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**Project Report of the**  
**Persepolis Fortification Tablets**  
**in the National Museum of Iran**

# **1 Introduction to the Collection**

During the excavations of Ernst Herzfeld in Persepolis, an ancient archive of clay tablets was discovered at the northeast corner of the platform, which was a part of the Persepolis fortification system. The collection was sent to the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago for further research. In 1951, after negotiations between the Oriental Institute, the Iranian Embassy in Washington D.C. and André Godard, a part of the collection was sent back to Iran to the Archaeology Office in the then Iran-e Bastan Museum in Tehran. The rest of the collection, apart from 300 tablets returned in April 2004, still resides in Chicago for translation and further research.



The part of the collection that was sent back to Iran included 3 wooden crates, containing 235 small boxes of tablet fragments. They were sent to Iran by ship via the Persian Gulf. The three crates were marked with numbers 1, 2, 3. Their dimensions, as appears from the OI records, were:

Crate 1: 33 x 25 x 19.5 inches (83.82 x 63.5 x 49.5 cm) 260 lbs (117.93 kilos)

Crate 2: 33 x 25 x 19.5 inches (83.82 x 63.5 x 49.5 cm) 305 lbs (138.34 kilos)

Crate 3: 30.5 x 22 x 21.5 inches (77.47 x 55.88 x 54.61) 215 lbs (97.52 kilos)

Each of the crates would have been marked on the outside with black ink to André Godard in the Iran-e Bastan Museum with the address:

Archaeological Service  
Musée de Tehran  
Tehran, Iran  
Attn.: Mr. André Godard<sup>1</sup>

The crates remained unopened in the basement of the National Museum until 1997. In this year the crates were opened and their contents provisionally counted.

In 2002, following the author's formal request and consequent approval by Mr. Mohammad Reza Kargar, director to the National Museum of Iran, the collection was, after recounting, moved from the basement to the Center of Achaemenid Studies in the National Museum.

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Charles E. Jones (OI) for providing this information.



## 2 The Project

After its relocation to the Study Room of the Center of Achaemenid Studies, the important tablet collection was analysed for a general assessment and setting-up of a system of processing the individual fragments. The author suggested twelve main categories by which the fragments would be divided.



The project team processing the fragments

The project started with the first crate and the fragments of each box was removed to a new box. After checking the recorded number of fragments on their boxes against the actual number inside these boxes, they were categorised according to the main categories.



The twelve main categories are as follows:

1. Seal impression (left edge)
2. Seal impression (left edge) + text
3. Additional seal impression
4. Text + edge
5. Text
6. Interior
7. Edge
8. Surface without text
9. (unscribed fragments)
10. Label
11. Upper edge
12. Lower edge

After processing the fragments according to the above categories, the contents of each original box were divided in two new boxes (of durable material originally designed to hold computer motherboards), each containing six compartments for the twelve categories. Foam was put in place to prevent the risk of additional damage.

During the inventory, it was established that some fragments had become broken within the original boxes. This necessarily prompted a strict rule of keeping fragments from the original boxes together in order not loose possible joins.

The part of the project described above is to be considered as a first phase and was intended to facilitate the future work on the fragments. Working on this collection involves searching through tens of thousands of fragments, but by the categories established during the inventory, scholars who are, e.g., interested in seal impressions, can find the



relevant fragments easily.

Apart from the twelve main categories, six additional categories were established:

- Fragments with Aramaic inscription.
- Special seal impressions
- Seal impressions suitable for drawing
- Pottery sherds
- V and W texts
- Complete pieces

The additional categories do not interfere with the main categories. Each fragment has kept its original crate + box number.

## 2 Main categories

- 1 **Seal impressions** - This group contains the fragments, which bear a complete or partial seal impression. All of these fragments have a seal impression on what was recognised as the left edge of the original tablet. The quality of the impressions varies from clear and recognisable to rather vague. In some cases a seal impression appeared after cleaning by the conservation department.
- 2 **Seal impression + text** - This group contains the fragments that, apart from a left-edge seal impression, preserve some cuneiform text. Seal impressions in this category can be complete or damaged.



- 3 Additional seal impressions** - Fragments in this group bear one or more seal impressions on one or several sides other than the left edge. Such impressions are typically found on the reverse, at the end of text. Sometimes they occur on the upper or lower edges of tablets.
- 4 Text + edge** - This category contains the fragments which preserve some text (from the obverse or reverse of a tablet) as well as an edge (upper or lower). In the next phase of the present project, when the necessary cleaning has been done, it will be possible to establish for individual fragments whether they preserve upper/lower and obverse/reverse sides of tablets. The fragments of category 4 will in the future be divided in three sub-categories: a) obverse with edge, b) reverse with edge and c) obverse and reverse with edge.
- 5 Text** - These fragments have text on one or two sides (obverse and reverse), mainly without edge.
- 6 Interior** - The fragments in this category represent the interior of the original tablets. They do not preserve parts of the surface and therefore lack traces of both text and seal impressions. Some may belong to other fragments in the same boxes and were, perhaps, broken during transport. The prospect of joining a number of these fragments, especially those that contain burned threads, seems promising. It is probable, however, that many pieces cannot be matched to any other fragments.



