



Under the direction of Nabila Oulebsir and Mercedes Volait

## L'Orientalisme architectural entre imaginaires et savoirs

---

# Orientalism & Mimicry of Selfness: Archeology of the neo-Achaemenid Style

Talinn Grigor

---

Publisher: Publications de l'Institut national d'histoire de l'art  
Place of publication: Paris  
Published on OpenEdition Books: 5 décembre 2017  
Series: D'une rive, l'autre  
Digital ISBN: 978-2-917902-82-0



<https://books.openedition.org>

### Digital reference

---

This text was automatically generated on 6 mai 2024.

The PDF format is issued under the Licence OpenEdition Books unless otherwise stated.

---

# Orientalism & Mimicry of Selfness: Archeology of the neo-Achaemenid Style

Talinn Grigor

p. 273-290

---

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I would like to thank Mercedes Volait and Nabila Oulebsir for making me a part of this engaging and much needed cross-Atlantic undertaking.

- 1 In October 1971, the king of Iran, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi celebrated “the 2,500-year Anniversary of the Founding of the Persian Empire by Cyrus the Great.” The famed ruins of Persepolis were chosen as not only the authentic site of historical reenactments, but also as the ultimate symbol of Iran’s monarchy and civilization (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Through the three days of royal celebrations, Persepolis became, according to official reportage, “the center of gravity of the world.”<sup>2</sup> 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 national history.<sup>3</sup> 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 and anti-West revolutionary massmovement.<sup>4</sup> Persepolis and the adjoined Tent City enabled both the staging of an international political theatrics and provided the space for a temporal leap from antiquity to modernity. While intended to assert Iran’s global cultural as well as political reputation, the neo-Achaemenid spaces and rituals that recreated the entire history of the Persian Empire were in effect a thoroughly self-Orientalizing spectacle. It was an

Iranian mimicry that wholeheartedly embraced the Saidian model of European and Western imperial tactics and models.

1. Panoramic view of the ruins of Persepolis, 518-331 BCE (2007).



Talinn Grigor.

- 2 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. Like his father, he was convinced that a better future for Iran was possible by a return to Iran's pre-Islamic roots in mimicking ancient customs and simultaneously pre-empting the pitfalls that had plagued Western modernization by concocting technological "shortcuts to the future."<sup>5</sup> 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. Unlike his father, however, 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 modernization. Persepolis '71, therefore, would be remembered in Iran's 20<sup>th</sup>-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 utopic Great Civilization.

## Reviving the (un)Timely

- 3 Allusions to Iran's antiquity and reproduction of its cultural mores were certainly not a novel invention. Selected edifices with explicit pre-Islamic visual vocabulary had been erected by kings and aristocrats in Qajar urban centers since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Described as "the first Persian monarch since antiquity to revive the Achaemenid and Sassanian tradition of royal images cut into rock," Fath Ali Shah Qajar (r. 1797-1834) had ordered the carving of his portraits and those of his heirs near the Allah-o Akbar gate at Shiraz and in the grotto at Taq-e Bostan.<sup>6</sup> Similarly in 1823, his exquisite rock reliefs at the Cheshmeh-e Ali in Ray, while an expression of the king's status as Persia's monarch rather than a glorification of the nation's pre-Islamic history, was distinctly Sassanian in style and composition.<sup>7</sup> The first Persian language translation of Darius I's cuneiform script at Bisotun, located thirty kilometers northeast of Kermanshah, had been presented to his grandson, Mohammad Shah (r. 1834-1848) by Sir Henry Rawlinson.<sup>8</sup> Half a century later, Naser al-Din Shah (r. 1848-1896) had self-consciously revamped Tehran with lucid awareness of both ancient Persian and modern Western aesthetics. In the late 1860s, he had destroyed parts of Tehran's city-

walls and had decreed the expansion of the royal palace, borrowing its design-ideas from Achaemenid and European architectural repertoires.<sup>9</sup>

