

1. Panoramic view of Persepolis. (Photo by author, 2000)

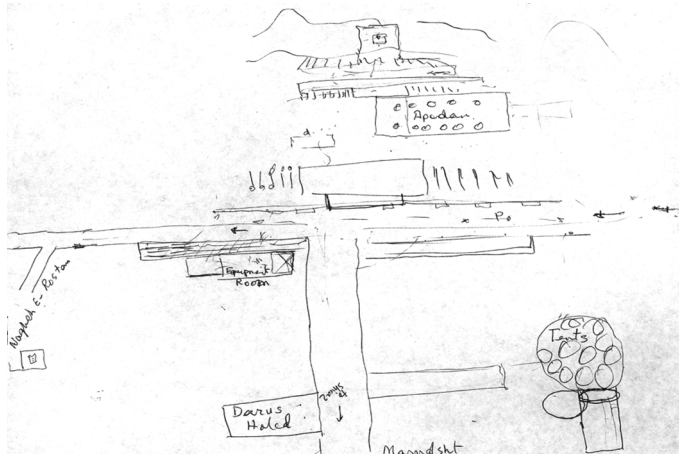
Preserving the Antique Modern: Persepolis '71

In October 1971, the king of Iran, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1941–79) decided to celebrate “the 2,500-year Anniversary of the Founding of the Persian Empire by Cyrus the Great.” The famed ruins of Persepolis were chosen not only as the authentic site of historical reenactments, but also as the ultimate symbol of Iran’s monarchy and civilization.¹ Through the three days of royal celebrations, Persepolis became, according to official reportage, “the center of gravity of the world.”² International invitees included the rich and famous of the time: a dozen kings and queens, ten princes and princesses, some twenty presidents and first ladies, ten sheikhs, and two sultans, together with emperors, vice presidents, prime ministers, foreign ministers, ambassadors, and other state representatives who came to witness a ritualistic speech by the king at Cyrus’ tomb, an unparalleled sound and light spectacle over Persepolis, exquisite banquets in a tent-city, and a fantastic parade of Persian History.³ While the event was “the greatest show the world ha[d] ever seen,” as the monarch had promised, it also proved to be the beginning of an anti-shah revolution.⁴

The conservation of Persepolis and Pasargadae—the royal seats of the Achaemenid Empire located near Shiraz in the central province of Fars—enabled their physical reuse as stages of political theatrics and, more importantly, provided the space for a temporal leap from antiquity to modernity. The integration of state-of-the-art technology into the ruins helped validate the king’s claims to both authenticity and modernity. Unlike a modern structure or a sheer archeological site, Persepolis as-preserved-ruin could give birth to the holistic vision of a glorious past projected onto a utopian future. These ruins would forge an intimate and viable gemology of monarchical conception of Iranian time. In Iranian politics and historiography, preservation as such would also help to concoct a linear national and artistic canon, thereby formulating a specific genre of Iranian identity formation that was intrinsically ancient and modern.

Mohammad Reza Shah, who secured the throne in 1941 following his father’s forced exile by the Allies, had been deeply committed to the rapid modernization of the country’s economy and infrastructure while preventing the liberalization of its political institutions. As his father had been, he was

2. Schematic map of the 2,500-year Celebrations by the technical manager of Iranian National Television.
(Photo by Vardkes Esraïlian, 2004)



convinced that a better future for Iran was possible by a return to the country's pre-Islamic roots, mimicking ancient customs and simultaneously pre-empting the pitfalls that had plagued Western modernization in concocting technological “shortcuts to the future.” The key to the realization of the king's ostensibly just, class-less, homogenous, and prosperous Iranian society was believed to be found in the cultural tropes of the Achaemenid dynasty. This collective urge to return to the “glo-rious past” had resulted in various forms of revivalism including the historiographic literature of the 1890s and 1900s, the architectural style of the 1910s and 1920s, the purification of the Persian language in the 1930s, and the reorganization of the education system in the 1940s. Yet the revivalistic scope and implication of the 1970s were both unprecedented and unforeseen. Unlike his father, Mohammad Reza Shah was blinded by his idolization of the ancients and was numbed to the highly nuanced intricacies of power in an unevenly developing modernity. Persepolis '71, therefore, would be remembered in Iran's twentieth-century history as the most explicit and extravagant articulation of the grand scheme of social engineering and cultural revivalism—a perverse manifestation of the shah's “Great Civilization” (Figure 1).

