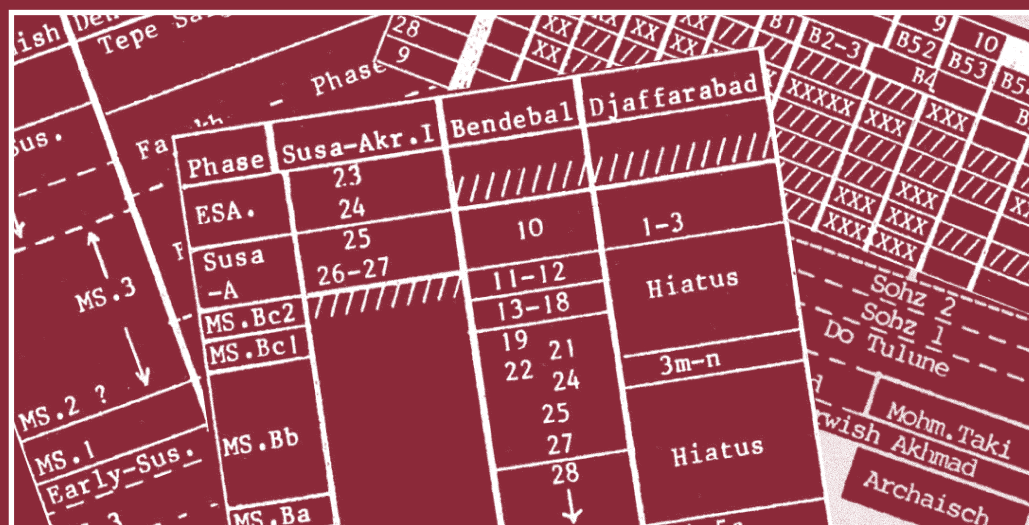




Übergangszeiten

Altorientalische Studien
für Reinhard Dittmann
anlässlich seines 65. Geburtstags

Herausgegeben von
Kai Kaniuth,
Daniel Lau und
Dirk Wicke

marru 1

Zaphon

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THE TRANSITION FROM NEO-BABYLONIAN TO ACHAEMENID GLAZED BRICK DECORATION

Kai Kaniuth, München

INTRODUCTION

The heterogeneity of material remains within the regions under Achaemenid control has posed a challenge to archaeological explanation on several levels. Firstly, there is the difficulty of matching the available historical and archaeological data. Secondly, a discrepancy is notable between the official art of the empire, well represented in the capitals of Iran, and a corresponding shortage of reliably dated remains of mundane practices in the provinces. Lastly, the early evolution of specifically Achaemenid forms of representation continues to be a subject of debate.

In line with the theme of the present volume – *Übergangszeiten* – this contribution will draw attention to a transition in the field of architectural decoration, which has gained clearer contours following recent discoveries. More specifically, I will summarize available information on the glazed brick reliefs of Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid date, their interrelationships and their relevance for the nascent monumental arts of ancient Persia. I offer it to René Dittmann in gratitude and affection, along with my best wishes.

THE BACKGROUND

Referring to a lack of criteria for distinguishing Achaemenid period material culture outside Iran (and at the same time criticizing our reliance on a small number of *Leitformen*), Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg once called the largest empire the world had seen to that date “elusive” (Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1990). This “elusiveness” primarily concerns the remains of everyday life. Official art¹ used a canon of public image-

¹ Referred to variously as “royal”, “imperial”, “court style/*Hofstil*” or simply “Achaemenid”. A discussion of the subtleties of these terms (compare, for example, Jacobs 2002 and Colburn 2014 in their usage of “*Achämenidische Kunst / Kunst im Achämenidenreich*” vs. “Art of / in the Achaemenid Empire”) is not the aim of this paper. For the sake of readability I will use these terms synonymously, just as “Persian” can be substituted for “Achaemenid”.

ry, shared elements of commensalism² and spatial structuration supporting the ruling *Herrschaftsideologie*, setting apart the products (or imitations) of a socially meaningful corpus of evocative forms and practices from the material world of the populations in the provinces. In this view, official art constitutes an exclusive supra-regional system of codes, which did not automatically take root in the societies exposed to it³. The notable eclecticism of the official arts makes them conveniently recognizable, but poses challenges of its own, by adversely affecting attempts to derive and decode this system of norms and ways of doing⁴.