- 4 By the closing of the century, the artistic expressions of this new revivalistic tendency surfaced more lucidly in Qajar aristocratic residential houses outside the capital city. An often mentioned example in Shiraz is the Narenjestan, which was designed by Iranian Prime Minister Ebrahim Khan Qavam in the late 1870s and completed in 1885 by another member of the aristocracy, Mohammad Reza Khan Qavam.<sup>10</sup> Restored by the patronage of Queen Farah Pahlavi in 1965 to house the Asia Institute of American art historians Phyllis Ackerman and Arthur Upham Pope, it had borrowed its decorative program from Persepolis and its general morphology from Achaemenid palaces with an amalgam of Islamic craftsmanship, tile-work, and landscape design.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the Afifabad Palace belonging to the Qavam family in Shiraz was inspired by Achaemenid palace typology, with a blend of Sassanian and Achaemenid royal iconographies: for instance, the direct reproduction of the Sassanian relief sculptures from the Achaemenid tomb complex of Naqsh-e Rostam (fig. 2).<sup>12</sup> Only a few kilometers from both Persepolis and Shiraz, the rock relief depicting the Roman Emperor Valerian's (r. 253-260) defeat by the Sassanian king Shapur I (r. 241-272) was faithfully copied in the exterior *iwan* at Afifabad (fig. 3). By the turn-of-the-century, Achaemenid revivalism was being produced outside Iran too. While the direction of cultural and ideological flow between Iran and India remains uncertain, the religious architecture conceived and sponsored by the affluent Parsee community of Mumbai, for instance, the 1898 Zoroastrian fire temple, displays similar efforts to link the present to the Achaemenid architectural past.<sup>13</sup> While explicitly Achaemenid and Sassanian in appearance, these Qajar palaces, rock cut reliefs, and decorative programs, too, were by and large intended as "eternal expressions of kingship" and unlike the architectural economy and national historiography that ensued, few underpinned or were supported by endemic racist theories.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. Rock relief of Shapur I's conquest over Valerian, Nagsh-e Rostam (2000).



Talinn Grigor.

## 3. Copy of Shapur-Valerian relief, Afifabad Palace, Shiraz, 1880 (2000).



Talinn Grigor.

- 5 By the mid-1930s, the Qajar sporadic tendencies to revive ancient forms and icons became the official architectural language of the Pahlavi state, underpinning an undeniable racist politics of homogenization and secularization. King and government rapidly erected Achaemenid mimics in order to provide arguments in favor of the Aryan superiority of the Iranian people and its resurgence under the new dynasty. Prominent examples of this neo-Achaemenid and neo-Sassanian architecture consisted of the first and main post office, the building of the justice ministry, the first national bank (fig. 4), the main train station, as well as the different ministries, legislative headquarters, and secondary administrative buildings in the heart of Reza Shah's capital city. All were amalgams of Western modernist monumentality and Iran's pre-Islamic monarchical tradition. Other often cited, but seldom analyzed, examples include the French architect André Godard's Archaeological Museum (1939), Maxime Siroux's National Library (ca. 1945), both fashioned after the last Sassanian palace at Ctesiphon, today located in modern Iraq; as well as the modern mausoleum of mediaeval poet Ferdawsi erected in Tus and inaugurated by the king in October 1934.<sup>15</sup> Throughout, Persepolis remained the main archeological site to which architects and politicians alike returned for artistic and political inspiration.

#### 4. Building of the National Bank, Tehran, 1935 (2002).



Talinn Grigor.

- 6 Historically speaking, 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. 1925-1941) and his secularist ministers on the Iranian political scene (fig. 5).<sup>16</sup> Burned by Alexander in 331 BCE, the ruins were rediscovered in 1620 CE and subsequently visited by numerous Western and non-Western travelers: in 1765 the German surveyor Carsten Niebuhr exposed the reliefs of Apadana Hall's eastern staircase; in 1872 Frantz Stolze photographically documented the site leading four years later to the attempts on the excavation of the Hall of One Hundred Columns by Iranian aristocrat Motamed al-Dowleh.<sup>17</sup> By the closing of the 19th century, however, archeological digs become the main battleground for colonial rivalry in Iran. Under the royal decree of Naser al-Din Shah, an agreement was signed on August 11, 1900 "conceding to the French Republic the exclusive and perpetual right to excavate in the entire expanse of the empire."<sup>18</sup> While the treaty gave French scholars and scientists a monopoly over all archeological sites, they focused their efforts on Susa, the first Achaemenid capital in the southwest, by and large disregarding Persepolis and Pasargadae.

##### 5. Details of reliefs, Apadana, Persepolis (2000).



Talinn Grigor.

