



GHIRSHMAN, ROMAN

GHIRSHMAN, ROMAN, French archeologist of Ukranian origin (b. Kharkov, 1895; d. Budapest, 5 September 1979, while attending the Congress of the International Federation of Classical Studies; [Figure 1](#)). Ghirshman was one of the pioneers of archeological research in Persia, where he spent almost thirty years excavating numerous sites. He also wrote a number of comprehensive and highly popular works on the pre-Islamic civilization of Iran, including *Parthes et Sassanides* (Paris 1962) and *Perses. Proto-iraniens. Mèdes-Achéménides* (Paris, 1963), both in the Univers des Formes series founded by André Malraux. Marred by occasional unsubstantiated generalizations and idiosyncratic theories, these wide-ranging works are not altogether reliable as works of general reference, but are still extremely useful thanks to their magnificent and lavish illustrations.

Ghirshman came from an affluent family in Kharkov and was enlisted in 1914 into the Russian army. In 1917, he joined the counter-revolutionary camp, and after the Communist victory took refuge in Istanbul, where he earned a living as a violinist. He then joined a kibbutz in Palestine, near the ancient city of Caesarea, a location which instilled in him a passion for history. Subsequently he began an intensive course of studies in Paris, which enabled him to keep company with the great authorities of Near East epigraphy and archaeology.

It was at this period in his life that he first met his future wife, Tania, who abandoned her career as a dental surgeon and accompanied him in all his missions, providing much practical support, sometimes under difficult circumstances. She drew the illustrations for his works and helped in the



restorative work on the excavated objects. Her autobiography depicts a colorful account of her life on the mission (*Archéologue malgré moi*, Neuchâtel and Paris, 1970).

Ghirshman was appointed in 1931 as the head of the Archeological Mission in Persia (see [DÉLÉGATIONS ARCHÉOLOGIQUES FRANÇAISES](#)) organized by the Louvre Museum. This heralded a long and prestigious career, taking him to the major sites in the Iranian world until 1972, the date of his last excavations at Masjed-e Solaymān. His first projects focused on the sites of Giyan Tepe (*Fouilles du Tépé Giyan, près de Néhavend, 1931-1932*, Paris, 1935; q.v.) and above all Sīalk (*Fouilles de Sialk près de Kashan, 1933, 1934, 1937*, Paris, 1938), where he applied a method of scientific excavation based on stratigraphic studies. He also recognized and studied the architectural remains of unbaked bricks, hitherto unnoticed by some archeologists. He thus rescued from oblivion one of the most ancient cultures of the Iranian plateau, going back to the 4th millennium before our era and marked by the quality of its craftsmanship, both in metalwork and ceramics. He also showed that this culture was replaced by a second one, the traces of which presented close affinities with those brought to light at the same period in Susa. It was Ghirshman who first formed the idea that Sīalk could be regarded as an outpost of the Elamite civilization. In 1935, spurred on by Georges Salles, the curator of the department of Asian Arts at the Guimet Museum in Paris, he set aside studying the earliest periods for a while to concentrate on the excavation of the great Sasanian city of Bīšāpūr (q.v.) in Fārs founded by Šāpūr I (241-72 C.E.). He worked there for five seasons, in 1935 and 1936 and between 1938 and 1941, at a time when the earliest excavations of Sasanian cities began to develop. The results were spectacular, bringing to light a palace complex including a reception hall with its floor decorated with mosaics similar to the contemporary ones at Antioch (q.v.). He interpreted the festive scenes they portrayed as representing the New Year (*nowrūz*) festivities with members of the royal family and dignitaries of the court participating in them (*Bichapour II: Les Mosaïques sassanides*, Paris, 1956). The highly dionysiac aspect of this iconography has since been pointed out (Gall; Balty). Publication of the architectural remains, however, was never carried out, since all the results of the excavation were destroyed when the building housing the mission was plundered. Ghirshman nevertheless issued a study of the stone reliefs in Bīšāpūr in a second publication which also referred to more general historical problems and especially relations with the Roman Empire (*Bichapour I*, Paris, 1971).