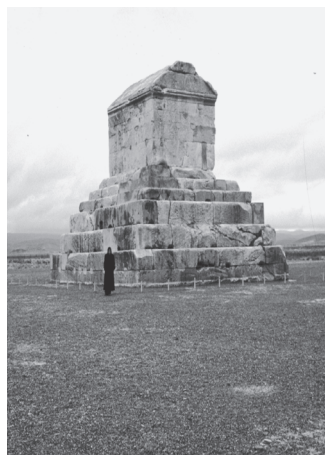
While Persepolis had attracted rulers from Alexander of Macedonia to Mughal Sultan Shah Jahan, its systematic excavation had to await the arrival of Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925–41) and his secularist ministers on the Iranian political scene.⁵ When, in 1927, the Iranian government swayed the French Republic to renounce its archeological monopoly in exchange for the organization of the Antiquities Services, the commission to excavate Persepolis went to German archeologist Ernest Herzfeld. Funded in part by the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute and in part by John D. Rockefeller, official excavations and documentations began in 1931. By 1934, archaeologists had uncovered the Persepolis Terrace, the

Eastern Stairway of the Apadana, the Council Hall, and Xerxes' Harem. German archeologist Erich F. Schmidt, who followed Herzfeld as the field director, carried on the general excavation of the site and its environment until the outbreak of World War II.⁶ In the postwar era, research and excavations were conducted by the Iranian Antiquities Services under local leaders who were joined by the Italian Institute of the Middle and Far East in 1964.

By 1971, the buried fragments of Persepolis had emerged to the surface as a vast ancient city with royal palaces and throne halls, residential quarters and harems, as well as a sophisticated decorative program with exquisite examples of high reliefs. The complex was unanimously selected to house the festivities that included five major events: the opening speech at the foot of the tomb of Cyrus at Pasargadae, two dinner banquets in the "Tent City" followed by fireworks over Persepolis, the viewing of "the Great Parade of Persian History" under the grand staircase of Persepolis, and, finally, the conclusion of the celebration in the modern capital of Tehran. Radical architectural and technological measures were undertaken not only to render Persepolis and Pasargadae user-friendly to dignitaries, but also to provide them with a modern look without impairing their antique allure, imagined or otherwise (Figure 2). A finely-tuned aesthetic synthesis of the ancient and the modern was to guarantee the symbolic and pragmatic success of the entire undertaking. On October 12 "at the crack of dawn," Mohammed Reza Shah launched the ceremonies with his famous address. Standing in front of Cyrus' empty tomb at Pasargadae, the king assured the historical figure that "after the passage of twenty-five centuries, the name of Iran today evokes as much respect throughout the world as it did in thy day" and that Cyrus should "rest in peace, for we are awake... to guard thy proud heritage."⁷ Until those words, the tomb had been presented in official literature as "a lonely, plundered, almost forgotten" place "left to lizards." Subsequently, it would signify the beginning of Iranian canonical history (Figure 3).

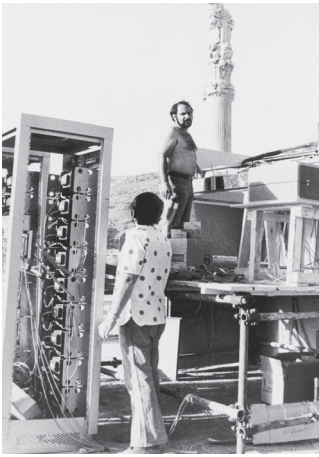
After the initiation ceremony at Pasargadae, the events continued at Persepolis. The biggest intervention on the site was the erection of the so-called "Tent City" on the ruins' southern section, described by an invitee as "one hundred and sixty desert acres covered with some seventy tents, sumptuously decorated by Jansen of Paris with French crystal, china, and linens, and hung with red silk and velvet and glittering chandeliers."⁸ The king had insisted that his 600 foreign guests camp outside Persepolis as ancient Assyrians, Lydians, Armenians, Arabs, and Babylonians had done. The star-shaped encampment was organized around a large fountain. The pairs

3. General views of Cyrus's tomb at Pasargadae, before and after its preservation. (Source: Ullens Collection c. 1960 and Talinn Grigor 2000)



of tents, totaling sixty residential villas, projected out to create five axes each named after a continent. Each tent of beige and royal blue fabric contained a sitting room, two bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a kitchen. At the end of the main axis, a large tent was erected to house Iran's king and queen as well as the extravagant evening galas. While the first night's formal banquet exulted in Western ethics and aesthetics in form of architecture, entertainment, and menu, the following night's dinner was redesigned to leave an impression of "an oriental pleasure pavilion with low divans and plush pillows on the carpeted floor." The evening concluded with fireworks over the ruins where actors, draped in ancient-style textiles, recreated the rituals of the ancient Achaemenid kings. Instead of washing his guests in sacred water as had been done in 500 BC, Mohammad Reza Shah invited his modern audience to "watch the history of the Persian Empire's ceremonial city unfold in a sound and light spectacle."⁹ The production had a twofold teleological purpose: to prove that Iran could and had transcended its "Orientalist traditions" while remaining true to its heritage. Ultimately, Iran could, if it wanted, be as modern as the West and as ancient as the Orient. Therefore, to accommodate the high-tech spectacle, the ruins were equipped with amplifiers, loudspeakers, transmitters, projectors, hi-fi sets, recorders, TV cameras, and other light and sound systems, all of which were concealed behind partitions and, hence, remained outside the view of journalists and their cameras (Figure 4).¹⁰