- 7 Between the 1890s and 1921, therefore, explorers, geologists, and archeologists like Captain Truilhier, Sir Henry Rawlinson, William Kenneth Loftus, Jane and Marcel Dieulafoy as well as Jacques de Morgan excavated Susa.<sup>19</sup> The choice of Susa had since the 1850s been politically significant both for the French and the Iranian state. The reign of the Achaemenid dynasty, founded by Cyrus the Great (r. 559-530 BCE) and expanded by Darius I (r. 521-486 BCE), stretched from Egypt to India from 559 to 331 BCE. Susa was the first capital city of the Achaemenids, itself considered as the first Persian Empire; this was, presumably, where Iran's history had begun. This period of Iranian history, furthermore, became particularly significant for modern Iranian reformists and Westerners alike for whom the Achaemenid past embodied the long-lost and forgotten glory of a pure Persian monarchy. Symbolizing "the true spirit of the nation" for the Pahlavi reformists, this selected history became the source for the invention of national heritage supported by those who excavated the site and those who propagated its past grandeur and potential revival. With the military coup of Reza Shah in 1921 and the change of royal dynasties from the Qajars to the Pahlavis in 1925, the nationalistic use of archeology was prioritized in state agenda, giving rise to the overriding of Susa by Persepolis as the most significant and authentic site of national origin. 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 architect and archeologist Ernst Emil Herzfeld (1879-1947). Funded in part by the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute and in part by John D. Rockefeller, official documentation and excavation began in 1931. By 1934, the Persepolis Terrace, the Eastern Stairway of the Apadana, the Council Hall, as well as Xerxes' Harem were uncovered. German archeologist Erich Friedrich Schmidt (1897-1964) followed Herzfeld as the field director who carried on the general excavation of the site and its environment until the outbreak of World War II.<sup>20</sup> In post-war era, research and excavations were conducted by the Iranian Antiquities Services under local leadership who were joined by the Italian Institute of the Middle and Far East in 1964.
- 8 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. 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 days...” and that he, Cyrus, should “rest in peace, for we are awake [...] to guard thy proud heritage.”<sup>21</sup> 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.

- 9 After the initiation ceremony at Pasargadae, the events continued at Persepolis. The biggest intervention on the site was the erection of the Tent City or Golden City, proposed by the French interior design firm of Jansen, on the ruins’ southern section, described by an invitee as “one hundred and sixty desert acres covered with some seventy tents, sumptuously decorated [...] with French crystal, china, and linens, and hung with red silk and velvet and glittering chandeliers.”<sup>22</sup> The king had insisted that his 600 foreign guests should camp outside Persepolis as had done ancient Assyrians, Lydians, Armenians, Arabs, and Babylonians in the time of Darius I. The star-shaped encampment was organized around a large fountain. The pairs of tents, totaling sixty residential villas, projected out to create five axes each named after a continent. In turn, 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, ‘Banqueting Hall’, was erected to house the extravagant evening galas of October 14th, catered by *Chez Maxim’s* of Paris. While the first night’s formal banquet exulted in Western ethics and aesthetics in form of architecture, entertainment, and menu, the following night’s casual dinner was redesigned to leave an impression of “an oriental pleasure pavilion with low divans and plush pillows on the carpeted floor.”<sup>23</sup> The evening concluded with fireworks over the ruins where actors, draped in ancient-style textile, recreated the rituals of the ancient Achaemenid kings. Instead of washing his guests in sacred water as had been done in 500 BCE, 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.”<sup>24</sup> 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, it could, if it wanted, be as modern as the West and as ancient as the Orient. Therefore, to accommodate the hightech spectacle, the ruins were equipped with amplifiers, loudspeakers, transmitters, projectors, hi-fi sets, recorders, television 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.<sup>25</sup>



10 These rather sophisticated theatrics of history, however, were mere prelude to the great parade of the following day, which had involved a decade of scholarly research, reproduction, rehearsal, and over 6,000 men. With the help of famous French companies, including Jansen, Chez Maxim's, Lanvin, and Limoges china makers who had been hired to make the celebrations "something never seen" before, the Iranian authorities concocted the costumes of the parade of Persian History.<sup>26</sup> It showcased ten epochs in the military history of Iran, from the Achaemenid Empire to the Pahlavi state. Televised to "tens of millions around the world," each era was represented by contemporary soldiers dressed "exactly" as their counterparts in selected historical phases. Described as "a panorama of 2,500 years of history on the march [...] in full splendor of their age," they induced, but not exclusive of, the armies of the major dynasties that had ruled greater Persia: Achaemenid, Parthian, Sassanian, Safavid, Zand, Qajar, and Pahlavi. For several months, rehearsals were organized, soldiers were prohibited from shaving, benches were assembled, and the entire ruins of Persepolis were thoroughly revamped. Shiraz, the city to which dignitaries were flown to, and from where they were driven to Persepolis, went through a meticulous state-sponsored face-lift: streets were asphalted and cleaned up; major building-facades were remodeled; lampposts were installed; square were redecorated; avenues were blocked for security; and shopkeepers were provided with blue jackets. Thousands of Iranian lives were interrupted to guarantee the image of a monarch who insisted of looking thoroughly modern as well as genuinely ancient. During the parade at Persepolis '71, Pahlavi versions of cultural imperialism fathered a unified linear Persian History from Cyrus the Great to Mohammad Reza Shah. The procession at the foot of the ruins was the most ornate and costly manifestation of that history. Later historians would note, "At Persepolis, Mohammad Reza Shah remolded Persian history to his own heart's desire," for he had insisted that it "helped immeasurably to establish Iran anew in Western perceptions."<sup>27</sup> However, many could but remark that the parade "surpassed in sheer spectacle the most florid celluloid imagination of the Hollywood epics."<sup>28</sup>