Our knowledge of the Achaemenid Empire's impact on Babylonian culture has grown substantially over the years. The year 539 BC marked a fundamental watershed in ancient Mesopotamian history. Cyrus the Great's defeat of Nabonidus and the subsequent takeover of Babylon differed from previous regime changes in that political rule moved to externally based powers for more than a millennium. Few researchers would currently consider the end of the Chaldean empire the end of ancient Near Eastern culture as such. J. Oelsner, in particular, has repeatedly argued for the persistence of a specifically Babylonian cultural identity until the Parthian period (Oelsner 2002; 2007). His position finds support in the continuity of major cults and the usage of Akkadian cuneiform, albeit restricted to the cultic sphere.

Whereas the general idea of kingship and the practicalities of political control developed to accommodate a new and unprecedented scale of imperial rule, the economic organisation of Babylonia changed only with the reign of Xerxes I. Following the uprisings of 484 BC, Persian attitude towards Babylonian institutions shifted, culminating in the replacement of a large portion of the local administrative elites (Joannès 1995; Waerzeggers 2004; Jursa 2007). Detailed examination of the textual record attests to the impact of Achaemenid rule. The integration of Mesopotamia in an interaction zone stretching from Egypt and the Balkans to the Indus and Middle Asia left its mark in a heightened exposure to cultural influences from abroad. Even though large-scale displacements of people had taken place already in Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian times mobility was further heightened in the Achaemenid period through both forced and voluntary movements, and the intensification of relations with the imperial administrative centres⁵. During this period, Aramaic finally replaced Akkadian as a vernacular language and alphabetic writing was probably found more

2 Note particularly the relevance of bowls or rhyta in the promulgation of new elite codes of participation and the display of allegiance to the Great King (Dusinberre 1999; Miller 2010; 2011; Kistler 2011, with further literature).

3 The abundance of precious jewellery must be mentioned here, from both within the empire's borders (Rehm 1992; Musche 1992; Curtis 2005) but – even more interestingly – also from regions beyond (Trejster/Jablonsky 2012).

4 A particularly illustrative case is glyptic art, which sees an influx of new motifs throughout the realm (Dusinberre 2008; Francfort 2013), but vis-à-vis a persistence of traditional iconography – certainly in Babylonia (Merrillees 2005; Mitchell/Searight 2007; Balzer 2007).

5 Zadok 1995; 2005; Kessler 2006; Waerzeggers 2006; Beaulieu 2017. For Iranians in Babylonia see specifically Zadok 1977. For the journeys of Babylonian tax officials to Fars: Waerzeggers 2010.

useful than cuneiform for daily business. None of these developments took place overnight, but the changes visible over the course of two centuries are striking when compared to the previous millennia of autochthonous Mesopotamian cultural developments.

So while in a historical and economic perspective we are by now reasonably well informed about the Achaemenid influence on Babylonian society, and can differentiate between actions within the context of conquest from the results of Achaemenid rule, there remains considerable uncertainty about the contribution of Babylonia towards Achaemenid culture and art (Calmeyer 1994). The imperial Achaemenid art's principal indebtedness to well-established Near Eastern formulae is clear, particularly in the choice of media. Neo-Assyrian art is an obvious source of inspiration for Achaemenid relief sculpture, in spite of a 70-year gap separating the two. The *apadana*, core of the Persian palatial arrangement, and of prime importance in a system of rule based on the audience principle, was tentatively suggested to have been modelled on Anatolian and Iranian precursors (for different emphases cf. Huff 2011; Stronach 2012) and Ionian forerunners are proposed for stone masonry techniques (Nylander 1970; 1979; Roaf 1983; Boardman 2000). In another field of the monumental arts, glazed brick decoration, there has been a recent tendency to disassociate the Persian examples from the geographically and chronologically close Neo-Babylonian tradition by emphasizing a local Iranian pedigree for the majority of the production (Caubet 2007: 131; Maras 2010; Caubet 2012: 158f.).