- 7 Edge** - This group contains fragments preserving the right, cone-shaped edge. Some fragments have a trace of a seal impression or the text on the obverse and/or reverse of the original tablets.
- 8 Surface without text** - This group contains the fragments belonging to a blank part of the original tablet surface. They typically belong to the reverse where, following the end of the text, one or several blank lines occur. Some of these fragments may belong to the anepigraphic “labels” (cat. 10), but usually their ascription to cat. 8 is ascertained by the presence of one or several clearly-indicated text-lines.
- 9 (unscribed)** - Fragments in this group were considered to be unsuited for categorisation during the first phase of the project. Some may represent interior parts of tablets, others corroded and damaged surface fragments. Cleaning of these fragments is necessary to establish their proper attribution to one the categories.
- 10 Labels** - This category has fragments of small sealed tablets, generally referred to as labels. They were used in connection with quantities of goods or packages and perhaps given after a certain transaction to the inspectors in combination with a written document. They are usually small and some have a seal impression or a short text. Others are anepigraphic and bear no traces of seal impressions. This category holds the most completely preserved pieces in the Tehran collection.



- 11 Lower edge** - In this group, fragments have been gathered which are likely to belong to the lower edge of a tablet. Many of the fragments preserve part of the original text, running across the edge from the lower obverse to the upper reverse.
- 12 Upper edge** - Fragments in this group probably represent the upper edges of tablets. Texts preserved on these fragments clearly terminate on one side (i.e. the reverse).

## 4 Additional categories

**Fragments with Aramaic inscription** - During working on the project, as expected some fragments with Aramaic inscription were found. Though there were not many of these, it will obviously be important to study them. Two kinds of Aramaic inscriptions are preserved: those written in ink and those incised in the clay tablet.

The number of Aramaic inscriptions written in ink was higher than those incised in the clay tablet. Corrosion made it difficult for some inscriptions to be recognised. Innovative techniques, such as the usage of special light, could reveal such damaged inscriptions. Several specialists in Aramaic have been contacted for this research.

**Special seal impressions** - This group contains the fragments with a special seal impression, like a fragment holding the seal impression of Cyrus I, king of Ansan. The





number of fragments in this category is not very high, but likely to rise after cleaning by the Conservation Department.

**Seal impressions suitable for drawing** - In this group there are some fragments with a very clear seal impression from which detailed drawings can be made. After the main categorisation described above, these fragments were taken from the boxes (each piece holding its box number) to facilitate future work on the impressions.

**Pottery Sherds** - During the project pottery sherds were also found. They seem to have been found together with tablets at the same location in Persepolis. This group is important from an archaeological point of view, because Achaemenid pottery is still not firmly identified. Studying this small collection can be useful in Achaemenid pottery studies. Secondly, the relation of the pottery fragments with the Elamite tablets is also of some importance. In a few cases pottery sherds were attached to tablet fragments, suggesting a link between them, such as storage of tablets in jars. Further study of this category may give confirmation for the idea.

**V, W texts** - This category contains fragments of tablets with a different size and shape. The fragments clearly belong to V (journals) and W texts (in Hallock's categories). In the next phase of the present project they will be subdivided in two categories (V and W), after cleaning, conservation and reading. Some of these texts have been broken in their box, probably during transport.



**Complete pieces** - Complete tablets were rarely found and mostly concern labels. Some tablets had only minor breaks and are now kept in a separate box.

## 5 Project members and colleagues

For the project a number of volunteers joined the team and, after training and continuous practice for some time, they gained enough skill to identify and categorise fragments. They were students and graduates of Archaeology and History departments of various universities. Their interest, care and hard working have been much appreciated. The team members were Anna Ghasemi, Niloufar Gol-Mohammadi, Maryam Hallaji, Sahar Shirdarreh, Reza Nikpour and Nima Mahjoub.

The project was supervised by the author (Shahrokh Razmjou) and assisted by Ms. Firouzeh Babae from the Center of Achaemenid Studies. Ms. Babae was also helpful in providing facilities and other needs for the project.

In this project the team tried to put every fragment in the categories as correctly as possible. Some mistakes among 35,000 fragments are probably inevitable, but appropriate measures were taken to reduce this risk as much as possible. The members were divided into small teams for processing a certain amount of fragments. These fragments were checked again by another team to avoid any mistakes in the categorisation. The teams were organised in such a way that



The project team

they would have ample opportunity of discussing and consulting on the categorisation of the fragments. Even counting each box was done repeatedly to avoid any possible mistakes.

The project continued for one year. At the end, because the team members had become more skilled, the progress of the project became faster and more precise. The processing of the fragments has been witnessed by a number of international visitors and scholars who came to see the project. After finishing the first phase, the tablets were returned to the



basement of the National Museum of Iran and will remain there until the second phase is started.

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