

Swedish Contributions to the Archaeology of Iran

By Carl Nylander

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Editor's note: Iran is a constant presence in Western media these days due to its politics and foreign policy. Less attention is paid to the country's many millennia of culture and its splendid and rich archaeological record. And hardly a word is said about the sustained and large-scale work performed there by Swedish archaeologists. Thus we are pleased to be able to present a paper and bibliography on this underappreciated aspect of Swedish antiquarian research by professor Carl Nylander, an authority in the field and a living link to the Swedish 20th century archaeological fieldwork in Iran.

A fine on-line museum exhibition on the Achaemenid Empire is available in French and English at <http://www.museum-achemenet.college-de-france.fr/>

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Swedish Research Before 1932

Historically, scholarly contacts between Sweden and Iran were limited, though not uninteresting (37, 73, 83). In the 17th century the travellers Bengt Oxenstierna (1591–1643) and Nils Mattsson Kiöping (c. 1621–80) visited, among other places, Persepolis and Naqsh-e Rostam (9, 37, 73). A Swedish gold coin of 1700 found in the bazaar of Isfahan hints at other early contacts (71).

Swedish philologists made early important contributions to the study of Iranian philology, religion and history, through Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931), H.S. Nyberg (1889–1974), Geo Widengren (1907–94), Stig Wikander (1908–84), Sven Hartman (1917–88), Bo Utas (b. 1938) and several others. Swedish archaeologists, however, had less opportunity to work in modern Iran. Long before fieldwork was possible there was

nonetheless a debate on the problems of Persian art and on the provenance of objects found not only in the Near East but also in Russia and Scandinavia. Around 1900 Sven Hedin (1865–1952), Ture J. Arne (1879–1965) and others discussed problems concerning especially Persian Turkestan and the Silk Road. In 1906–07 Arne worked in eastern Turkey and in 1929 he studied the Turkestan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan area.

In 1930 the Reza Shah created a law permitting foreigners to excavate. In 1932, at last, Swedish archaeologists could initiate fieldwork in Iran proper. The results were two major excavations: Shah Tepé directed by Arne from 1932–33, and Takht-i-Suleiman directed by Hans Henning von der Osten, Bertil Almgren and others from 1958–62.



Fig. 1. Takht-i-Suleiman, Azerbaijan, c. 2200 m above sea level. This was the “City of the Warriors’ Fire”, with a great temple, a magical bottomless lake, a great wall and gates reinforced by 38 towers, all dating from the Achaemenid through the Mongolian eras. Aerial photograph 1961/62.

Shah Tepé (1932–33)

In the early 1920s, J.G. Andersson had discovered a previously unknown Neolithic culture (3rd millennium BC) in Northern China. It displayed astonishing similarities with the Tripolie/ Cucuteni culture in southwest Russia and other kindred cultures in western Asia (12,35). In 1927–35, Hedin and his colleagues carried out major investigations in East Turkestan, Inner Mongolia, Tibet and northern China. One aim was to study the age-old Silk Road connections between eastern Asia, Turkmenistan, the Near East and Europe (12,118) and, not least, Persia as an important intermediary between East and West (26, 36, 37, 73, 122). With the same goal, Arne investigated Shah Tepé, one of the first field-work efforts in the rich steppe north of the Asterabad-Gorgan region of eastern Iran. Arne could divide Shah Tepé into four main periods,

stretching roughly from c. 3200 to 1800 BC. The typical burnished grey ware he found was related to the important settlement mounds of Tureng Tepé, Yarim Tepé and Tepé Hissar. The Bronze Age of all those sites came to a more or less simultaneous abrupt end in the early second millennium BC. Shah Tepé was deserted until it became an Islamic cemetery in the 8th century AD. There were rich finds of early painted ware and of black and grey pottery and copper objects (24). Also later finds of silver Arabic coins, glass and faience.

At Shah Tepé, 257 skeletons were uncovered, of which 176 were prehistoric and 81 from the Islamic period c. AD 800–1000. The human skeletons were studied by Carl M. Furst and the animal bones by Johan Amschler: all published in 1939 (28). Amschler documented 18 species of wild and domestic animals, including a very



Fig. 2. Takht-i-Suleiman. Ruins on the shore of the magical lake. Photograph 1961/62.

early horse, a huge boar and, above all, the short-horn giant-bull *Bos brachyceros Arnei*.

The rich finds from the excavation, and other finds from Iran, were exhibited in Stockholm in 1940, and soon the excavation results were published (21, 22, 24, 31, 34).