GLAZED BRICKS

Glazed bricks have been a characteristic form of monumental architectural ornament in the Near East since the mid-2nd millennium BC (Moorey 1994; Sauvage 1998; Tite et al. 2008). Their use in the embellishment of the Achaemenid residences of Persepolis and Susa has been known since long⁶, but they have always been overshadowed by the impressive stone reliefs of the Persepolis terrace and by the glazed brick monuments par excellence, the Babylonian façades, world wonder and artistic hallmark of a period.

Robert Koldewey and Walther Andrae documented and presented the Ištar Gate with its famous façade of alternating bulls and *mušḫuššū* (Fig. 1) in one long, Herculean effort lasting from the initial discovery in 1902 through the excavation report (Koldewey 1918), to the façades eventual reconstruction in the *Vorderasiatisches Museum*, completed in 1930 (Klengel-Brandt 1999; Crüsemann 2000; Marzahn/Schauerte 2008). The incorporation of the monument into the canon of Mesopotamian art has been one of the unchallenged narratives in Near Eastern archaeology for its meticulous excavation, swift publication and impact on our understanding of culture-historical developments. No subsequent excavation has brought to light comparable evi-

6 For the initial discoveries see Loftus 1857 and Dieulafoy 1893. For recent summaries see Razmjou 2004 and the various contributions in Perrot 2008.



Fig. 1 The Istar Gate bull (reconstruction in the VAM, Berlin).

dence of Neo-Babylonian architectural decoration, ensuring the Istar Gate bricks a pivotal role in Mesopotamian art history and an iconic status evident to this day.

While Babylon offered the best comparanda for Achaemenid glazed wall decorations in terms of scale, the Babylonian tradition differed fundamentally in that it worked in glazed clay brick, compared to the glazed quartz bricks favoured in Iran. Also, Achaemenid brick decoration used *Fadenemail*, a technique whereby coloured fields of glaze are separated by thin black strips of glaze with a higher melting point, allowing for more precise rendering of the decoration. This innovation in particular permitted the introduction of more detailed iconographic elements such as humans with intricately decorated garments, in addition to the mythical beasts known already from Mesopotamia. Still, a small proportion of the Susa bricks, namely those with clay bodies and depicting striding lions or griffins must be considered of Babylonian inspiration if not manufacture (Daucé 2008; André-Salvini 2008). Sabrina Maras (2010) went furthest in her attempt to untack the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid glazed brick productions. Key points of her argument concern the technological derivation from Middle- and Neo-Elamite precursors, the programmatic imperial transcension of previous iconographies and the potentially international character of the workforce, deduced from brick marks.

Several years ago, this author had the opportunity to review the records of the Borsippa excavations, kept as part of the *Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft* (DOG) Babylon archive. This sister excavation of Babylon was run by R. Koldewey and W. Andrae from November 1901 until early April 1902, when the demands of the new Istar Gate dig required its cessation. In the vaults of the *Vorderasiatisches Museum*

