SUSA

City of Splendour
"In those days, when King Ahasuerus was sitting on his royal throne in Susa, the capital..."

(Esther 1: 2)
FIGURE 1: Plan of the site of Susa.
The palace of Susa was built by Darius I and his son Xerxes (Figs. 1-2). Darius drew up the plans and started construction at the beginning of his reign, in 521 B.C.E. Work was still not complete at his death in 486 B.C.E.; it fell to Xerxes to finish and embellish it. Later, around 404 B.C.E., Artaxerxes II restored the palace and built another some distance away on the Susa plain, on the other side of the Shaur River.

Darius, a Persian prince, seized power and gained control of the empire shortly after the accidental death of Cambyses, son of Cyrus the Great. As the first king of Persia, Cyrus had revolted in 550 B.C.E. against the Medes who occupied the northern part of the Iranian plateau. In 539 B.C.E. he captured Babylon, took king Nabonidus prisoner, and restored liberty to the Jews whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken away into captivity after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. Cyrus never annexed Babylonia, however, preferring to build his capital at Pasargadae on the Iranian plateau. During his reign and that of his son Cambyses, the Persian empire grew till it extended from India to Egypt.

Darius could have settled at Pasargadae or Babylon, but he doubtless preferred to distinguish himself from his predecessors. Moreover, Pasargadae, set high in the mountains, was difficult to reach in winter; while populous Babylon, on the floodplain of the Tigris and Euphrates, was less secure politically. Darius chose Susa, the ancient Elamite capital founded 3,000 years earlier, which lay on the plain 300 km south-east of Babylon. It stood at the foot of the Zagros mountains, at the crossroads of the routes which led over the Iranian plateau to the east, in the direction of Fars (Persia) to the south, and towards Media to the north. A little later, Darius built the palace of Persepolis in Persia and that of Ecbatana (Hamadan) in Media. He also occupied Pasargadae. To the Greeks, Susa, the winter residence of the Great King, appeared to be the capital of the empire. The imperial government
FIGURE 2: General view of the palace after restoration; in the background is the "château" (the headquarters of the archaeological mission), with the white spire of the tomb of the Prophet Daniel to the right.

actually had several points of support: the imperial administration rested on a network of rapid communications (the road from Susa to Sardis was punctuated by 111 relay posts), on an alert intelligence service and on an effective administration. Under the system inaugurated by Cyrus, the conquered provinces kept their socio-economic system, culture and religion, along with a certain degree of autonomy. It was thus that the Jews of Babylon were authorised to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. Achaemenid political organisation was superimposed on regional realities. Susa is a good example of this tendency.

THE CHOICE OF SUSA
At the time of Darius' accession, Susa was no more than a small market-town of little economic or political importance. After being razed to the ground in 639 B.C.E. by Aššurbanipal, king of Assyria, the ancient Elamite capital never regained its former splendour, even though Cyrus restored some of its temples. The site consisted of three tells 15-25 m high, covering some 300
acres (120 hectares), and dominating the plain near the bank of the Shaur River (Fig. 3). The few thousand inhabitants were moved out to the north-east, founding the new suburb labelled the “Artisans’ tell” by archaeologists. The Elamite city of Susa witnessed the complete remodelling of its original topography; Darius’ architects gave the site its present form, under a thick cover of Parthian, Sassanian and Islamic strata. The top of the apadana tell was levelled for the construction of a vast, partly artificial platform, rising 15 m above the surrounding plain, on which stood the royal residence, its gardens and the great audience hall or apadana. The three tells have been named the “Acropolis”, the “apadana” and the “Royal City”; they were united in a lozenge-shaped area by a defensive system composed of walls and a glacis, dominated by the Acropolis.

THE EXCAVATIONS OF Susa
Identified since 1840 as the “Shushan” mentioned in the Book of Esther, Susa was explored between 1851 and 1853 by the Scottish geologist W.K.

FIGURE 3: General view of the palace, the inner courtyard and the royal apartments, after restoration.
Loftus, who was a member of an English mission charged with marking the frontier between the Ottoman empire and Persia. Loftus unearthed four column bases from the great hypostyle hall which bore the trilingual cuneiform inscription of Artaxerxes II, recording his restoration of the apadana. Excavations were resumed in 1884-1886 by the French scholars Marcel and Jane Dieulafoy, who recovered fragments of a huge capital from the hypostyle hall, ornamented with volutes and bullheads, as well as portions of the glazed brick friezes of lions and of archers which decorated the walls of the palace courtyard. Jacques de Morgan, who began work at Susa in 1897, leading a large French archaeological mission, was not interested in the Achaemenid period; however, he did note traces of fortifications on the Acropolis; he also uncovered a rich princely tomb there, remarkable for the quality of the jewellery found within. Morgan's successors, particularly Roland de Mecquenem, resumed the excavation of the palace, most of which was recognized; however, a faulty reading of the remains led to an erroneous interpretation, which remained uncorrected by work carried out by Roman Ghirshman in 1946-1966.

