

## INTRODUCTION: THE MOST BEAUTIFUL BLUES

Behind glass doors in a repository in the basement of the National Museum of Asian Art at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, remain a modest number of beautiful pigments from almost 2,500-year-old stone façades on the sites of Persepolis, Naqsh-e Rostam, and Pasargadae in Iran (**Figures I.1–I.3**). Away from the ruins of the monuments standing calm and in gentle dignity in Fars in southern Iran, these tiny pigments, stuck on paper squeezes made on the sites only two generations ago provide an amazing opportunity to approach and better understand the aesthetics and sensual visual culture of the great palaces and environs of Achaemenid Persia. Even more, the residues are a window into the world of the craftsmen and people who built Persepolis and other sites. They are part of the great narrative connecting painters, people, places, and traditions across cultures and times, connecting the largest world empire between the late sixth and mid fourth centuries BCE and beyond with today. They are at the heart of this book.

The residues also help us to engage with and think about the aesthetic experience once encountered by those who visited these sites. They encouraged others and me to travel with those who documented and managed to transport them away from the façades, to witness the first modern engagements with this colorful past, and to comprehend a modern western fascination with the impressive ruins on these sites. One such modern individual was the German archaeologist Ernst Herzfeld (1879–1948), whose interventions on the site of Persepolis and whose aspirations to uncover the histories of the site



1.2. View of the archaeological site and ruins of the terrace of Persepolis in Iran from the north. A roof covers the sculpted façades on the east front of the structure referred to as the Apadana, the largest building on the site. Courtesy B. N. Chagny, Iran–France Mission at Persepolis–Pasargadae

have inspired many later researchers while leaving a complex legacy on the site (**Figures I.4 and I.5**). A note in a letter Herzfeld had written from his camp in Persepolis to James Henry Breasted, director of the Oriental Institute in Chicago on November 5, 1932, is perhaps a good start to introduce how these aspects of polychromies of the originally painted façades surprised him:

I nearly forgot to mention that yesterday, during the uncovering of a door in the Tripylon the lower part of a relief was found, . . . in its original bright colors. . . . I first thought that the reliefs essentially were the colors of the polished stone, i.e. black and only a few parts, like ornaments, feather wings, lips, eyes, overlaid with red and bright blue, green, and yellow. Now, it seems rather that all reliefs were entirely painted in brilliant, alternating colors, perhaps on the polished, black ground. What a strange impression this must have been!<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Ich hätte fast vergessen, dass gestern bei der Freilegung einer Tür im Tripylon der untere Teil eines Reliefs, . . . in seiner vollen ursprünglichen Farbenpracht zu Tage kam. . . . Nach den Farbresten, die sich überall an den in der Erde begrabenen Skulpturen finden, hatte ich geglaubt, dass die Reliefs wesentlich die natürliche Farbe des polierten Steines, d.h. schwarz, gezeigt hätten und nur einige Teile, wie Schmuck, Flügel, Lippen, Augen mit rot und hellblau, grün und gelb aufgehöhnt gewesen wären. Nun sieht es doch mehr aus, als seien die