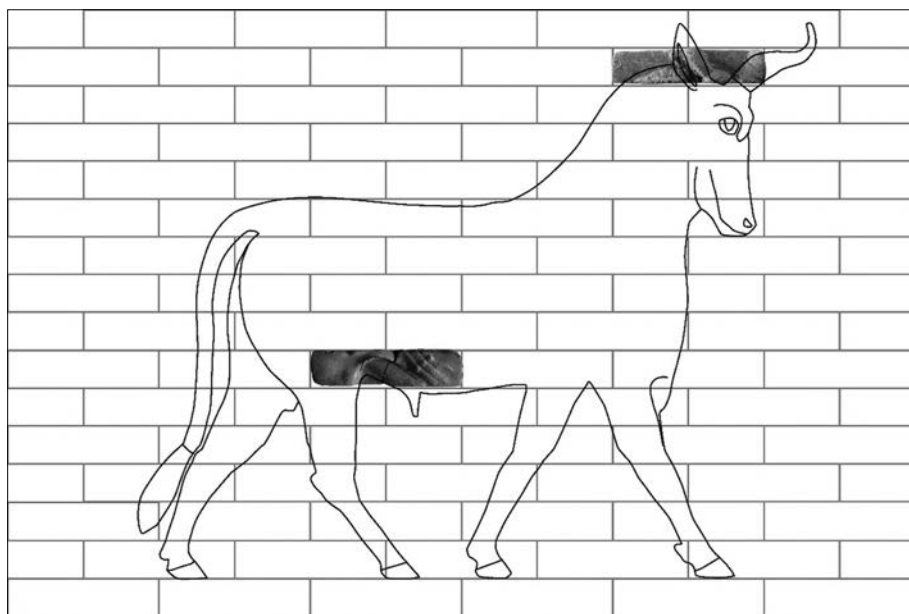


Fig. 2 Reconstruction of the Borsippa right-facing bull (Kaniuth 2013: Fig. 12).

lay two glazed and relief-decorated bricks transported to Berlin as part of the Ištar Gate shipment. Thanks to Andraes field notes it was possible to trace them back to the Ezida temple. Through an analysis of the iconography and manufacturing technology of the bricks it could then be demonstrated, that a façade displaying bulls and *mušhuššū*, closely resembling the Ištar Gate in both iconography and manufacturing technique, had existed at Borsippa (Fig. 2). At the same time, detailed measurements and a reconstruction of parts of the façade demonstrated the proximity of the Borsippa bulls' proportions to "Achaemenid" glazed bricks from Susa. Given the close technological parallels from Babylon, however, I did not hesitate to propose a date in the years of Nebuchadnezzar II. (Kaniuth 2013).

Shortly after the aforementioned article had gone into print, an exciting discovery in western Iran threw an entirely unexpected light on the circumstances of mid-1st-millennium glazed brick production. Building on previous work in Fars (Gondet 2011; Boucharlat et al. 2012), a joint Iranian-Italian team targeted the approaches to the Takht-e Jamshid in order to better understand the Achaemenid capital's built environment. Traces of settlement had already been located by archaeological surface work in the Bagh-e Firuzi area, some four kilometres due west of the terrace. Following up these indications with geophysical prospection, Bagh-e Firuzi site H (locally referred to as Tol-e Ajori – the "mound of bricks"), was identified as a single, rectangular building complex concealed beneath the 60×80 m large mound. What set apart this place from others was the presence of glazed brick fragments on the surface⁷. Exca-