These rather sophisticated theatrics of history, however, were mere prelude to the great parade of the following day, which had involved years of scholarly research, reproduction, rehearsal, and over 6,000 men. With the help of French artists who had "devised the 'authentic' uniforms," the parade of "Persian History" showcased ten epochs in the military history of Iran.¹¹ Televised to "tens of millions around the world," each epoch was represented by contemporary soldiers dressed



4. Hi-tech alterations to the ruins of Persepolis for the 2500-year Celebrations. (Photo by Vardkes Esrailian, 1971)

“exactly” as their counterparts in selected historical phases. For several months, rehearsals were organized, soldiers were prohibited from shaving, benches were assembled, and the entire ruins of Persepolis and the city of Shiraz were thoroughly cleaned. “At Persepolis, Mohammad Reza Shah remolded Persian history to his own heart’s desire,” later noted historians, for he had insisted that it “helped immeasurably to establish Iran anew in Western perceptions.”¹² However, many could but remark that the parade “surpassed in sheer spectacle the most florid celluloid imagination of the Hollywood epics.”¹³ When the second half of the celebration was launched in Tehran, the king dedicated a large-scale modernistic museum of linear history, Shahyad Aryamehr Monument.¹⁴ This change of location spoke to the direct link between the ancient city of Persepolis as the capital of the Achaemenid Empire and the modern city of Tehran as the capital of the Pahlavi state, a conspicuous evocation of continuity. As put by a state spokesman, it was a jump “out of history into the nation’s future.”¹⁵ On the final day of the celebrations, additional parades took place in the newly inaugurated 100,000-seat Aryamehr Stadium. The fact that the events in Tehran were acted on the backdrop of modern architecture contributed in no small way to the illusion of compressed time. These articulations of national history were meant to “show off Iran’s considerable recent achievements to the outside world and at the same time show Iranians how respectfully the outside world would treat the official ideology.”¹⁶ By the end of the week, the Iranian state had poured more than 300 million dollars into the events.¹⁷

The rhetoric of ruins was intended to legitimize the policies of rapid, uneven, and, at times, authoritarian modernization. A publication sponsored by the Celebration Committee maintained, “Only when change is extremely rapid, and the past ten years have proved to be so, does the past attain new and unsuspected values worth cultivating,” concluding that “the celebrations were held because Iran has begun to feel confident of its modernization.”¹⁸ The celebrations served their purpose, which according to the king was, “to re-awaken the people of Iran to their past and re-awaken the world to Iran.”¹⁹ When in March 1976, Mohammad Reza Shah decreed the substitution of the Muslim Solar Calendar with the Royal Calendar, the 2,500-year Celebrations were recalled to endorse not only the reason underpinning this gigantic temporal shift, but also its historical exactitude. Equating performance with political power and enactment with historical lineage, time itself was reset at Persepolis ’71. Overnight, the Muslim 1355 mutated into the Royal 2535.²⁰ Prime Minister Hoveyda declared, “This is indeed a reflection of the historic fact that

during this long period, there has been only one Iran and one monarchical system and that these two are so closely interwoven that they represent one concept.”²¹ In response to public outrage, the king vowed that this would put Iran “ahead” of the West in terms of historical progress, since from now on, “they [1976 Europe] would look forward to us [2565 Iran].”²²

Through the modern preservation and use of Persepolis as-preserved-ruin, the state performed the nation on an ostensibly authentic site of national origin, with all its ancient glamour and modern excesses. It also presented a moment when Iran tried to reclaim superiority vis-à-vis the (Western) world, for it was, after all, Alexander who looted Persepolis and brought about the demise of the Achaemenid Empire. The experiential, phenomenological immediacy to ancient ruins was meant to intensify and authenticate the appearance of modernity at Persepolis ’71. Such proximity instrumentalized an untimely preservation of time. The compression of history delineated the appropriation of these fragments of ancient artifacts not only as a thoroughly modern act, but also as the very manifestation of modernity. This process of becoming modern was achieved with the staging of fragments of architecture that lent themselves to the holistic vision of a reincarnated historical golden age and the promise of a great future civilization. Both of these giant and unrealistic shortcuts into the untimely increasingly contributed to political decadence in Pahlavi Iran.

