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This sumptuous book traces the rise and fall of one of the ancient world's largest and richest empires. Encompassing a rich diversity of different peoples and cultures, Persia's Achaeminid Empire flourished between 550 and 331 B.C. The empire originated with Cyrus the Great (559-530 B.C.) and expanded under his successors, who ruled from the royal capitals of Susa and Persepolis, until at its peak it stretched from the Indus Valley to Greece and from the Caspian Sea to Egypt. The Achaeminids acted as a bridge between the earlier Near Eastern cultures and the later Classical world of the Mediterranean and had a profound influence on Greece in political, military, economic, and cultural fields. Forgotten Empire was created in association with the British Museum, which is mounting the most comprehensive exhibit ever staged on the Achaeminids. This book opens a window onto the wealth and splendor of Persian society--its rich palaces, exquisite craftsmanship, and sophisticated learning. Showcasing an unprecedented loan of unique material from the National Museum of Tehran--most of which has never before been presented outside of Iran--this beautifully illustrated and produced book demonstrates why the sculpture, glazed panels, gold vessels, and jewelry of the Achaeminids rank among the finest ever produced.

Because the palace was central to imperial life, remains from the royal sites of Susa and Persepolis are a major focus. Forgotten Empire is divided into sections such as the expansion of the Persian Empire, arms and warfare, trade and commerce, writing, luxury dinner services, jewelry, religious and burial customs, and the rediscovery of ancient Persia.

ABOUT THE EDITORS (back to top)

John Curtis is Keeper of the Ancient Near Eastern department at the British Museum. He has written extensively on Iran, Mesopotamia (Iraq), and the Ancient Near East. Nigel Tallis is Special Assistant in the Near Eastern department at the British Museum.
British Museum, this is only the second tablet ever found in Lebanon and it is especially important as a historical clue, proving that writing was in everyday use in the third millennium in Sidon.

Dr. Claude Serhal, director of the excavation, calls this site "extraordinary." She says archeologists there are not rewriting the history of Sidon because the city’s history has never been written before. Though Sidon is mentioned 35 times in the Bible and many stories about it are well known throughout the region, no one has ever found any evidence to verify these stories.

"This is an opportunity to really learn something, to finally have evidence of what occurred in Sidon’s history,” says Serhal.

A preliminary report by Irving Finkel indicates that the tablet dates back to about 1400 B.C. Finkel is an expert in cuneiform and the Assistant Keeper in the Department of the Ancient Near East at the British Museum in London. He says when he first got news of the discovery everyone in his office was literally jumping with excitement.

Finkel writes: "With a site as important as Sidon, one knew for certain that there must be cuneiform inscriptions buried there, but it is one thing to 'know for certain,' and quite another to find the proof. With such a find the likelihood is always that there will be more waiting to be uncovered."

The cuneiform tablet was discovered outside the entrance to one of the buildings that will be excavated next year. According to preliminary analysis of the writing on the front and back of the tablet, it appears to be a kind of rations list. The markings include a short line which indicates each new entry, followed by a measurement (most probably of barley), a space, and then the name of the recipient. The short line appears to be a marking local to Sidon and the fabric on the cuneiform is local to Sidon as well.

Another important detail is that at least one of the names seems to be Arcadian, from the Syrian-Mesopotamian area, which suggests Sidon was an international trading hub as far back as the 13th century B.C.

Archeological work on the Sidon site began in 1998, making it the second urban excavation in all of Lebanon. The land was expropriated specifically for research in the 1960s by the previous Director of Antiquities, Emir Maurice Shehab, but it was not until the British Museum arrived that the excavating began.

This site was originally thought to hold the "pleasure garden of the Persians." While it quickly became clear that the anticipated gardens would not be found, a wealth of other archeological findings surfaced instead.

This site is now referred to as "College Site" because prior to the expropriation of land, the Gerard Institute and Frair College stood on its grounds. The foundations of these buildings still stand and the team is excavating around them.
A plethora of artifacts have been uncovered at each level. From the third millennium B.C. level, the team has found a house with four rooms and a kitchen. Inside the kitchen were the bones of lions, hippos, bears, and other sorts of game that had been a source of food, according to the marks on the bones.

Interestingly, the animals were all found with their heads severed from their bodies, suggesting the teeth were used as weapons or tools. And all of the animals were male. Serhal speculates that either people left the females for reproductive purposes, or more likely, the house belonged to a member of the elite who killed only male prey as proof of his own manhood.

The Sidon excavation is taking place for only six to eight weeks a year due to funding limitations. Typically, the team begins its day at 6 a.m. and works until 4 p.m., excavating items to be processed and identified each evening. Jars found smashed into hundreds of shards are carefully put back together. Everything is photographed and documented, because, as Serhal says, "archeology is destruction." In order to explore the site layer by layer, each level must be effectively destroyed to excavate the one beneath.

This particular excavation is unusual in that it is funded from both international and Lebanese sources. Serhal notes that most excavations have little if any outside funding from corporations, let alone individuals. This one is being paid for primarily by the British Museum and British Academy, but there is also financial support from Byblos Bank, the Hariri Association, Nokia Lebanon, Cimenterie Nationale, and two London-based individuals, Michael Farres and Namia Yunes.

A documentary about the excavation, entitled "Sidon 5000," is currently being filmed and will screen in London on November 25, under the auspices of the Lebanese ambassador to the U.K.