7 These had already been reported by Tilia 1978: 74.

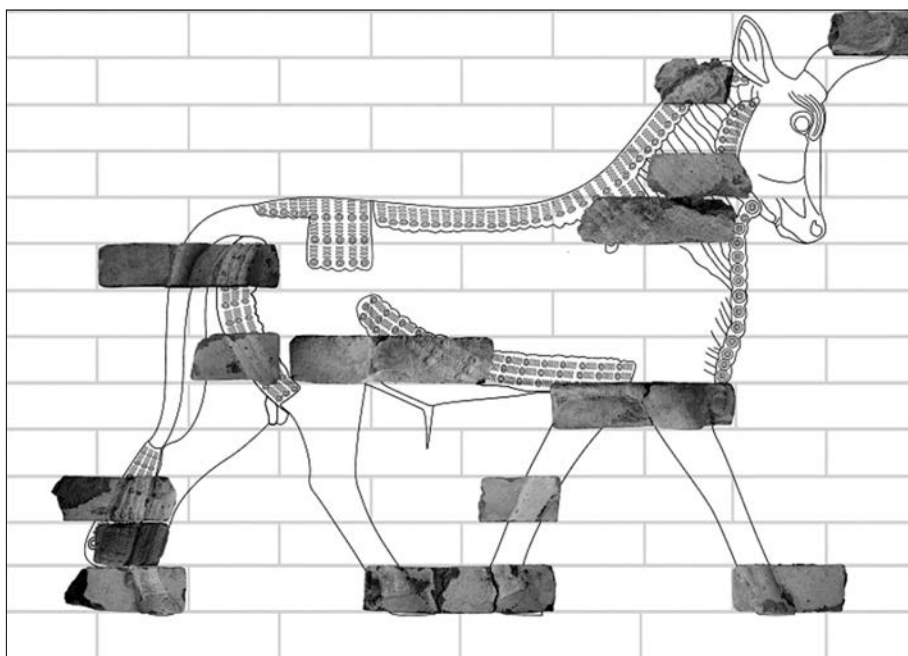


Fig. 3 Reconstruction of a right-facing bull from Tol-e Ajori (Askari Chaverdi et al. 2014: Fig. 21b).

vations carried out since 2012 have unearthed the remains of a mudbrick structure of 29×39 m, closely resembling but exceeding in size the Iṣṭar Gate at Babylon. The 10 m thick walls of the Tol-e Ajori monumental gate had a glazed brick facing on the outside (Askari Chaverdi et al. 2014: 225.236–237 and Fig. 1). While the glazed bricks found *in situ* are single-coloured (brown, yellow and white, Chaverdi et al. 2013: Fig. 17), more than 40 bricks bearing a relief decoration have been published from secondary contexts (Chaverdi et al. 2013: Fig. 24–27; Callieri et al. 2014: 8; Askari Chaverdi et al. 2014: Fig. 16.21.22). The bricks' size (32–33×32–33×7–8 cm), the technologies employed in their production (clay bodies with glazed relief decoration in Babylonian tradition) and their decorative scheme (yellow and white bulls – Fig. 3 – and *muṣhuššū*, probably affixed in alternating rows) conform entirely to Babylonian practice⁸. Even the fitters marks (Askari Chaverdi et al. 2014: Fig. 4) are practically identical to those known from Babylon (Andrae 1902), suggesting that also the workers responsible for the assembly were trained in a Babylonian craft tradition. A graphic projection of the recovered fragments onto the Babylon façades (Askari Chaverdi et al. 2014: Fig. 21.22) illustrates the virtual identity of the compositions. The Iranian-Italian team consequently insisted on the “evident Babylonian origin” of the Ajori bricks, settling for a date within the reign of Cyrus II or Cambyses, since the consolidation of a court iconography under Darius I would have precluded

⁸ The lion reliefs mentioned in Callieri et al. 2014: 6 have not been illustrated.

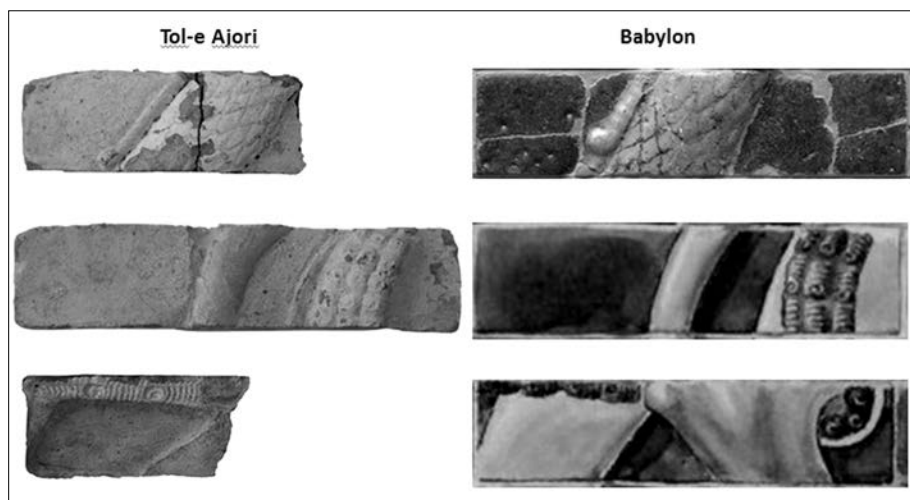


Fig. 4 Comparison of the Tol-e Ajori and Babylon bricks.

the use of purely Babylonian religious imagery (Askari Chaverdi et al. 2014: 237f.).