Luristan Bronzes (1932/33)

There was a longstanding debate in Sweden regarding similarities of bronzes and possible contacts between Scandinavia and Iran. As a contribution to this discussion, Arne brought to Sweden a collection of c. 300 Luristan or Amlash bronzes from north-western Iran. He compared them with finds from other areas, from China, Italy and Scandinavia. The collection is now in the Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm (14, 19, 25, 29, 30, 49, 83, 86, 119, 127). At the same time a collec-

tion of various objects, a Sasanian stucco and Medieval glass vessels were procured for the National Museum (32, 83).

Takht-i-Suleiman and Zendan-i-Suleiman (Sweden 1958–62)

After working in Germany, America and Turkey, Hans Henning von der Osten (1899–1960) was an inspiring professor in Uppsala from 1951 to 1960 (cf. 71) and renewed Swedish interest in Iranian archaeology, not least through *Die Welt der Perser* and other works (11, 13, 38, 40, 42, 44).

The beautiful and fascinating site of Takht-i-Suleiman, some 2200 m above sea level in Azerbaijan, had long been visited and commented on by early scholars such as Ker Porter who was there in 1819, Henry Rawlinson who saw it in 1837, D.N. Wilber and A.O. Pope in 1937 and, not least, L.-I. Ringbom who wrote about the



Fig. 3. Takht-i-Suleiman. Gatehouse. Photograph 1961/62.

place as a Paradise on Earth in 1958 (43). In that very same year, 1958, at last, a joint German-Swedish-Persian excavation started. It was led by von der Osten, Bertil Almgren (b. 1918) and Rudolf Naumann, then director of the German Institute in Istanbul, with young German, Iranian and Swedish (S. Zachrisson, A. Åman, Y. Jahangir, L. Gezelius and myself) scholars taking part.

Takht-i-Suleiman (figs 1–3) was the important and much discussed site of the holy Shiz and of the *Atur Gushmasp*, the “City of the Warriors’ Fire”, with a great temple, a magical bottomless lake, a great wall and gates reinforced by 38 towers. Only 3 km away was discovered the early sacred mountain crater of Zendan-i-Suleiman. The beautiful landscape thus documented a long history from the prehistoric periods of the 3rd/2nd millennia BC up to the Mongolian pe-

riod with Ghengis Khan’s grandson Abaqa Khan’s summer palace of the 13/14th centuries AD.

At the earlier Zendan-i-Suleiman in 1958–64, German and Swedish archaeologists – von der Osten and Almgren in 1958, Zachrisson-Oehler in 1959 (47) and Oehler-Nylander in 1960 – excavated the impressive prehistoric Mannaean sanctuary from c. 800–600 BC on the volcano-like Zendan (fig. 4). It was related to other 1st millennium BC sites like Ziwiye and Hasanlu. Two main periods were distinguished, one a monumental unfortified sanctuary with much grey pottery, the second a settlement with fine decorated and painted wares, which appears to have met a violent end about 600 BC perhaps at the hands of the Medes. Pottery and other finds tend to date these periods from the beginning of the 8th century to the end of the 7th. There are good reasons to believe that Zendan



Fig. 4. Zendan-i-Suleiman, Azerbaijan. Y. Jahangir and S. Zachrisson enjoy a basket of apricots during excavations at the Mannaeen sanctuary. Photograph 1959.

was an important religious centre of the Mannai, a people known from Assyrian and Urartian written sources.

At the Takht-i-Suleiman (1959–78) the main excavation, directed by German archaeologists R. Naumann, W. Kleiss and D. Huff, concentrated mainly on the beautiful Mongolian summer palace of Abaqa Khan (c. AD 1270) and on the underlying great Sasanian Fire Temple. The latter magnificent structure was probably built by Chosroes I Anosharvan (AD 531–579) and destroyed by the Byzantine emperor Heraclius in 624. Underneath were discovered an earlier temple, most probably of Peroz I (AD 459–484), and, further down, remains of an Achaemenid settlement (6/5th centuries BC).

Us Swedes, Almgren (1959) and Gezelius/Nylander (1961–62), concentrated our work on two parts of the Takht-i-Suleiman's great stone wall with its towers and the impressive mud-

brick system inside it. In addition, the excavations established the stratigraphical sequence of the settlement periods in the area inside (46, 51, 54). These early investigations documented several Mongolian and Early Islamic phases with houses, fireplaces, wells and much pottery from the Near East, from the West and even fine fragments of Tang and Song dynasty pottery from China.