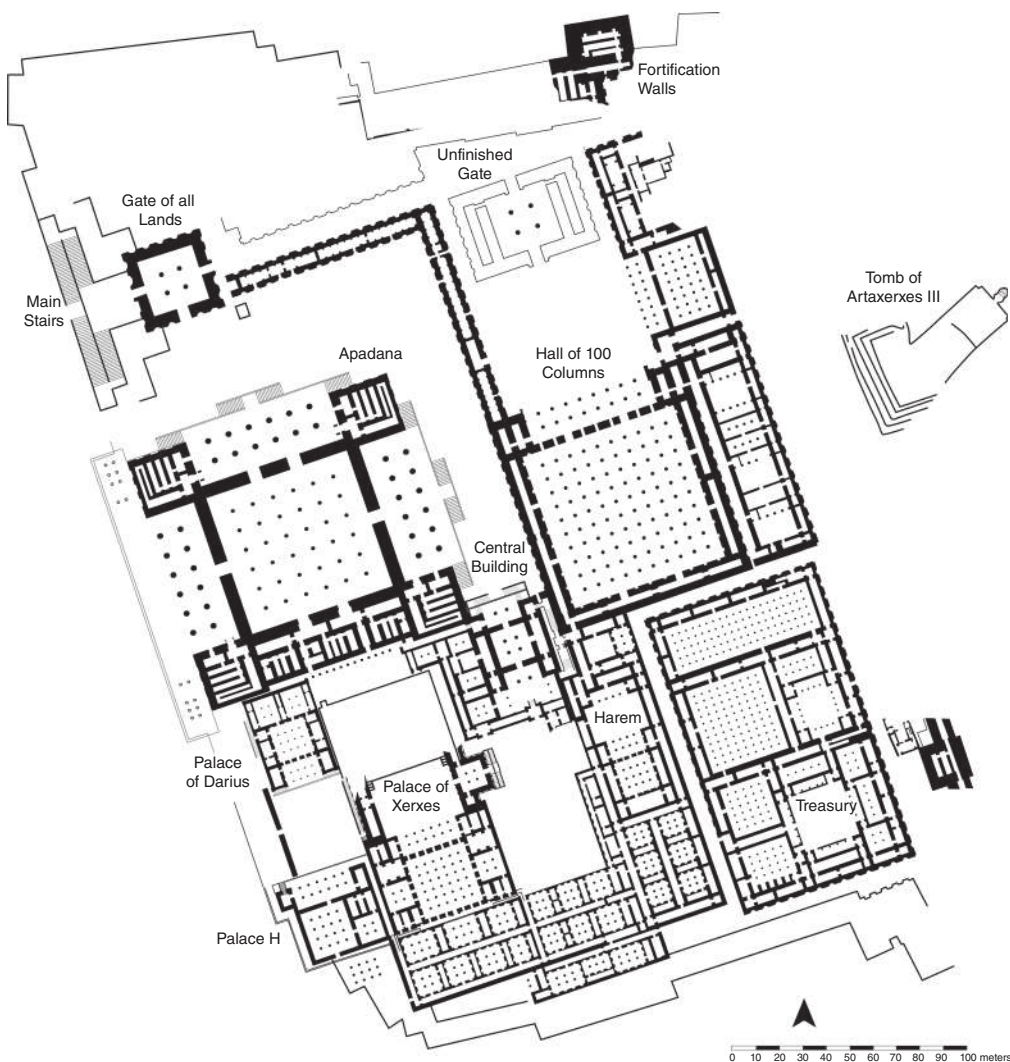
1.3. Royal necropolis at Naqsh-e Rostam with the tombs of four Achaemenid rulers carved in the mountain façades. The once brightly painted façade of the tomb of Darius I (†486 BCE) can be seen on the right. This is the tomb façade from which twentieth-century paper squeezes that contain blue pigments were made. Photo: Juergen Hasenkopf, Alamy Stock Photo

Herzfeld had documented precious traces of polychromies on stone monuments at Persepolis and Pasargadae during earlier visits in 1923 and 1928 as well as wall paintings at other sites further east of the Zagros, such as those on the walls of the palaces at Kuh-e Kwaja, today close to the border of Afghanistan. Some more of Herzfeld's important observations, many unpublished until this day, will be introduced throughout the following pages. I got to know the scholar, the person, and the aspirations of Herzfeld better through reading his letters and diaries, through the photographs he took and the drawings he made, which are kept in Washington, DC, Chicago, New York, Berlin, and elsewhere. Herzfeld often described the beautiful skies and colors of the landscapes he visited in the Zagros and in western Asia (**Figure I.6**). Herzfeld's story is now entangled in the history of research on pigments at Persepolis.