## Mimicry-as-Camouflage

11 The Pahlavi revivalism of Iran's pre-Islamic past, displayed at Persepolis '71, had for decades been rooted in Western theories of race. An official discourse on Aryan race and its validity for Iran, from the outset, was amalgamated with the secular nationalism of Reza Shah's royal court. In the name of progress and modernization, Iranians were not only urged to give up Islam in *toto*, but were also impelled to feel and act as the Oriental branch of Germanic Aryans.<sup>29</sup> As early as 1934, official newspapers had insisted that Iranians had "...always been firm defenders of the Aryan race against the avalanche of Tartars, Arabs, Mongols, and other hordes hostile to our collective race."<sup>30</sup> Persepolis '71 was a reassertion of Iran's national confidence in its own cultural tradition, monarchical history, and above all, in its own racial superiority. In a 1975 interview conducted by American journalist Mike Wallace, the king went so far as to caution the West about the imminent rise of the non-West, of a third force. "The men with blue eyes," Mohammad Reza Shah warned his Western audience, "have to wake up!"<sup>31</sup> While a simple expression of the king's self-confidence in his political and military power, this was, above all, a postcolonial reassertion of believed civilizational and cultural superiority of Iran vis-à-vis the West. Persepolis '71 was

orchestrated as a tour de force of this emerging (postcolonial) third way. Or so it seemed to the king.

- 12 The juxtaposition of the ancient and the modern was the exhibition of progress under the Pahlavis. At the end of the third day of celebrations, the foreign dignitaries were flown back to Tehran. This change of location from Persepolis to Tehran 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 change and continuity – of ancientness and modernity. As put by a state spokesman, it was a jump “out of history into the nation’s future.”<sup>32</sup> This was a utopic future in the making since February 21, 1921, when Reza Khan and his secularist collaborators orchestrated a coup d’état and ousted the last Qajar king, Ahmad Shah. Since then, rapid modernization was filtered through the practice of revivalism in the effort to endorse both international progress and national rootedness. The first indication of this official policy was revealed when Reza Khan took the ancient Iranian term of “Pahlavi” as a dynastic name. Decades later, like his father, Mohammad Reza Shah added to his name the title *Aryamehr* derived from Achaemenid inscriptions, discovered by a 19th-century English archaeologist. Darius I had referred to himself as *Aryamehr*. It meant the Light of the Aryans.<sup>33</sup> When the second half of the celebration was launched in Tehran, the king dedicated a large-scale modernistic museum of linear Iranian history, the Shahyad Aryamehr Monument.  
34
- 13 Designed especially for the occasion and commissioned to the then young Iranian-Baha’i architect, Hosayn Amanat, the white landmark in the western Tehran was to signal the most ambitious and utopic reform-programs of the king: the twelve points of his White Revolution. They would, inevitably, never materialize the way in which the king had imagined.<sup>35</sup> Until the dawn of the Iranian Revolution in 1978, therefore, Shahyad acted as the architectural manifesto of the shah’s monarchy, visions, ideologies, and ultimate aim. It became the symbol of the modern nation which marched forward, captured in the dynamic form of the landmark, and connected to the past with the general configuration of the plan and the elevation along with the decorative details and prototypes. As in the nation, in Shahyad, the new and the old were omnipresent: a gate to the king’s Great Civilization. Through its architecture, the nation was remembered and narrated. “Through that language, encountered at mother’s knee and parted with only at the grave, pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures dreamed.”<sup>36</sup> As the Pahlavi dynasty longed to be the Achaemenian Empire and as modern Iran longed to return to ancient Persia, they had to cross the utopic arch of Shahyad Aryamehr Monument. On the final day of the celebrations following the inauguration of Shahyad, additional parades took place in the newly inaugurated 100,000-seat Aryamehr Stadium. The celebrations concluded at the tomb of Reza Shah in Ray, south of the capital city. 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.”<sup>37</sup> By the end of the week, the Iranian state had poured more than 300 million dollars into the events.<sup>38</sup>