A partial restoration programme, conducted from 1969 onwards by the French Archaeological Mission at Susa, with the support of the National Office for the Protection of the Historic Monuments of Iran, has elucidated the plan of the royal residence and of the hypostyle hall, thus clarifying their interpretation; excavation led to the discovery of the palace gate, a freestanding pavilion at the eastern end of the tell; another gate or propylaeum stood on the “Royal City” tell. A city-gate was found to the east, as well as part of the fortifications. Several cuneiform inscriptions, written in the three languages of the empire – Elamite, Old Persian and Akkadian – have confirmed the attribution of the various structures to Darius and his son Xerxes. A colossal statue of Darius was discovered in situ; it adorned the western façade of the gate.

THE ACHAEMENID CITY
The royal Achaemenid city covered about 300 acres (120 hectares); the dwellings of the common people must have been situated on the surrounding plain, where they have left few traces. The population of Susiana was probably semi-nomadic at this time; the people and their flocks began to move towards the highlands in the spring, staying there until autumn.

1. The palace excavations were carried out from 1969 to 1979 by Jean Perrot, head of the mission, and Daniel Ladiray, architect. All line illustrations for this article were drawn by Daniel Ladiray.
The royal city was surrounded by a glacis and a large moat, filled by the waters of the Shaur River. The moat was crossed on the east in order to reach the city and the palace, by means of an earth causeway on the same axis as that of the city-gate. The gate itself was built halfway up the glacis, with a baked brick ramp leading up to it. This gate seems to be a free-standing structure, with no trace of a wall on either side. The great height of the glacis apparently provided sufficient protection. The glacis followed the edge of the ancient Elamite tell; it was built in a series of right-angled projections in order to follow the contour line. When the glacis was constructed, the edge of the tell was cut off vertically down to the original ground surface. A bed of beaten earth, over 20 m wide in some places, supported the glacis, which was made of mud; mudbricks were used for its upper part and for its facing, which was covered by a protective layer of terre pisée (a mixture of earth and straw). The outer face of the glacis displayed a fairly pronounced batter. Gravel was laid down between the glacis’ inner face and the archaeological strata, forming a continuous and easily recognisable inner lining, which ensured that the massive glacis was properly drained. No trace of a wall has been discerned on the top of the glacis, whose tremendous height of 10 to 15 m must have afforded sufficient protection by itself. This bears little resemblance to the complex system envisaged by Marcel Dieulafoy. Thick mudbrick walls connected the three tells. The whole complex was dominated by the “Citadel” or “Acropolis”.

THE “ROYAL CITY” (Fig. 4)
The “Royal City” tell has only been excavated in a rather superficial manner, apart from the great “stratigraphic” trench opened up by Ghirshman to the east of the “Propylaeum”. It seems probable that there were no other Achaemenid structures of any significance on this tell besides this monument. Geophysical investigations have revealed no trace of the enormous accumulations of pebbles which usually form the foundations of the monuments of this period.

THE “PROPYLAEUM” (Fig. 5)
This structure is a pavilion with a square plan (24 x 24 m), situated on the axis of the road leading from the city’s eastern gate to the palace and the apadana. It is oriented like the buildings on the apadana tell, and lies at the same level, 15 m above the plain. Two large broad rooms form a vestibule, sandwiched between two porticoes, each with two columns. This complex is
flanked on either side by four small rooms; those at the corners are square and those in the middle are rectangular. There is no trace of any staircase.

The construction is of particularly high quality, starting with the foundations: first, a trench measuring 25 x 25 m was dug 7-8 m deep through the Elamite strata, though it did not reach virgin soil. This was filled with gravel and beaten earth – the gravel under the walls and the column bases, and the beaten earth lying beneath the structure’s empty spaces, according to a predetermined plan. The walls are built of unbaked mudbricks, laid on two courses of baked mudbricks; in some places they have survived to a height of over a metre. Both inside the two large chambers and on the building’s exterior, the walls are punctuated at regular intervals by niches, while a bench runs along the base of the porticoes. A tiled floor runs around
the building, in order to protect the foundations. The grey stone column bases in the porticoes are square; on three of their sides they bear a trilingual cuneiform inscription of Xerxes, attributing the construction of the *badish* ("building") to his father Darius. Judging from certain details of its construction, the structure could have been built towards the end of Darius' reign. It stood a dozen metres high and had a flat roof; it seems to have been ceremonial in function.

