups (Babylonians, Assyrians, Ionians, Egyptians, etc.) engaged in various occupations (“treasurers,” stonemasons, irrigators, etc.) in many different places.

The chief officer of the economic administration was Pharnaces, son of Arsames. His own daily pay was two sheep, 180 quarts of flour, and ninety quarts of wine or beer. One text records his daily allotment of flour along with the meager ration of his 300 “boys,” who got one quart each. Since Pharnaces clearly enjoyed high status, it seems probable that his father Arsames was the king of that name, grandfather of Darius. This Pharnaces is, however, otherwise unknown to history, unless he is the Pharnaces mentioned by Herodotus as father of Artabazus, commander of Parthians and Chorasmians in the army of Xerxes.

Other important figures occasionally appear, for example, the general Gobryas, father of the famous Mardonius. A text tells us he received his daily 100 quarts of beer for one day at Bessitme and for two days at Liduma, in the year 23, twelfth month. In the same year and month, according to a parallel text, “the wife of Mardonius, daughter of the king” (her name, strangely, being unmentioned) received her daily ninety quarts of flour for one day each at Kurdušum and Bessitme and for two days at Liduma. We can hardly avoid concluding that Gobryas met his daughter-in-law at Bessitme and traveled with her to Liduma, where they stopped over for a day. The information is not, however, easy to reconcile with the statement of Herodotus that, seven years later, “Mardonius was a youth

at this time, and had only lately married Artazostra, the king's daughter."

The texts of course continually provide new data on Elamite, which few can appreciate. They also add to the large stock of Old Persian loan words, which enrich the limited known vocabulary of that dialect, and to the very numerous Iranian personal names; thus they are of great interest to the Iranists.