- 14 While in official reportage, the Iranian state declared that “thousands of spectators [...] came from far and wide to witness today’s great spectacle,” only a handful of the world’s privileged nobilities and diplomats were invited.<sup>39</sup> The Iranian masses, in whose name the events had been organized, were persistently excluded from the celebrations. As such, the events greatly agitated ordinary Iranians and left the international community unimpressed. The local critics immediately began to carry their opposition against the state and the royal court vis-à-vis Persepolis ‘71. The Fanon of Iran, Ali Shariati, who had translated Fanon’s anti-colonial works into Persian, insisted that the nation was being molded through a return to the wrong roots. “[F]or us,” he wrote, “return to our roots means not a rediscovery of pre-Islamic [Aryan] Iran, but a return to our Islamic, especially Shi’ia, roots [sic].”<sup>40</sup> In his view, Persepolis ‘71 was the ultimate expression of this mistaken origin. The *ulama*, on its part, quickly realized that if the Achaemenid Zoroastrian revivalism as manifested at Persepolis ‘71, succeeded in winning the hearts and minds of the people, the representatives of Islam and Islam as a way of life would cease to exist in Iran. On the eve of the celebrations, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a declaration from his exile in Iraq, calling it a devil’s festival and condemning the entire incident. His words were followed by action. A radical Marxist-Islamist group, the Mojahedin, blew up Tehran’s main electrical station and attempted an unsuccessful hijacking of an Iran Air plane.<sup>41</sup>
- 15 By 1972, the king was being criticized by the Western media as well as his own queen, Farah Pahlavi.<sup>42</sup> When the latter was asked by the shah’s devoted court minister, Amir Assadollah Alam, to approve a documentary film of the celebrations, she told him, “For goodness sake, leave me alone [...] I want our names to be utterly dissociated from those ghastly celebrations.”<sup>43</sup> In an interview with an American journalist, the shah defended himself on the base of an Orientalist *différence*:
- You Westerners simply don’t understand the philosophy behind my power. The Iranians think of their sovereign as a father. What you call “my celebration” was to them the celebration of Iran’s father. The monarchy is the cement of our unity. In celebrating our 2500th anniversary, all I was doing was celebrating the anniversary of my country of which I am the father. Now, if to you, a father is inevitably a dictator, that is your problem, not mine.<sup>44</sup>
- 16 The rhetoric of ruins was intended to legitimize the policies of rapid 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.”<sup>45</sup> 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.”<sup>46</sup> 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 Solar Muslim 1355 mutated into the Royal 2535.<sup>47</sup> Prime Minister Fereydoun 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.”<sup>48</sup> 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].”

- 17 Through the modern preservation and use of Persepolis as-preservedruin, the state performed the nation on an ostensibly authentic site of national origin, with all its ancient glamour and modern excesses.<sup>49</sup> It also presented a moment when Iran tried to reclaim civilizational 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 as not only a thoroughly modern act, but also as the very manifestation of modernity.
- 18 This process of endlessly becoming – that is, becoming modern – was achieved with the staging of fragments of architecture that, then, lend 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.
- 19 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 the American activist and author Susan Sontag, Camp is unintentional: “they are dead serious” and do not “mean to be funny.”<sup>50</sup> As an aesthetics the value of which resides in irony and as a mode of performance, Camp culture claims legitimacy through an oppositional mechanism to the status quo. The king’s power-display performed on the ruins of Persepolis contributed in no ambiguous way to the very undermining of his own political power at home and a manifest oppositional stance to colonialism on the international stage. Historians of modern Iran often place the origins of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which shook the world and brought down the Pahlavi dynasty, at Persepolis ‘71. Camp, as Persepolis ‘71, is a critical analysis and simultaneously a big joke. 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?<sup>51</sup>
- 20 During the revolutionary days between 1978 and 1979, the masses attacked and vandalized the Tent City as an act of protest not only against the Pahlavi court, but also against the entire Western civilization and its modern imperial history (fig. 6). Subsequently, the Islamic Republic of Iran, under the leadership of Imam Khomeini, decided to preserve the defaced tents as manifest expressions of royal overindulgence and wastefulness. By 2006, with the non-existing possibility of the return of the monarchy, these tents too had disappeared. On the site of Persepolis itself, however, the Derridian trances of the celebrations remain (present/absent) until today: outdated projectors, electric cords, electric panels, etc. (fig. 7). While they allude to what occurred in ‘71, they endlessly defer a fixing of meaning(s). The deceptive banality of the presence of these technological debris on the ancient site renders them both invisible to present-day visitors and simultaneously stand as signifiers of the epistemological anxiety of Persepolis ‘71. They, above all, silently narrate a story of

imperial extravagance, of anti-imperialist performances, of modernity unfulfilled, and of post-revolutionary neglect. The high tech trances of Persepolis '71 have become an integral part of the very ruins of Persepolis and its long history.

6. Tent City after the Iranian Revolution, near Persepolis (2000).



Talinn Grigor.

7. Projectors installed for the 2500-year Celebrations, Persepolis, 1971 (2007).



Talinn Grigor.