Underneath was documented the great mud-brick wall system (some 10–15 m thick) inside the late Sasanian stone wall. The problem was their relationship. Were they contemporary or was the mud-brick system some hundred or more years earlier? Early Sasanian or perhaps even Parthian? In 1961/62 this was still unclear (51, 54, 71). Only in the excavation of 1966–69 did our German colleague D. Huff, at last and excavating in a new area, resolve the problem. The mud-brick structure was, as it turned out,

the first defence system of Takht-i-Suleiman and dated from the early Sasanian period, most probably being coeval with the first Fire Temple built during the reign of Peroz I.

The Silk Road and Takht-i-Suleiman (1958–59)

In a stimulating paper (48) on the ever-changing Silk Road, Almgren discussed the mysterious flowing waters of Takht-i-Suleiman and Zendan-i-Suleiman. Enigmatic archaeologically observable fluctuations in the Silk Road trade route from China to the Mediterranean were thought by Almgren to be connected with possible climate changes in the mid-1st millennium BC and the 1st millennium AD, parallel to those already observed in contemporary Europe. Because of increased precipitation, these climate fluctuations would have blocked the crucial high passes over the Pamir with snow and ice and thus forced travellers to take another route, most probably northwards, thereby contributing to the prosperity of the Altai region (cf. 115, 122). At the same time this increased precipitation would have resulted in vastly enlarged areas for pasture in the western highland regions, where lack of erosion would make the mountain slopes react intensely to a slight increase in humidity. The result would have been a general multiplication of cattle and perhaps also of people. Almgren hinted at a possibility to understand the varying fortunes of the Takht-i-Suleiman valley in connection with these climatic changes, which were thought to have influenced the use of the water flow of the crater lakes of the Zendan and the Takht.

Achaemenid Architecture and Art (1957–2007)

The Achaemenid period (559–330 BC) offers fairly limited written evidence but, on the other hand, much monumental architecture and art. Scholars have long been interested in the historical problem of the Graeco-Roman world versus Persia and the Orient, i.e. the fundamental understanding of East and West. The Persian culture was often considered peripheral and uninteresting. In 1892 Lord Curzon was not impressed by Persepolis: “It is the same and the same again, and yet again”. In 1905 de Morgan, the excavator of Susa, wrote: “L’art achéméni-

de... fure le plus souvent associé avec le plus complet mauvais goût.” And the prominent art historian B. Berenson in 1954 considered ancient Iran as having nothing but “originality of incompetence”. Such attitudes has often led to a lack of interest in Achaemenid art itself and instead to a concentration on the problems of its background, more of its becoming than of its being.

Consequently scholars debate whether the few touches of perceived artistic quality found at Persepolis (e.g. fig. 5) were especially or even exclusively there thanks to Greek architects and artists. A few Oriental scholars objected, but the idea was accepted by many Classical Mediterranean archaeologists, traditionally experts on problems of style. How to resolve this central problem? (69)

After the Second World War a new generation of young scholars from several countries and various disciplines entered the field of ancient Iran. They had the ambition to collaborate, to change the rigid academic boundaries between the Near Eastern and the Classical disciplines and to analyse Achaemenid culture, art and architecture on its own ground and as a phenomenon sui generis (94, 100, 114).

“Did the King cut the rough rock?” (B. Brecht)

Around 1960 myself (b. 1932) and Ann Britt Peterson-Tilia (1926–88) initiated research on some very basic Achaemenid evidence, the stone. I established the stonework and stone tools in the ancient Near East (56, 69, 112), Urartu (58), Israel (60), Egypt (61), India (108) and Greece. I also made comparative studies (55) and specifically studied the stonework at Pasargadae (57, 69) and Persepolis (82). The importance of masons’ marks was documented (72, 82, 87, 95). Another subject was debated in Teheran in 1973, the ancient Now Ruz (New Year), Persepolis and the brilliant 10/11th century Iranian scholar Al-Biruni (81). In syntheses I discussed Achaemenid imperial art and Ionian Greek and Lydian work in the distant Persian palaces (94, 100, 111, 141).

Peterson-Tilia’s research was different. She and her Italian husband, architect and restorer Giuseppe Tilia (1931–2001), lived and worked from 1965–1979 at Persepolis. Their results were



Fig. 5. Persepolis. Bull's head.

remarkable, penetrating research, rich documentation, brilliant drawings and photography and 19 major publications (63–67, 74–80, 84, 85, 88–92). The first work (63) appeared in 1968. The publications deal with everything, they give documentation, chronology and construction history. Tilia suggested a new interpretation of how and why the central bas-relief of Darius was moved from the great Apadana into the Treasury (76). She documented that Xerxes, not Darius, had created much of the Apadana and the famous bas-reliefs of the Great King and the Crown Prince, and that it was probably Artaxerxes III who had carefully moved the bas-reliefs into the Treasury, now possibly a religious *horoon* (77). In addition the Tilias studied several other sites in the northern part of the Marvdasht Plain (92), in Pasargadae, Naqsh-e Rostam and on the important water Kor at Dorudzan (85, 92).

