

Appleby Archaeology February 2010

Anne Bell and Margaret Albon entertained and informed fellow members of Appleby Archaeology when they spoke on their trip to Iran in 2009. They were accompanied by excellent guides, who were happy to answer questions about Iran today, and who told them about the country's history and culture as they travelled to the various sites on a bright green bus named "Only God,"

Their beautifully illustrated presentation included an overview of their experiences but the emphasis was on the ancient history and archaeology of the Persian Empire or Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BC). The empire was founded by Cyrus the Great, and at its height, spanned three continents, Asia, Africa and Europe. The Achaemenid empire was invaded by Alexander III of Macedon, which led to its collapse in 330 BC.

An early stop was at the museum in Tehran where they saw pottery, which predates the Persian Empire, some dating back to the 5th millennium. These artefacts included a container, possibly for corn, and life size statues of cattle and sheep, all indicative of an agrarian society which emerged in the Middle East between 10000 and 6000 BC and later moved west into Europe.

Written records appear early and one example referred to, the Cyrus Cylinder, is in the British Museum. This clay cylinder is inscribed, in Babylonian cuneiform script with an account by Cyrus, King of Persia (559-530 BC), of his conquest of Babylon in 539 BC. This cylinder has been described as the "first charter of human rights" but it reflects a long tradition in Mesopotamia where, from as early as the third millennium BC, kings began their reigns with declarations of reforms.

In the early 1930s the site at Persepolis was excavated. Prior to the excavation only the tops of columns were visible. The building remains unearthed were of grey limestone which had been well preserved by burial in the sand. The site, which is extensive and dates from around 515 BC, forms a platform on a plain with mountains as a backdrop. Persepolis was the ceremonial capital of the Persian Empire during the Achaemenid dynasty. It is thought that Cyrus the Great chose the site but that Darius the Great, his successor, built the terrace, palaces, military buildings, treasury and reception halls. The city was one of several capitals and would have been visited at different times, probably in the Spring at the Persian New Year. Impressive friezes can be seen on stairways to the Apadana, the principal audience hall of Darius. One depicts soldiers from different parts of the empire bearing tribute and another shows women with elaborate head dresses. To emphasise the power of the empire Xerxes (486-465 BC), the successor to Darius, had his name carved in cuneiform script, over an entrance gate, in three languages, Elamite, Babylonian and Old Persian, .

Pasargadae is the site of an earlier capital of the empire and is 40-50 kilometres to the north of Persepolis. The most important monument at the site is the impressive tomb of Cyrus the Great, which has six broad steps leading to the sepulchre. Closer to Persepolis at a site called Naqsh-e Rostam there are four tombs, belonging to Achaemenid kings,

carved out of the rock face. They are all at a height above the ground. One of the tombs is identified by an inscription as the tomb of Darius I (522-486 BC). The other three tombs are believed to be those of Xerxes I and two of his successors. Seven huge reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam depict monarchs of a later period (309-226 BC). It is possible that this was also a site where ritual exposure of the dead took place as part of the beliefs of Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrianism gained momentum during the Achaemenid period and had immense prestige in ancient times, with some of its doctrines being adopted by other religions. It was over taken by Islam from the 6th century AD.

Isfahan, now the third city of Iran, is famous for its Islamic architecture with beautiful boulevards and bridges, one of which, built of mud brick in the 12th century, is still in use today. The city flourished from the 11th century and was at its peak in the 16th, prompting the saying “Isfahan is half of the world”. There are many magnificent palaces and mosques and photographs shown to the meeting illustrated the skill of the craftsman who constructed and decorated them. One particular place mentioned was Naghsh-e Jahan Square. The square is surrounded by long walls on all four sides. The Imam Mosque is on the south side, the Mosque of Sheikh Lotfollah on the east, the Ali Qapu Palace on the west and the Great Bazaar comes into the square from the north. The area of the square is such that in medieval times the entire population could assemble there. Today it is a popular spot where the Isfahanis settle down on carpets and bring out their picnics and samovars.

Two examples of early Iranian architecture and engineering which are still in use are their are wind towers and qanats. The technology for both was developed over 4000 years ago. Wind towers are constructed as part of a building and provide natural air conditioning by channelling the wind and guiding the air into the building through a system of shafts and flaps at the top of the tower. The qanats are a water supply system. Water from the snow in the highlands is trapped in sedimentary rocks and the qanats are a system of aqueducts that bring this water to the surface and then take it for use to the cities and towns on the plains. The system was invented in Iran thousands of years ago and adopted by other regions of the Middle East and around the Mediterranean. Today the system supplies seventy five percent of all the water used in Iran. One of the advantages of this is the number of lush gardens with trees and fountains, where Anne and Margaret were able to relax after visiting archaeological sites.

They ended their talk by speaking of the courtesy and kindness of the Iranians they had met and encouraging other members to go to visit the country