- 21 Back in '71, from the perspective of Western imperialism, Mohammad Reza Shah in the aura of his celebrations had become an unauthorized version of otherness — Naipaul's "mimic-man" and Fanon's "black skin/white masks." At Persepolis '71, he had emerged as an inapt colonial subject, who had managed to reproduce such a perfected blueprint of mimicry that, from a colonial perspective, would seem an undesirable "vision of the colonizer's presence."<sup>52</sup> What the shah was doing to the Western imperial image of hegemony was to undermine its subjectivities, disturb its asserted centralities, and

distort its civilizational purity. The Iran of the king was a form of a “menace” — a postcolonial counter-narrative that was not based on discourse of hybridity, but one on the discourse of mimicry-as-camouflage.<sup>53</sup> In explaining this camouflage, Mohammad Reza Shah would insist that “My reign has saved the country...”<sup>54</sup> Persepolis '71 was his own othering process of the West through resemblance: a historical, a civilizational, and above all, an epistemic symptom that aspires to *différence* through camouflage-of-sameness.

- 22 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, in due course, came to contribute to the image of a corrupt monarch in the eyes of the Iranian masses. Few doubted the mimicry of its theatrics. The king had by no means persuaded his subjects of the truth of the events. Even then, at the time, the king’s privileged Western audiences, nobilities and commoners alike had fully endorsed the seriousness of the events. 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* boldly confirmed, “They have not changed since 2,500 years ago”.<sup>55</sup>

---

## FOOTNOTES

1. Jacques LOWE, *Celebration at Persepolis*, Geneva: Creative Communications S.A., 1971, p. 6.
2. William SHAWCROSS, *The Shah’s Last Ride: the Fate of an Ally*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988, p. 39.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Quoted in Roy MOTTAHEDEH, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran*, London: Harmondsworth Penguin, 1987 (A peregrine book), p. 326-327.
5. “[Great Civilization’s] avowed goal [...] then it will have to invent unique programs to find shortcuts to the future.”, in “Iran Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow”, *Art and Architecture*, 18-19, June-November, 1973, p. 140.
6. Douglas BROOKES, “The Royal Iconography of Qajar Iran”, paper presented at the Middle East Studies Association 1996, Providence, RI. These are among the “eight known Qajar rock carvings” that have survived; seven are believed to have been executed under Fath Ali Shah’s order; see Judith LERNER, “A Rock Relief of Fath ‘Ali Shah in Shiraz”, *Ars Orientalis*, no. 2, 1991, p. 31-43, part. p. 31.
7. Judith LERNER, *ibid.* p. 31, 36.
8. See Said Amir ARJOMAND, *Turban for the Crown: the Islamic Revolution in Iran*, New York, NY; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988 (Studies in Middle Eastern history), p. 77.
9. For details on the construction processes and patronage of Golestan Palace and other royal structures, see Jennifer M. SCARCE, “The Royal Palaces of the Qajar Dynasty; a Survey”, in Edmond BOSWORTH and Carole HILLENBRAND (eds.), *Qajar Iran: Political, Social, and Cultural Changes, 1800-1925*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1983, p. 329-51, part. p. 335, 339.

