



ACHAEMENID GLAZED BRICK DECORATION

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The [Achaemenid](#) cities of [Persepolis](#), [Pasargadae](#) and [Susa](#) were constructed of stone foundations, embellished by sculpted stone bas-reliefs carved onto interior and exterior walls, door panels, gateways, and stairways. Hundreds were preserved in situ at Persepolis, far less at the other two cities. Their presence (as essences, not decorations) functioned as calm political depictions of historical, religious, political, military, and social realities and protocols, reflecting the king's power and authority. At Susa, the second of the three Achaemenid capital cities erected, only a few examples of stone reliefs were recovered. But there, and in the Achaemenid palace built in the captured city of [Babylon](#), many hundreds of both glazed and unglazed molded relief bricks have been excavated by French and German excavations respectively ([EXCAVATIONS i. In Persia](#)). Also recovered at these cities were a lesser number of glazed, flat, non-relief bricks, depicting the same or similar scenes as those on the relief examples. Both the relief and flat bricks, glazed and unglazed, depicted the same scenes, decorative patterning as the stone examples at Susa and Persepolis.

Molding bricks into sculptures within palace walls was not an original conception introduced by the Achaemenids. The model had existed since the Middle Elamite period (12th century BCE) at Susa, here employing unglazed



bricks. Glazing of objects including plaques also occurred later at Susa, in the Neo-Elamite period (9th-8th centuries BCE; Nadali, p. 99). But the conception of glazed individual brick-molded iconographical motives first occurs in [Assyria](#), at Nineveh in the 9th century BCE. We next encounter them in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar at Babylon, where glazed relief bricks were extensively and spectacularly employed. They became known to the Achaemenids in 539/8 BCE when [Cyrus II](#) captured Babylon, and where the Achaemenids soon adopted the practice there and elsewhere (Haerinck, pp. 118-27).

Each glazed brick is 8.5 cm x 33 cm in size, and of varying thickness. The Susa examples are wedge-shaped at the rear; on the viewing side they are mold-formed as one component of a pre-planned cull figure, scene or frieze. The figures on the relief bricks were glazed in multi-colors, formed from a siliceous amalgam of oxides, producing yellow, blue, blue green, black, brown, and white. After being fired in high heat the bricks were then set in place piece by piece, to become “part of a larger design extending across a number of courses of brick” (Caubet, 1992, p. 224).

The depicted iconography was quite varied: winged bulls and griffins, lions, armed guards, servants carrying food, all exhibited in profile. There were also decorative patterns of lotus, palmettes and rosettes on tiles, motives formed not in relief but in cloisonné, thin lines of thick glaze compartmentalized to form a design. The only examples of glazed bricks from Persepolis consisted of a frieze of cloisonné palmettes, and two bricks with circular bands.

The unglazed relief bricks vary in size, but exhibit the very same figures – striding lions, winged bulls and griffins – as those depicted in glazed color. Many seem to have been reused as pavement and wall fillings in later period structures.

Most of the molded bricks from Babylon were recovered in the Achaemenid palace. At Susa, however, while some were excavated in the palaces, but not in their original positions, many were recovered outside the palaces, and even in post Achaemenid levels, all reused. Hence it is not possible to reconstruct their original positions, contexts and juxtapositions. Judging from the preserved stone relief loci at Persepolis, most surely were set in palace walls, in stairway and doorway panels (Caubet, 1992, p. 225). Fortunately, a large number of relief bricks recovered south of the Susa [Apadāna](#) (where they may have been originally positioned) were re-joined to form one of the best known



of all the Susa friezes. This is a group of panels, of which eighteen have been reconstructed, each seventeen bricks in height, depicts walking guards facing right and left, dressed in exquisitely decorated garments, and carrying bows, quivers, and spears. A number of glazed bricks from Babylon also depict similar walking guards. Represented also in stone at Susa and Persepolis, they may indeed represent units of the famous Ten Thousand (see [Immortals](#)), the elite troops mentioned by Herodotus (Muscarella, “Guards,” 1992, p. 226). Another well-preserved panel at Susa, fourteen bricks in height, was recovered within the palace; it consists of two sphinxes with heads facing in different directions, under a sun disc (Muscarella, “Confronting Sphinxes,” 1992, p. 229).

The reliefs from Susa may be seen today in Iran and in the [Musée du Louvre](#). Much painstaking work was employed to rejoin the isolated bricks found in different areas and levels, and to reconstruct units of the original compositions.

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See Caubet and Muscarella 1992 for further bibliography of the excavation records and earlier discussions of the bricks.