**THE "ROYAL CITY" - "APADANA" CAUSEWAY**

From the "Royal City", which seems to have been occupied by small buildings, dwellings or palace annexes, the *apadana* esplanade, which lay at the same level, could be reached via a huge causeway built of unbaked mudbrick, which bridged the 10-15 m deep ditch that separated the two platforms. This causeway, which was 30 m long and 17 m wide at its base, had sides which sloped inwards. The upper part has been destroyed by erosion; the actual roadway was probably about 10 m wide. The causeway was supported by a strong bed of unbaked brick 4.5 m thick. It was formed of two side walls, connected by two transverse walls; the three compartments formed in this way were filled with rubble. On the west, the causeway abuts the retaining wall of the palace platform; on the east – the "Royal City" side – it rests directly on Elamite strata, which were cut off at an angle of 45 degrees.

**THE PALACE TERRACE**

The *apadana* hill today is a regular quadrilateral, measuring about 250 m along each side, which rises about 15 m above the level of the surrounding plain. Under Islamic strata (which predate the Mongol invasions) and under some traces from the Sassanian and Parthian periods is a vast platform whose core is formed by the ancient Elamite tell. Its summit was levelled, and the earth used to fill up the space behind mighty retaining walls, founded on the original ground surface. In the gate area, this retaining wall was 16 m high and 23 m wide at its base. Each of the walls built on the platform had its own separate foundations. A trench was dug down to virgin soil for each wall and each column; it was filled with gravel brought from the bed of the nearby river. The excavation of the foundation pits, the deposition of the fills and the construction of the platform retaining walls were carried out simultaneously, according to a pre-established general plan. A layer of gravel 30-60 cm thick covered the entire area and levelled it. In order to drain this vast surface – and the spring rains here are unusually violent – an extraordinary drainage system
FIGURE 6: Reconstruction of the palace, showing the gate, the royal residence, the apadana and the gardens.

was built of baked mud-bricks pointed with bitumen. Three main drains ran from east to west towards the river, collecting water from the courtyards and terraces.

The esplanade supported three elements: the gate, on the same axis as the causeway; then the “Royal Residence”, beyond a vast paved piazza; this is abutted on the north by the hypostyle hall, the apadana, which was probably surrounded on the other side by gardens (Fig. 6).

THE GATE (Figs. 7, 8, 9)
The foundations of this structure, which measures 40 x 30 m, represent a superb feat of engineering. The eastern wall rests on top of the huge retaining wall of the platform; for the other walls, enormous foundation walls had to be built in the interior of the embankment; each was topped by a wide channel filled with gravel, on which rested a wall of the gate building. In addition, each foundation wall was protected against infiltration within the embankment itself by a lining of pebbles. The foundation gravels of each of the four columns of the central chamber were also enclosed by retaining walls, built at the same time as the fills. It is thus quite clear that the gate’s plan was intimately linked to the construction of the platform and the palace.
complex from the very start. This is an important point, for this is the first appearance of the architectural element of the square hall with four columns in Achaemenid buildings; this element can thus be unhesitatingly attributed to Darius’ first architects.

The building’s outer walls were smooth, and may have been covered with glazed bricks or stone slabs. A fragment of a relief has been unearthed; it depicts the life-size hand of an archer. The hall with four columns is flanked on either side of the axis of the central passage by two long rooms, and on the esplanade side, by two staircases — which has allowed D. Ladiray’s reconstruction of corner towers on the building’s flat roof. The walls of the great hall are broken by niches; the floor of the building is covered by square tiles measuring 0.51 m (the royal cubit) in the western passage and by smaller tiles measuring 0.33 m (a standard cubit) in the hall. The column bases are square; they are the largest found at Susa after those of the hypostyle hall. The torus is 1.25 m in diameter; the diameter of the columns must thus have been over one metre, and their height could have been 12-13 m. The column bases bear a trilingual cuneiform inscription of Xerxes, attributing the construction of the gate to his father Darius.

The building’s entrance, on the side nearest the causeway, seems to have been decorated with projecting carved stone blocks; only the gravel foundations which originally supported them have survived. They may have depicted winged bulls like those at Pasargadae and Persepolis. On the side facing the esplanade, the passage façade was decorated with two colossal statues; one, representing Darius, was found in its original place (Fig. 10). It was fixed with lead on to the stone base, which in turn rested on a pebble
foundation. Its companion piece has disappeared. This statue, the only one of its kind known in the repertory of Achaemenid art, was carved in Egypt on Darius’ orders for a temple at Heliopolis, from whence it was brought to Susa by Xerxes after he crushed the Egyptian revolt at the beginning of his reign. The statue is covered with hieroglyphic and cuneiform inscriptions. Its rectangular base bears the names of the peoples of the empire’s 24 provinces, each framed in an Egyptian cartouche.