In 1941, Joseph Hackin, then the director of the French Archeological Delegation in Afghanistan, resigned his post to join General Charles de Gaulle, and Ghirshman was appointed as his successor. He had already some experience of the neighboring terrain as he had worked in Sistān on the Nād-e 'Alī site in 1936. A tense two-year period followed, ending with Ghirshman's dismissal in 1943. As a Jew, a Russian immigrant, and an ardent partisan of Free France, he was opposed by the French representatives in Kabul who depended on the Vichy government, and he irritated all with his highly critical judgments of his predecessor's work. He nevertheless continued the exploration of the Begrām (q.v.) site, where Hackin had already made sensational discoveries, and led two excavation seasons under difficult conditions and wrote a contribution to the study of the Kushan civilization (*Bégram: Recherches archéologiques et historiques sur les Kouchans*, MDFAA 12, Cairo, 1945). He also briefly excavated a Hephthalite tomb at Setqābād (Olivier-Utard, p. 137) and wrote a monograph on it (*Les Chionites-Hephthalites*, MDFAA13, Cairo, 1948).

Ghirshman's knowledge of Russian enabled him to refer to the pioneering works of Russian archaeology in Central Asia, and he brought them to the attention of Western scholars (Olivier-Utard, p. 138). He subsequently went to Cairo for a brief stay at the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, where he worked on the final draft of his works on the excavations at Begrām and on the Chionite-Hephthalites.

After the war, Ghirshman was again appointed the head of the French Archeological Mission in Iran, and entrusted with the difficult task of following Robert de Mecquenem at the head of the Susa excavations. The first campaign began in late 1946, and the last more than twenty years later, in 1967. For the first time, Susa was to be explored following modern archeological techniques, not in order to collect beautiful objects to decorate the showcases of the Louvre, but to reconstruct the complete history of the great city, which emerged near the beginning of the 4th millennium before our era and was not abandoned until more than five thousand years later, in the 13th century C.E.

Thanks to Ghirshman, the archaeology of Susa made great progress, and, for the first time, the excavators managed to reveal entire architectural complexes. Until then, de Mecquenem, who only belatedly recognized the remains of unbaked bricks, had mainly explored the tombs dug at the level of the settlement. An exception was the palace of Darius situated on the Apadāna



(q.v.), which had begun to yield its secrets. For twenty-one years, Ghirshman worked at thirty-six areas of different dimensions, embracing all the periods of the life of the place (Stève, Gasche, and De Meyer; Gasche). The most important area, referred to as site A, was established in the northern zone of the hill of the Royal City, at a place which had not been disturbed by the work of his predecessors. Ghirshman worked there for twenty years before reaching virgin soil. He first explored the levels of the Islamic period, which were then hardly known at Susa, and uncovered an area containing houses and shops. Then he managed to get down to the subject he probably liked best, uncovering Sasanian, Parthian, and Hellenistic remains. Site A of the Royal City turned out to be particularly fascinating. Here Ghirshman found a grand aristocratic residence decorated with mural paintings, built towards the end of the Parthian period and occupied at the beginning of the Sasanian reign. This residence had been established within a built-up area, the most ancient houses of which went back to the 3rd century B.C.E. One of them, based on a typical Greek plan, had a courtyard with a peristyle, a tiled roof with a dual slope, and was decorated with mural paintings. The Achaemenid period was also represented on this site, but Ghirshman did not manage to identify the vestiges he uncovered. It was only after further work by later archeologists that a royal pavilion called the “Propylaea of Darius” and the remnants of a road leading to the “Gate of Darius,” providing access to the Apadāna Palace, were identified (Gasche, pp. 173-74).

The periods preceding the Achaemenid era at Susa, i.e. the neo-Elamite and meso-Elamite (see [ELAM](#)) ones, were hardly represented at site A of the Royal City. However, the most ancient levels of the survey provided previously unknown information on the Epartid or *sukkalmah* period (ca. 1970-1500 B.C.E.) and on its extensions. Ghirshman excavated another built-up area containing grand residences, including one built against the city wall and situated amidst houses of much more modest dimensions, under which their residents had been buried. The place was organized on the basis of a network of streets that had remained unchanged for several centuries. Since the beginning of the *sukkalmah* period was not represented at the site, Ghirshman decided to move south of the Royal City, where he started working on an old probe by de Mecquenem, which became site B of the Royal City. Here he worked on the levels of the beginning of the *sukkalmah* period and other more ancient ones, corresponding with the period when Susa was ruled by the Sumerian kings of Ur. But the Royal City was not the only place to have drawn Ghirshman’s attention. He also followed up his project of excavating the