Related to this were studies of decoration

and colour on the clothes and shoes of the sculpted kings and soldiers and on other objects like the throne-cover (91). Another worker in the same field was Paavo Roos, who studied the ornaments of the royal dress at Persepolis (70), and Tullia Linders who discussed Greek and Persian *kandys* (104). In 1989 Johan Flemberg and myself resolved the problem of the small but important stone fragment of Darius currently in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The excavator E. Herzfeld who published it in 1934 called it “one of the finest specimens of Achaemenian art”. However, we could document that the fragment was entirely Greek (110).

The long preoccupation with great and small stones by the two Tilias and their generosity in collaborating with other colleagues profoundly increased the general knowledge of the physical reality of the Achaemenids and of the complex development of architecture and art, with slow creation, addition and change. However, much

remained to study when, in 1979, the Tilias were forced to leave their beloved work, Persepolis and Iran.

Stones Destroyed

Stones were not only worked and used for creation but sometimes, also interestingly enough, mutilated or destroyed. I studied such iconoclasm in relation to Near Eastern art and the Classical world (96, 108, 126). The broader political destruction of art in the Near East, as well as in the later periods, was further debated (108, 126).

Inscriptions and Texts

In two papers I discussed Iranian inscriptions in Pasargadae (50, 59). Two Greek texts with Iranian dimensions: the 21st Letter of Themistokles and a passage in Xenophon, (62, 117). In 1969 Hugo Montgomery (b. 1932) published a textually based study of Alexander sitting on the throne of the Great King in Susa (68).

Pompeii, Persepolis and Darius “the Worthless King”

The famous mosaic of the battle between Alexander and Darius III was found in 1831 in the Casa del Fauno in Pompeii. It was a fine copy of a lost late-4th century Greek painting of the great battle, the final meeting of East and West and the concluding Persian disaster. In 1982/83 I suggested a new interpretation of the King’s standard, long thought to be a Macedonian signal of attack, a *phoinikis*, and of the heroically dying Iranian, the centrally placed but “unknown soldier” of the mosaic (98, 102).

Darius III, the last Achaemenid king, fought, lost and fled to eastern Bactria. There he was murdered or perhaps ritually killed to save the Kingship. Most historians, ancient and modern, maintain that Darius was “a soft weakling” (Arrian) and “a worthless king (Sir William Tarn). However, in 1965 Geo Widengren (*Die Religionen Irans*, p. 153), briefly but clearly, defended the king: “Darius verfolgt von einem Streitwagen die Kämpfe von Issus und Gaugamela. Als aber die Schlacht verloren ist, wendet er sich zur Flucht, weil seine Pflicht nicht darin besteht zu kämpfen, sondern einfach als König zu existieren. Sehr zu unrecht hat man diese Haltung als Feigheit ausgelegt“. In 1993 I discussed the theme

further and showed how “active” and “passive” aspects of kingship are clearly seen in royal Achaemenid art. On one hand there are seals and coins which show the heroic king fighting his enemies or killing lions; on the other, there are the calm and peaceful scenes of the monumental palatial art at Pasargadae, Persepolis and Susa, the dynamic and the static dimensions of empire (114). In Parthian and Sasanian times the Great King was actually explicitly forbidden to go to war. The debate goes on. But the leading specialist on Iran P. Briant stresses in his monumental book *Darius dans l’ombre d’Alexandre* (2003, pp. 530–531, 554–555) that “L’hypothèse de G. Widengren a pris peu à peu une consistance conceptuelle et une épaisseur documentaire qui donnent corps l’ébauche que l’auteur avait naguère proposée”.

Ancient Musical Instruments in Iran and along the Silk Road

In the fundamental *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (143) is the foundational article “Iranian music, 3000 BC to 1500 AD” by Bo Lawergren (b. 1937). Lawergren – physicist, historian, musician and builder of musical instruments – has published more than 60 articles on aspects of ancient music. 24 are listed below.