10. Ebrahim Khan Qavam was Iran's prime minister during the reigns of Aqa Muhammad Khan Qajar and his successor Fath Ali Shah Qajar; see Terence O'DONNELL, *The Narenjestan: a Brief History and Interpretation of the House*, Shiraz: Asia Institute; Pahlavi University, [1970], p. 5-13; and Judith LERNER, "Achaemenid 'Fakes': a Re-Evaluation in the Light of 19th century Iranian Architectural Sculpture", *Expedition*, vol. 22, no. 2, Winter 1980, p. 5-16, part. p. 15. For a discussion on Qajar "traditionalism" vis-à-vis revivalism and contemporary designs, see Robert HILLENBRAND, "The Role of Tradition in Qajar Religious Architecture", in *Qajar Iran: Political, Social, and Cultural Changes*, op. cit. (note 9), p. 352-382, part. p. 353; and in the same volume, A. A. BAKHTIAR and Robert HILLENBRAND, "Domestic Architecture in Nineteenth-century Iran: the Manzil-i Sartip Sidihi near Isfahan", p. 383-401.
11. Mirza Ebrahim Khan was the great-grandson of the elder Qavam and grandfather of the contemporary Qavam al-Molk; the Qavam family exerted heavy power in the central province of Fars. The house was erected on the northern side of the vast Narenjestan Garden. After renovation, it served as Asia Institute's headquarters until 1979, where Ackerman and Pope worked and lived until their deaths. Today, it is a palace-museum, open to tourists.
12. It now serves as the military museum of Iran's Islamic Republic in Shiraz.
13. See Delphine MENANT, *The Parsis in India*, Bombay: Murzban, 1917 (Studies in Indian culture, religion, and society series, 6), p. 392.
14. Judith LERNER, "Rock Relief of Fath 'Ali", op. cit. (note 6), p. 36.
15. See André GODARD, "Les Monuments de Feu", *Athar-é Iran: Annales du Service Archéologique de l'Iran*, 3, Haarlem, 1938, p. 7-80. Elsewhere, I have traced the detailed history of Ferdawsi's mausoleum and analyzed its exceptionally complex aesthetic and political underpinning; see Talinn GRIGOR, *Cultivat(ing) Modernities: the Society for National Heritage, Political Propaganda, and Public Architecture in 20th-century Iran*, Ph.D. dissertation, Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2005, chapter 3, p. 145-246.
16. For 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*, vol. 105, no. 1, January 2001, p. 51-76.
17. See Kamyar ABDI, "Nationalism, Archaeology in Iran", *ibid.* p. 59-60.
18. Archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Direction des Affaires politiques et commerciales Asie-Océanie 1919-1929, Perse 66, Fouilles archéologiques, E387-3, 17, 11 Août 1900, Paris, France.
19. William Kennett LOFTUS, *Travels and Researches of Chaldaea and Susiana with an account of excavations at Warka, the "Erech" of Nimrod, and Shúsh, "Shushan palace" of Esther, in 1849-1852*, London: Nisbet, 1857; Marcel DIEULAFOY, *L'Acropole de Suse*, Paris: Hachette, 1890; Marcel DIEULAFOY, *L'Art Antique de la Perse*, Paris: Librairie centrale d'architecture, 2 vols., 1884. URL: <http://www.purl.org/yoolib/inha/4758>. Accessed December, 2nd 2013. Jane DIEULAFOY, "La Perse, la Chaldée, et la Susiane", *Le Tour du Monde*, Paris: Hachette, 1883, p. 1-160. URL: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k62128841>. Accessed December, 2 2013. For a Persian translation of the latter, see Jane DIEULAFOY, *Safarnamah-ye Madam Dieulafoy*, Tehran: Farhangsarā, 1361/1982; and *At Susa: the Ancient Capital of the Kings of Persia: narrative of travel through western Persia and excavations made at the site of the lost city of the lilies, 1884-86*, Philadelphia: Gebbie & Co., 1890. The Dieulafoys traveled to and in Iran between 1881 and 1882. Jane Paule Henriette Rachel Magre Dieulafoy (1851-1916) dressed as a man in order to be able to travel and work at Susa. They eventually shipped most of their findings to the Louvre. Also, see Petrus Emmanuel VAN DER MEER, *Mission en Susiane*, Paris: E. Leroux, 1935, vol. 27. Kamal Aldin NIKNAMI, *Methodological Aspects of Iranian Archaeology: past and present*, Oxford: Archaeopress, 2000 (BAR international series, 852). Also see his own impressive four volumes: Jacques de MORGAN, *Mission scientifique en Perse*, Paris: E. Leroux, 1895-1896. Supervised by the French minister of public instructions, fine arts, and

culture, it includes details of various archeological undertakings in Iran including ancient Hamadan or “Ecbatana”, maps and sketches of the Caspian Sea region, Kurdistan, and Elam, among other topics BnF, NF O2H-481 (4,1) microfilm m17131; BnF O2H-481 (5, 2) microfilm m17132; BnF O2H-481 (cartes)microfilm m17133. Recent publications on Jacques de Morgan include, *Mémoires de Jacques de Morgan (1857-1924), directeur général des antiquités égyptiennes, délégué général de la délégation scientifique en Perse : souvenirs d'un archéologue*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997; and *Compte rendu sommaire des travaux archéologiques exécutés du 3 novembre 1897 au 1<sup>er</sup> juin 1898*, Boston: Adamant Media, 2001.

20. Erich Schmidt's major publications on Persepolis include, *Persepolis. 1. Structures, Reliefs, Inscriptions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953 (University of Chicago Oriental Institute publications, 68); *Persepolis. 2. Contents of the Treasury and Other Discoveries*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957 (University of Chicago Oriental Institute publications, 69); *Persepolis. 3. The Royal Tombs and Other Monuments*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970 (University of Chicago Oriental Institute publications, 70); *The Treasury of Persepolis and Other Discoveries in the Homeland of the Achaemenians*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939 (Oriental Institute communications, 21). See the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute website, <http://oi.uchicago.edu/>. Accessed December 2, 2013.

21. Jean HUREAU, *Iran Today*, Tehran: Éditions Jeune Afrique, 1975 (Le voyage en couleurs), p. 60.

22. Quoted in Marvin ZONIS, *Majestic Failure: The Fall of the Shah*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 68.