Palace of Darius on the Apadāna hill, while particularly concentrating on his search for the accesses to the palace. The easternmost part of the as yet hardly known “City of Artisans” formed another object of his attention. Here he excavated an establishment which he called the “Persian-Achaemenid Village,” the function of which remains problematic (*Village perse-achéménide*, MDAFI 36, Paris, 1954). This establishment, built in the 7th century B.C.E., a period when Susa was as yet hardly known, was probably re-occupied, after an interval, in the Achaemenian and Hellenistic periods. Here Ghirshman also excavated numerous Hellenistic and Parthian tombs, as well as a great mosque from the 8th century C.E. And lastly, the most ancient levels of the history of Susa were explored on the Acropolis during the last years of the mission’s activities. The most spectacular discovery was made by Marie Joseph Stève and Hermann Gasche, who proved the existence of a high terrace containing prestigious buildings dating from the beginning of the occupation of Susa, i.e. the 4th millennium B.C.E, and even the beginning of the 5th (M.-J. Stève and H. Gasche, *L’Acropole de Suse. Nouvelles fouilles*, MDAFI 46, Paris, 1971).

Ghirshman’s arduous excavations at Susa were thus very fruitful. Unfortunately, however, there is a paucity of references as the research did not lead to many definitive publications. On the whole, despite the numerous preliminary reports which were quickly published, knowledge about the history of Susa, which had made considerable progress in the field compared to early excavations, was not disseminated as it deserved to be. However, Ghirshman did not devote himself exclusively to the archeological exploration of Susa during his years of directorship of the mission. He also led excavations on various areas of southeastern Iran, at Masjed-e Solaymān in 1948, where he returned later; at Tang-e Pabda in 1949, at Ayvān-e Karkā from 1948 to 1950; on Kharg Island in 1959 and 1960, where he excavated a 7th century Christian monastery; and at Bard-e Nešānda (q.v.), between 1964 and 1966. But his most important results were achieved at Čoġā Zanbīl (q.v.), where he carried out nine excavating seasons from 1951 to 1962 and which was in fact the second greatest site of his archeological career (*Tchoga Zanbil (Dur-Untash) I, La Ziggurat*, MDAFI 39, Paris, 1966 and *Tchoga Zanbil (Dur-Untash) II, Téménos, temples, palais, tombes*, MDAFI 40, Paris, 1968). The city had been founded by the 13th century B.C.E. Elamite king Untaš Napiriša. It included a sacred zone surrounded by a temenos containing a ziggurat and various temples, as well as an official area with several palaces. Ghirshman managed to extricate most of these buildings. He devoted himself particularly to excavating the ziggurat so



as to find out how it was built and to try to get an idea of the religious rites associated with it. This was the first time an archeologist explored a building of this type in all its details, and Ghirshman was able to prove that the architects had not built it by piling up horizontal planes, as was usually assumed, but by fitting the different floors into each other and building them all from the ground up.

Ghirshman retired from his task of directing the excavations of Susa in 1967, but he continued working in Iran, for, in 1968, he returned to Masjed-e Solaymān, which he had started to explore again the year before, and where he worked until 1972. The remains he found were similar to the ones he had come across at Bard-e Nešānda, and made him assume that these two areas were indeed two sacred terraces from the Achaemenian period (*Terrasses sacrées de Bard-e Néchandeh et Masjid-i Soleiman*, MDAFI 45, Paris, 1976). He was probably right about the religious character of these areas, though he interpreted them as sacred centers of Zoroastrianism, which they were not, as John F. Hansmann was to prove later (Hansmann). They also date from the Hellenistic and Parthian periods.

Ghirshman's archeological activity was thus exceptionally rich and varied, although at times, perhaps, he over-reached himself. His method of excavating, though scientific to start with, eventually aged with him, and it might be said that the study of the history of Susa benefited from a change of directorship, which led to modernizing archeological practice. His fieldwork, which kept him in Iran for long years, also prevented him from exercising a direct influence on French academic circles and from teaching, although he had been elected as professor at the University of Aix-en-Provence in 1948 and as ordinary member of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres in 1965. He also enjoyed great international reputation and was well connected to influential circles in Persia. These contacts were clearly advantageous to him in facilitating the operation of his excavations in Iran but they also brought an unwelcome close connection with the world of the art market and private collectors, where commercial and personal considerations outweigh scholarly scruples. Thus the last years of Ghirshman's life were marked by a controversy concerning the provenience of the objects that he had published as coming from the Ziwiye treasure, a site which in fact turned out to be mainly fictitious (see FORGERIES ii; Muscarella, 1977; and Ghirshman's response in Ghirshman, 1979). Many of these objects were displayed at the famous exhibition of Iranian art, organized by him and entitled *Sept mille ans d'art en Iran*, at the



Petit Palais in Paris (1961-62).

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