Western Iran, the Near East and Mediterranean

Simple music existed already in the Stone Age. In the 6–4th millennia, the social and cultural development in and between Mesopotamia, Iran and Anatolia and the entire Near Eastern and Mediterranean region inspired the creation of harps, lyres, lutes, zithers, drums, trumpets, pipes, flutes and many others. Early Iran was important (99, 107, 121, 129, 131, 136, 143). The earliest known harp (c. 3200 BC) has been found near Susa, and evidence for other musical instruments turn up in the western part of Iran and in Mesopotamia (127). In addition, Lawergren has discussed the relationship between music and musical instruments in Syria, Egypt, Anatolia, Greece and Etruria (106, 116, 124, 129, 142).

Eastern Iran

The huge area of northern and eastern ancient Iran, including modern Afghanistan, Turkme-

nistan and Uzbekistan, was politically very important. The region was rich and central to Iranian religion. Toward the end of the second millennium the god Ahura Mazda and his enemy Angra Mainyu were thought to rule there. This was also the area of the priest Zoroaster, the language Avesta and the holy poems Gathas, of important kings and peoples, of riches and treasures. In Marv, Turkestan, in 1877 was found the great gold and silver "Treasure of Oxus" comprised of Achaemenid and Scythian objects. After 1960, Russian and other archaeologists discovered remains of the "Oxus civilization" of the 4th and 3rd millennia BC (135).

The Oxus Trumpets

Already in 1841 the Shah Mahammed had received "ancient gold vessels and other curious objects" from eastern Iran. Today we know of 43 of the strange "Oxus trumpets": seven gold, 27 silver and nine copper. They are very small (60–123 mm long) and nine of them carry very small (20–30 mm) and beautiful faces. For 150 years various famous scholars tried to understand them (de Bode 1844; Rostovtzeff 1920; Schmidt 1937; Ghirshman 1977; Amiet 1997) but without success. Most recently Lawergren has analyzed them, their use and societal role (133–135, 139). He dates the trumpets to c. 2000 BC. His analyses show that the little "trumpets" are not strictly speaking musical instruments but intended to make a very high-pitched signal (two octaves above middle C).

The Oxus objects' miniature size is unprecedented, the use of precious materials is unparalleled and their exquisite design must have had a specific purpose, suggesting an elite environment. Thus, they were not musical instruments and their small size made them useless as battle signal instruments. Instead the soft and sliding sound of the little trumpet is similar to the call of a deer. At rutting time the deer emit sounds similar to those of an Oxus trumpet. But if they were hunting instruments, then why were they made of gold, silver and copper, and why so finely decorated? It is clear that the trumpets had religious and social importance. In many countries, big game hunting was reserved for the ruler and the social elite (Egypt, Assyria but also

Medieval England, etc.). Lawergren documents the social structure of the "trumpet upper class", the wealth of this elite and their graves (one with three different trumpets and four small golden mouflon faces). In the end of his most exciting work Lawergren discusses the profound relationships between prehistoric people, animals and music.

The Silk Road between Iran and China

Swedish scholars such as Hedin (2, 4), Anderson (12), Arne (26), Almgren (48), Gyllensvärd (73) and others (118) have worked on aspects of the meeting of East and West and of the Silk Road. Lawergren has formulated new problems and made important discoveries. In 1997 he stated: "The study of ancient musical migration between China and the West (i.e. the Near Eastern region between Anatolia and Iran) has had a long but not always enlightening history" (122). He himself worked for several years on the communications from the Mediterranean via Iran along the Silk Road to China and Japan (120, 122, 137, 138, 140).

Lawergren discusses Iranian issues far from the Achaemenid centre. A 4th century BC harp from the deep-frozen Pazyryk cemetery in south Siberia has also been studied by Lawergren (115, 122). It can be connected to another Iranian find from the same site, a huge royal Achaemenid carpet. Lawergren also discusses beautiful tuning pegs and tuning keys for string instruments found in China. Some show Iranian traits (122, 128). He stresses the fact that ancient musical instruments, which were rarely shown in Central Asia before the arrival of Buddhism, became common afterwards (120, 122, 128, 137, 140). Two reasons are given: Buddhists delighted in image-making, and China had a vast appetite for Western instruments, principally from Iran. The Silk Road was a conduit for musical instruments, mainly flowing from the west to the east.

Iran 1957–2007

In 1957, when as a young archaeologist I was about to leave Athens for Iran, the famous classical scholar and excavator of Olympia Emil Kunze said to me: "Aber, junger Freund, was wollen Sie denn da? Sie haben doch Alles hier!"

The past 50 years of Persian archaeology have shifted Iran firmly from the periphery to the central agenda of the disciplines of archaeology and history.

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