All Ancient Near Eastern brick façades were built up in modules. In the case of Babylon and Tol-e Ajori (the latter reconstructed), for example, 45 bricks were required for a bull. In Borsippa (also reconstructed), the number seems to have been around 52 (Fig. 1). While remarkable in their degree of congruence, the Babylon and Tol-e Ajori panels are by no means identical (Fig. 4):

1. The middle neck lock of the right-facing *mušhuššu* from Tol-e Ajori (Askari Chaverdi 2014: Fig. 22b) is set lower than its Babylonian counterparts (VAK 9, watercolour by W. Andrae, published in Koldewey 1918: Pl. 14; Koldewey 1990: Fig. 31; VA Bab 4431, reconstruction, Berlin *Vorderasiatisches Museum*, published in André-Salvini 2008: Cat. 131; Marzahn/Schauerte 2008: Fig. 101; Orthmann 1975, Pl. XXVI [from the Iraq Museum]; see also the beast held in the Detroit Museum of Arts, acc. nr. 31.25).
2. The right-facing bull's tail on Askari Chaverdi 2014: Fig. 21b is thinner and curves downwards more steeply than the Babylon examples, while the locks on the bulls hindquarters (on the same brick) do not curve inwards but point down; the space between bottom and tail is wider in Babylon (compared to VAK 7, watercolour by W. Andrae, published in Koldewey 1918: Pl. 12).
3. The same bull's second foreleg is strongly curved where it intersects with the first leg and the animal's breast. The Babylon examples show a straight leg.

Still, the proximity between both reliefs is considerably higher than with the Borsippa specimens.

While the construction of the new Persepolis façade is inconceivable prior to the conquest of Babylon its temporal relationship with the construction of the Persepolis ter-

race is debatable. It may be useful to quickly review the evidence from Babylon first.

The Ištar Gate at Babylon has two or three pavement levels all attributable to Nebuchadnezzar II.'s reign, possibly at 7,19 m⁹, at 10,40 m and at 15,40 m (Koldewey 1918: 8)¹⁰. The documents linking the monument with the Babylonian ruler are the great Ištar Gate inscription on (flat) enamelled bricks found in debris near the gate, a limestone block with a dedicatory inscription, also discovered in secondary position and the stone paving of the uppermost street level (Berger 1973; Da Riva 2008). Also, the Wadi Brisa inscription refers to a Lapislazuli Gate in the city (Da Riva 2012). The Ištar Gate reliefs attest to three production stages: Nine rows of unglazed relief-decorated bricks were uncovered *in situ* at the bottom of the Ištar Gate trench. The potential street level at 7,19 m left the row 7 bulls visible. The 8th row (*mušhuššū*) was covered by the brick pavement at 10,40 m, and the last row of unglazed bricks above (row 9) was finished more accurately than the ones below, suggesting that at this level, at least, the gate was in use (Koldewey 1990: 52). Of the 10th row, the first one with glazed (albeit flat) brick decoration, only the lower parts of one bull, standing above a frieze of rosettes (Koldewey 1918: Pl. 17–18), were preserved. The fact that the previous rhythm of alternating bulls and dragons was interrupted indicates a constructional, and may be also a chronological interval. At least one more row of flat glazed bricks (row 11) is required by the recovery of further bricks with a flat glazed *mušhuššū*, and which would have been visible just above the youngest pavement (at 15,40 m). It may well have been more, but the relationship of Nebuchadnezzar II.'s Ištar Gate inscription (Marzahn 1992), which stood at more than 5 m height, to the glazed reliefs is uncertain. Its existence merely proves, that a glazed façade was executed by the king to a considerable height, as is also suggested by other royal testimonials (Da Riva 2012). The stylistic similarity from the unglazed reliefs of stage 1 to the glazed reliefs of stage 3 is suggestive, but no stratigraphic or epigraphic evidence conclusively links the glazed relief panels of the latest stage to the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II. Also, the apparent homogeneity of the Babylon corpus remains to be demonstrated. The number of comparanda available from Babylon is actually quite low, and only an inspection of the many bricks still unstudied would show, whether there is more variability in the material than Walter Andrae's masterful reconstructions allow for.