Reliefs so gut wie vollständig bemalt gewesen, in leuchtenden, gegensätzlichen Farben, vielleicht vor dem polierten, schwarzen Grund. Was für ein seltsamer Eindruck muss das gewesen sein!" (trans. mine). Herzfeld, letter to James H. Breasted, November 5, 1932, Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, University of Chicago, Archives.



1.4. The German archaeologist Ernst Herzfeld (1879–1948) worked on the site of Persepolis, first occasionally between 1923 and 1930 supported by German and Parsi industrials and then with an official sponsorship from the Oriental Institute in Chicago between 1931 and 1934. Herzfeld, who taught in Berlin and Princeton, frequently documented polychromies at Persepolis. Here, Herzfeld is standing near stone slabs on the eastern portico of the building referred to as the Apadana. Photo. Courtesy of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, University of Chicago



1.5. Plan of excavated structures on the terrace complex of Persepolis, featured in this book. The large structure referred to as the Apadana holds a prominent place on the western side of the artificial terrace complex. Drawing. Courtesy of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, University of Chicago

## AIM AND SCOPE OF THIS BOOK

This book describes an ongoing fascination with the paints and polychromies creating modern ideas of the monumental art of the Achaemenid Persian Empire – and, by extension, of the broader context of the ancient cultures around the Zagros mountains between about 520 and 330 BCE (**Figure I.7**). It is a cultural history. The objective is to increase and offer pragmatic knowledge and provide insights into the understandings of and ongoing collaborative research on aspects of polychromies and paint. Can this modern research on crafting surface decorations help us ultimately in a better understanding of the



1.6. Blue skies over mountain landscape south of the Caspian Sea in northern Iran in 2018. Herzfeld often described the landscapes in the most vivid terms and was deeply impressed by the light he encountered in western Asia. Photo: uskarp, Alamy Stock Photo

material culture of the ancient sensual landscape? It can if we remain critical and are aware of several caveats. This book is an invitation to think about the power and the role of polychromies in the Achaemenid world.

The three main goals of the book are (1) to help the reader to understand the opportunities and limits we are faced with when constructing ancient Achaemenid Persian polychromies altogether today; (2) to introduce and contextualize modern efforts in retrieving aspects of ancient polychromies; and (3) to suggest frameworks in which future research can play a crucial and dynamic role in investigating aspects of ancient technological knowledge. Ultimately, my goal is to celebrate the painters, artisans, and craftsmen of the past who decorated the palatial environs.

Systematic documentation of remnants of polychromies on the exterior and interior relief sculptures and monuments at and from Persepolis and other sites of Achaemenid presence such as Naqsh-e Rostam, Pasargadae, and Susa is ongoing. Together with investigations of hitherto unpublished archival materials to collect citations of evidence no longer preserved for scrutiny, this book offers a platform for wide-ranging analyses and discussion. We can gain valuable information on the concepts and contexts of ancient craft production and aesthetics as well as the natural resources work crews exploited in their projects for the imperial agenda. With rigor and strategic thinking, we might



1.7. Map of modern Iran and Iraq with Persepolis, Susa, and Babylon. These ancient settlements were at the heart of a dense network of cities connecting people and goods in the Achaemenid Persian Empire. Drawing by Reid Hoffman

even consider imagining the ancient *chaîne opératoire* and principles informing and guiding technologies of paint application operatives, as well as the maintenance of surface decoration on ancient architectural sculpture, and critically scrutinize modern aesthetics and archaeological and museological practices of care and conservation.