THE ESPLANADE AND THE ROYAL RESIDENCE (Fig. 11)
Once past the gate, visitors would emerge on to the vast paved esplanade, from whence their eyes would be drawn to the surrounding landscape, with the Zagros mountains visible on the horizon. The gate of the royal residence stood 70 m to the right; it too was flanked by stone reliefs, but only their foundations have survived. The palace occupied an area measuring 246 x 155 m on the platform, thus covering an area of 38,000 sq m (to which must be added the 12,000 sq m of the audience hall); it was arranged around three
courtyards, which decreased in size from east to west. The king’s apartments opened on the innermost courtyard.

The entrance to the residence, on the east, was through a double guardroom; this arrangement was repeated at all the passages leading from one courtyard into another. These passages are 5-6 m wide; the doors have two wings and their posts turn in copper sockets fixed with lead to heavy stones sunk into the floor. Judging from the usual canons of Achaemenid architecture (the width/height ratio is 2:5), the doors must have been more than 10 m high.
The eastern courtyard measures 64 x 55 m. On its northern side, three small doors were flanked a little in front of the façade by enormous poles, whose bases rested two metres below ground level, supported by heavy stone bases hollowed out to take them. Two other poles stood in the courtyard’s northern corners. The lion frieze unearthed by Marcel Dieulafoy was found in this courtyard at the foot of the northern façade, which it must have adorned. This part of the residence may have had a religious function. The archers’ frieze may also have decorated the walls of the eastern courtyard.

The central courtyard measures 36 x 33 m. It seems to have played an important role in controlling traffic within the palace. On the south, it led into a complex of rooms which may have housed storerooms or an administrative service. In the northern and southern wings, narrow corridors...
allowed rapid movement from east to west; in contrast, north-south movement involved crossing the courtyard under the watchful eyes of carefully placed guardrooms. A vast apartment of several rooms opens on to each courtyard, probably assigned to a high office-holer or service official in charge of this part of the palace.

**THE KING'S APARTMENTS (Fig. 12)**

The inner courtyard (36 x 31 m), whose surface was covered with large tiles of baked clay (0.51 m square), is remarkable for the much greater richness of its architectural ornamentation. In front of each door and passage, beneath the paving, were small boxes of baked mudbricks, obviously intended to hold foundation deposits. Another box was found in the middle of the courtyard. The southern façade is adorned with niches. On the medial axis, the royal apartments opened on a passage 9 m wide, which must have been more than 20 m high. This led to a large chamber 35 m wide and 9 m deep. The floor
was made of a thick mortar of earth and chalk, covered by a carefully polished red layer, which appears in all the rooms of this complex. A double-leaved door, 7 m wide, separated this room from another chamber of the same size, on the same axis as the entrance, which led into the king’s chamber.

The eastern wall of the king’s room contains a niche whose floor is paved with three large grey flagstones, laid with care. The room’s importance was confirmed in 1970 by the discovery of two marble plaques engraved with cuneiform characters under the base of the walls on either side of the entrance. They bore Elamite and Akkadian versions of the famous “Charter of the Foundation of the Palace”, part of which was already known from baked clay tablets (Fig. 13). The text lists the origins of the precious and semi-precious materials accumulated for the construction of the palace, and the participation...
of the different peoples of the empire: wood from the Lebanon, stone from the Zagros, gold from Ethiopia, glazed bricks made by Babylonian craftsmen. The king's chamber lay at the very heart of the palace, at the centre of a vast complex which also included, on both sides of the great reception rooms, two complexes of longrooms probably used for storage, and at the back, reached by a guarded passage, the apartments of the women and the royal family. These opened on a long corridor. Five apartments have been partly preserved; four of them, each with the same plan, cover an area of about 1,000 sq m. The fifth is smaller. These apartments are organised around two courtyards, separated by a long room which contains a sanitary installation which runs into a large east-west sewer. The residential part of each apartment is reminiscent of the classic Mesopotamian module, that of the royal apartment.

FIGURE 14: Remains of the apadana.