The person of the king, Mohammad Reza Shah, in the sensation of his celebrations was the ultimate representation of “Being-as-Playing-a-Role,” except in this case, he, along with his guests, played the role earnestly. In fact, Persepolis ’71 was a “pure example of Camp” for, according to Susan Sontag, camp is unintentional: “they are dead serious” and do not “mean to be funny.”²³ The king’s power display staged on the ruins of Persepolis contributed in no ambiguous way to the very undermining of his own political power. Historians of modern Iran place the origins of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which shook the world and brought down the Pahlavi dynasty, at Persepolis ’71. Had not the shah unveiled an elaborate matrix of Saidian self-Orientalization that would lend itself to revolt? Was not Persepolis ’71 a genius reassertion of “Voilà! the Orient!” in its complete authenticity that would reassert itself in the form of revolutionary slogans such as “Death to USSR; Death to USA”?²⁴ The extravagance of the celebrations, the use of antiquity to legitimize power, the theatrics of the performances and the ultimate expression of snob taste on the preserved ruins of Persepolis came to contribute to the image of a corrupt monarch in the eyes of the Iranian masses. The king had by no means persuaded his subjects of the truth of the

events. However, at the time, the king's privileged Western audiences, nobilities and commoners alike, had fully endorsed the seriousness of the events, which came to contribute to belated social rage at home. This endorsement was abundantly expressed in major Western popular journals and newspapers. For example, ten days after the parade at Persepolis, next to the illustration of rather bored Iranian soldiers dressed in Achaemenid military costume, *Paris Match* confirmed, "They have not changed since 2,500 years ago."²⁵ All that did change on September 8, 1978, when the monarch's soldiers opened fire on his people and instigated the end of monarchy in Iran.

Author biography

Talinn Grigor received her Ph.D. in February 2005 from the History, Theory, and Criticism Section of the School of Architecture, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Currently, she is the 2003–2005 Ittleson Predoctoral Fellow at the Centre for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. During the academic year 2005–2006, as a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow at Cornell University, she will be teaching courses on non-Western architectural culture and politics as well as preparing her dissertation *Cultivated Modernities: The "Society for National Heritage," Political Propaganda, and Public Architecture in Twentieth-Century Iran* for book publication.

Endnotes

¹Jacques Lowe, *Celebration at Persepolis* (Geneva: Creative Communications S.A., 1971), 6.

²William Shawcross, *The Shah's Last Ride: The Fate of an Ally* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 39.

³*Ibid.*, 39.

⁴Quoted in Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 326–7.

⁵For a recent account of Iran's archeological history and its relationship to nationalism, see Kamyar Abdi, "Nationalism, Politics, and the Development of Archaeology in Iran," *American Journal of Archaeology* 105/1 (January 2001): 51–76.

⁶See University of Chicago's Oriental Institute website, <http://flcsvr.rc.kyushu-u.ac.jp/~michel/serv/ek/chron-english01.html>, accessed 30 January 2005.

⁷Jean Hureau, *Iran Today* (Tehran: Editions j.a. Iranian Ministry of Information and Tourism, 1975), 60.

⁸Quoted in Marvin Zonis, *Majestic Failure: The Fall of the Shah* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 68.

⁹Lowe, 35.

¹⁰This information, along with the photograph, was kindly provided by the technical manager of Iranian National Television, Mr. Vardkes Esraïlian, to whom I am most grateful.

¹¹Shawcross, 42.

¹²*Ibid.*, 46.

¹³Lowe, 62.

¹⁴On Shahyad see Talinn Grigor, "Of Metamorphosis: Meaning on Iranian Terms," *Third Text* 17/3 (September 2003): 207–225.

¹⁵Lowe, 95.

¹⁶Mottahedeh, 326–7.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 326–7.

¹⁸Lowe, 7.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 95.

²⁰See Zonis, 82 and 289; and Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982), 444.

²¹Fereydown Hoveyda, *The Fall of the Shah* (New York: Wyndham Books, 1980), 203.

²²For the change of calendar, see Marvin Zonis, *Majestic Failure: the Fall of the Shah* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), 82 and 289.

²³Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp" *Against Interpretation* (1964), 280 and 282.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 282.

²⁵"Persepolis: la Fête d'un Empereur et de son Peuple [Persepolis: the Celebration of an Emperor and of his People]," *Paris Match* 1172 (23 October 1971): 37.