Persepolis, Naqsh-e Rostam, Pasargadae, and Susa are only four major sites in the vast Achaemenid Persian Empire, which reached from the Indus to the Danube and across North Africa. In recent years, many more sites have been explored. As we know from the thousands of inscriptions preserved on tablets excavated at Persepolis, many of which have been deciphered in recent decades, craftsmen and -women were brought from all over to serve the court's vision of grandeur and display. Thus, knowledge based on texts, combined with archaeological evidence of the original polychromies of Achaemenid Persian imperial monuments, can inform the study of patrons and craftsmen in the mid-first millennium BCE writ large. All these tasks, and the observations ensuing from them, enable us ultimately, in turn, to gain a deeper understanding of the sensory landscapes inhabited by past Persian court elites and experiences by those who visited these impressive Persian heartland capitals from far and wide.<sup>2</sup>

#### RESEARCH ON ANCIENT PIGMENTS AND POLYCHROMIES TODAY: A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW

The past decades of scholarship have seen major multidisciplinary breakthroughs in integrating studies of the surface of ancient architectural and sculptural environments and color as an inseparable element of appearance and meaning. Academic scholarship accepted that research on the cultural use of pigments, their production, and concepts of paint application is an important dimension to consider. Paintings, color, light, and related material components evoked agency; they were part of the sensation of things. Today, the work of painters and of those involved in painting-related processes and technologies can even be studied as part of a community with sometimes far-reaching consequences as we understand aspects of ancient and more recent aspects of colonialism and workforce exploitation.<sup>3</sup>

The *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* dedicated a special section of one issue to the subject of color. In 2002, a major anthology on color in anthropological research appeared, offering analyses of great relevance to studies of the role of color in premodern societies.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, David Batchelor's (2000) inspirational yet not uncontroversial *Chromophobia* focused attention on historiographic issues by contemplating allegedly orientalizing trends that have

<sup>2</sup> Recent discussions on the art of Achaemenid Persia include Jacobs 2021b and chapters in Dusinberre et al. 2020. On the history of Achaemenid Persia and its modern legacies, see, e.g. Briant 2018; Brosius 2021; Daryaei et al. 2014; and the chapters in Jacobs and Rollinger 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Early pigment application and trade in Africa and western Asia: Brooks et al. 2018; Schotsmans et al. 2022. On aspects of colonialism and workforce exploitation related to pigments, in the *New World*: Magaloni Kerpel 1994, 2010, 2014, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Gage et al. 1999; Jones and MacGregor 2002. See also Sahlins 1976.



shaped current western approaches to a “white” antiquity in which color was a sign of eastern degeneracy. His observation that it would be “one thing not to know that . . . statues were once brilliantly painted; it is another thing not to see colour when it is still there” has been guiding me ever since.<sup>5</sup> Some of this scholarship built upon and has occurred within a fertile environment of empirical research on vestigial color on ancient North African and eastern Mediterranean architectural and sculptural finishes in particular, with far less systematic and wide-ranging exploration of the abundance and opportunities offered by monuments in western Asia. Of the numerous studies related to the creation, dissemination, and legacy of polychromies in the ancient eastern Mediterranean in general, I have found the research of several colleagues most enlightening.

With their sophisticated work on ancient sculptural polychromy, Brigitte Bourgeois and Hariclia Brekoulaki have been pushing the field for many years.<sup>6</sup> With their sights on ancient painted surfaces, Bourgeois and Brekoulaki each stand at the forefront in locating blind spots between those studying ancient painting and those studying ancient sculpted monuments. Such blind spots certainly exist between scholars working on sculpture and painting in western Asia, too, as we will see in this book. If nothing else, scholarly interest in refining methods for approaching ancient polychrome sculpture has increasingly helped retire the aging discourse concerning the supremacy of painting or sculpture rather than their collusively affective properties. Fresh explorations and meticulous transdisciplinary investigation into the original polychromies of Neo-Assyrian palaces and the North African world are an intriguing development.<sup>7</sup> Exciting work has been done on fourth-century BCE eastern Mediterranean painting, where much is preserved from funerary-related contexts.<sup>8</sup> Future investigations in these realms will enhance our ability to deal with the backdrop of traditions informing the craftsmen of the Achaemenid Persian court, too.