THE HYPOSTYLE HALL (APADANA) (Fig. 14)
Adjoining the royal residence on the esplanade, the great hypostyle hall measures 109 x 109 m. The ceiling of the central chamber (58 x 58 m) was borne on six rows of six columns set on square bases, while the ceilings of the porticoes which surrounded the hall on the north, east and west were supported by two rows of six columns set on bell-shaped bases with floral decoration (Fig. 15). The three porticoes communicated with the central hall though double-leaved doors set on the hall's medial axes. The walls were 5.2 m thick. Each column weighed more than 25 tons, and was crowned by volutes and a capital ornamented with bull-shaped protomes (Fig. 16), on which rested the beams of the ceiling. The Susa apadana is slightly larger than that of Persepolis. An inscription commemorating its restoration by
Artaxerxes II around 400 B.C.E. is engraved on the four column bases flanking the hall's northern passage. From the royal residence, the apadana was reached through two doors preceded by a vestibule. Inside the hall, a large square slab set between these doors and between the first two rows of columns on the medial axis may mark the site of the throne. The paving has disappeared. The organic link between the audience hall and the residence has not been definitely established; later building in this area, perhaps during the reign of Artaxerxes II, has obliterated the original plan.
FIGURE 17: Part of the glazed brick frieze of the archers.
No trace of the *apadana*’s decoration has survived. All the suggested reconstructions, such as that proposed by M. Dieulafoy, are conjectural.

THE PLACE OF SUSA IN ACHAEMENID ARCHITECTURE

In chronological terms, Darius I’s palace at Susa, planned at the beginning of his reign, lies between the palace of Pasargadae and that of Persepolis, which was begun shortly before 500 B.C.E. Susa still belongs to the formative phase of Achaemenid architecture, which produced an original synthesis of Egyptian, Greek, Assyro-Babylonian and Iranian influences. Due to its location on the plain, Susa strikes a characteristic note in this process, related to the nature of the terrain and the principal material used at the site—unbaked clay. The influence of the Assyro-Babylonian palaces, especially the great palace of Babylon, its traditional building techniques (pebble foundations, unbaked and baked mudbricks, glazed brick decoration—*Fig. 17*) and architectural formulae (organisation of the house around a central courtyard, axial suites of rooms oriented widthways) is clearly apparent here. The differences from the Babylonian model are most obvious in the general scheme, the clarity and intelligibility of the plan, the taste for symmetry and the development of columned halls. The palace of Susa is thus a unique piece of evidence for Achaemenid architecture as well as an important landmark in the history of palatial architecture in this region.

"SHUSHAN THE CAPITAL"

The Book of Esther makes Xerxes’ palace at Susa the backdrop of its story. The first excavators naturally enough tried to identify the remains they found with the setting of the biblical account. This identification was always very vague. The gate had not been discovered, and the plan and general scheme of the palace were not understood; even the attribution of the building and its date were uncertain. Today, we have better reasons for thinking that Darius’ palace at Susa—begun in 520 B.C.E., completed by Xerxes, restored in 400 B.C.E. by Artaxerxes II, and briefly occupied at a later date by Alexander the Great, who celebrated his marriage to Darius III’s elder daughter there in 323 B.C.E.—is indeed the palace in the mind of the author of the Book of Esther, written a century and a half later, as is evident from his descriptions of the gate, the royal apartments, and perhaps the gardens. The tenuous agreement here between archaeology and the biblical record gives the latter an incontestable flavour of authenticity for the first time.
This publication is issued in conjunction with a special exhibition held at the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem:

**JERUSALEM: A CAPITAL FOR ALL TIMES, ROYAL CITIES OF THE BIBLICAL WORLD**

January 17, 1996-December 31, 1996

This publication was made possible by the generous support of:

N.H. Horiuchi Inc., Tokyo
Lily and Nathan Silver
The Jerusalem 3000 Committee
Ministry of Science and Art, The Culture Authority, Department of Museums

**SCIENTIFIC EDITOR:**
Joan Goodnick Westenholz

**ENGLISH EDITOR:**
Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz

**TRANSLATORS:**
from French - Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz
from Hebrew - Alan Paris, Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz

**EDITORIAL CO-ORDINATOR:**
Daniella Slasky

**GRAPHIC DESIGN:**
Noam Morag

**TYPESetting:**
Keter Press Ltd.

**COLOUR SEPARATIONS:**
ArtPlus Jerusalem

**EXHIBITION:**
We are grateful to the following for their loans to this exhibition:

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**EXHIBITION MANAGER:**
Yehuda Levy-Alderman

**MODEL CONSTRUCTION SUPERVISOR:**
Avraham Hason; Dageash Exhibitions Ltd.

Printed in Israel, 1996.
Published by the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem
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© Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem, P.O. Box 4670 Jerusalem 91046 Israel
ISBN 965 7027 01-2
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