23. Jacques LOWE, *Celebration at Persepolis*, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 30.

24. Jacques LOWE, *ibid.*, p. 35.

25. This information was kindly provided by the technical manager of Iranian National Television, Mr. Vardkes Esrailian.

26. “From Teheran to Persepolis: All the Glitter of the Empire”, <http://www.angelfire.com/empire/imperialiran/persepolis1.html>. Accessed December 2, 2013.

27. William SHAWCROSS, *Shah's Last Ride*, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 46.

28. William SHAWCROSS, *ibid.*, p. 62.

29. On the theories of 19th- and 20th century racism vis-à-vis Iran's modern architecture, see Talinn GRIGOR, “Orient oder Rom? Qajar ‘Aryan’ Architecture and Strzygowski's Art History”, *The Art Bulletin*, vol 89, no. 3, September 2007, p. 562-590.

30. “Éditorial : Notre But”, *Le Journal de Téhéran*, no. 1, March 15, 1935, p. 1.

31. Mohammad Reza Shah in an interview with Mike Wallace on CBS, *Le Journal de Téhéran*, 11.826, February 6, 1975, p. 1.

32. Jacques LOWE, *Celebration at Persepolis*, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 95.

33. See Roy MOTTAHEDEH, *Mantel of Prophet*, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 326.

34. On Shahyad see Talinn GRIGOR, “Of Metamorphosis: Meaning on Iranian Terms”, *Third Text*, vol. 17, no. 3, September 2003, p. 207-225.

35. Hosayn Amanat was around 30 years old when he designed Shahyad. A graduate of Tehran University's Faculty of Fine Arts and Architecture, “his professional career and the opportunity to open his own office came when he won the national competition for design of Tehran's Shahyad Monument.”, in “Iran Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow”, *Art and Architecture*, June-November 18-19, 1973, p. 126. He is of Baha'i faith wherein the idea of a *bab* or a gate is central.

36. Bendedict ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London; New York: Verso, 1991, p. 154.

37. Roy MOTTAHEDEH, *Mantel of Prophet*, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 326-327.

38. The official figure announced by the shah's Court Ministry was \$17 millions. See Roy MOTTAHEDEH, *ibid.*, p. 326-327.

39. Jacques LOWE, *Celebration at Persepolis*, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 7.



40. Quoted in Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, Princeton (New Jersey): Princeton University Press, 1982 (Princeton studies on the Near East), p. 467.
41. *Ibid.* p. 472.
42. When he was criticized for having spent too much money to please his foreign guests, Mohammad Reza Shah rhetorically asked his interviewer, "What a I supposed to do – serve [heads of state] bread and radishes?" Quoted in Roy MOTTAHEDEH, *Mantel of Prophet*, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 326-327.
43. Quoted in Amir Assadollah ALAM, *The Shah and I: The Confidential Diary of Iran's Royal Court, 1969-1977*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1991, p. 245-246.
44. Muhammad Reza Shah at an interview in 1972.
45. Jacques LOWE, *Celebration at Persepolis*, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 7.
46. Jacques LOWE, *ibid.*, p. 95.
47. See Marvin ZONIS, *Majestic Failure*, *op. cit.* (note 22), p. 82 and 289 and Ervand ABRAHAMIAN, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, *op. cit.* (note 40), p. 444.
48. Fereydoun HOVEYDA, *The Fall of the Shah*, New York: Wyndham Books, 1980, p. 203.
49. For the argument on Persepolis as-preserved-ruin, see Talinn GRIGOR, "Preserving the Modern Antique: Persepolis '71", *Future Anterior: Journal of Historical Preservation History Theory Criticism*, Columbia University, vol. 2, no. 1, summer 2005, p. 22-29.
50. Susan SONTAG, "Notes on Camp", in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York: Anchor Books, 1964, p. 280 and 282.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 282.
52. Homi BHABHA, *Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 88.
53. See Jacques LACAN, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Freud's Papers on Technique*, Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988; and Homi BHABHA, *Location of Culture*, *op. cit.*, p. 88.
54. Mohammad REZA PAHLAVI, *Answer to History*, New York: Stein and Day, 1980, p. 32.
55. "Persepolis: la fête d'un empereur et de son peuple [Persepolis: the Celebration of an Emperor and of his People]", *Paris Match*, no. 1172, October 23, 1971, p. 37.

## AUTHOR

Talinn Grigor

She is an Assistant Professor of modern and contemporary architecture (Ph.D., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2005) in the Department of Fine Arts at Brandeis University. Her forthcoming book, *The Civil(ized) Nation: Cultural Heritage and Modernity in 20th-century Iran* (Periscope Publishing, 2009) traces the history of cultural heritage, architectural profession, and political discourses under the Pahlavi dynasty.