In their introduction to an edited volume on aspects of color in the world of Islam, Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom acknowledge the many references to

<sup>5</sup> Batchelor 2000, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Bourgeois 2012, 2014a, 2014b; Bourgeois and Jockey 2001, 2003, 2010; Brekoulaki 2010, 2011, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Bröns et al. 2018; Davies 2001; Dawson et al. 2010; Fulcher 2018, 2022; Hartwig 2013; Laboury 2012; Le Fur 2016; Nunn 2022; Nunn et al. 2015; Nunn and Piening 2020; Rodler et al. 2022; Sue 2015; Thavapalan et al. 2016; Thavapalan 2019; Verri et al. 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Adornato et al. 2019; Manetta 2019. There are well-preserved contexts in Macedonia and Thrace adding much to our knowledge about painting in western Asia where it remains challenging for scholars to define and distinguish between Achaemenid, satrapical, and Greek contexts (see fn. 28). I disagree with scholars who claim something “looks Greek” or “Greco-Persian” or “provincial.” Much of this ground has been covered by Jennifer Gates (2002).

color in written texts and revelations such as the holy Qur'an, addressed also by commentators in Islamic science and scholarship, even though the authors in their volume focus less on the polychromatic aspect of monuments created in the Persian world and deal less with texts referring to the production of these paints and materials, which I see as a missed opportunity.<sup>9</sup> As art historian Lawrence Nees reminds us in the same volume, Qur'anic citations of the color blue, for example, find reflection in monumental inscriptions of the Dome of the Rock and elsewhere, often in the form of gilded letters on blue backgrounds. Documentation of such inscripational strategies and stressing the importance of highlighting text messages as features on monuments in the world of Islam are now known to have been significant features of much earlier Achaemenid Persian monuments already, as we shall see in Chapters 3 and 5. But how can we contextualize these features in a community of artisans, craftsmen, and those who executed the painting beyond the idea of symbolism?

It is true that prominent features of color symbolism in later Iranian cultures may well extend back in time to traditions of color iconographies already established in the Achaemenid Persian heartland. Blue is a color frequently referred to, appearing (as a sign of mourning) in the first verses of Ferdowsi's poetic masterpiece of roughly 1000 CE, the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings), for example. Cuneiform tablets inform us that it was a blue lapis stone on which the Epic of Gilgamesh was written by the ancient site of Uruk, and lapis is referred to in a number of ancient texts and excavated items.<sup>10</sup> Blue has also been a predominant color in later Iranian painting.<sup>11</sup> The application of paint on monuments in general certainly played a major role at the Seleucid, Parthian, and Sasanian courts, not least through the different colors known to have characterized the crowns of the Sasanian ruler, and there is historic evidence for paint on reliefs such as those at Taq-e Bustan and on the colossal statue of Shapur I near Bishapur.<sup>12</sup> This is another area in which cross-temporal and

<sup>9</sup> Arnold 1965; Bloom and Blair 2011, 14; Holakooei 2016; Thackston 1990. By contrast, there are many studies on the role of pigments and its trade alone in western Europe: Kirby et al. 2010; Kirschel 2011; Matthew 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Excavated raw lapis at Susa: Thomas 2016, no. 64 (= Louvre Sb 23957); Casanova 2002; see Chapter 5.

<sup>11</sup> Purinton and Waters 1991.

<sup>12</sup> Sarre and Herzfeld 1910, 205. The French delegation in Persia crafted plaster molds from the Sasanian Taq-e Bustan reliefs in 1899. These are today in the Louvre in Paris: Demange 2007, 22 (casts: Louvre AO31900 and AO 31906). These molds might still preserve traces of original paint, even though earlier centuries already encountered white façades: Allen and Carey 2021, 291 and figure 8.9 (illustration from 1410). Other evidence for the polychromy of Sasanian monuments: Abkai Khavari 2000, 31–3; Morgenstern 1939, 1373. The aspect of polychromy on this colossal statue of Shapur is not mentioned in Reza Garosi 2009. Traces of paint at a Sasanian relief in Central Asia: Grenet et al. 2007, 248. See Miri 2022. One ungrounded sculpture preserved with abundant polychromy from a Sasanian site: Kröger