That Babylonian monuments have been dated to the Chaldean dynasty on less than secure grounds has been repeatedly shown. The Ezida temple at Borsippa had also long been thought to represent as such an archetype, and was used by Andrae and Koldewey as a key example for Neo-Babylonian temple architecture. A restudy by Walther Kuntner and Sandra Heinsch has demonstrated that this building in its excavated state was certainly no older than the Achaemenid Period, and that no excavator (neither Rassam, nor Koldewey and Andrae) had ever reached Neo-Babylonian levels (Kuntner/Heinsch 2012). Similar doubts have been forwarded for the Ninmah temple

9 This street level was only tentatively suggested by Koldewey.

10 The substantial raising of the street to counter inundations is confirmed by an inscription found in the 1970s (Ismail 1981).

in Babylon (op. cit.), for Esagil (Bergamini 1977; 2013) and the *Südburg* (Gasche 2013). While it is beyond this article to evaluate these proposals, a certain scepticism regarding our received image of Neo-Babylonian Babylon may be called for. The first securely dated Achaemenid construction in the royal compound of Babylon is Artaxerxes II.'s *Perserbau*, but the Achaemenid style glazed reliefs (Haerincx 1973) may well date earlier¹¹.

For Susa, the summary description of glazed bricks (Daucé 2008: 327f.) revealed the coexistence of several styles and techniques of ornamental brickwork during the time of Darius I.

CONCLUSION

What conclusions can be drawn for the development of glazed brick decoration of the mid-first-millennium BC and the relationship of Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid art in general? The situation has certainly become more complicated through the Tol-e Ajori finds, thanks to both the larger variability within the material and the realisation that a number of chronological issues will have to be addressed anew.

For one, the new finds from Tol-e Ajori support the idea that the specifically Babylonian craft tradition of glazed brick reliefs depicting mythical creatures did survive the Chaldaean dynasty. The securely dated brick reliefs of Darius I from Susa and those from Borsippa (whose findspots postdate the Neo-Babylonian period) suggest a coexistence of both traditions for some time. Such a continuation of Babylonian craft traditions is fully in line with current thinking on both texts and the minor arts.

One cannot deny the fundamental break observable with the reign of Darius I., who moved on both technologically and iconographically to create what we understand to be the quintessential royal Persian art (Colburn 2014: 775). But his very deliberate use of all the empire's artistic talent in this process was not simply the rhetoric device that recent criticisms of the Susa Charter (DSf; Colburn 2014: 779) suggest. There is ample evidence for foreign workers active in Iran (for Babylonians see Henkelman/Kleber 2007; Tolini 2008) and these would have been influenced by their native traditions, first and foremost. In addition, analytical results on glazes of "Achaemenid style" bricks from Persepolis and Susa (Caubet/Kaczmarczyk 1998; Holakoei 2013; Holakoei et al. 2016) show similarities with Babylonian colouring technologies in their use of cobalt as a colouring agent. The confirmed presence of Babylonian craftsmen active in the production of glazed bricks in the Persian heartland further narrows the perceived gap between the Babylonian and Achaemenid craft traditions. Ištar Gate Phases 1 and 2, at least, are securely dated to Nebuchadnezzar II (most likely 605–580 BC, since the *mušhuššū* are mentioned in the Wadi Brisa inscriptions), while the Tol-e Ajori gate was built after 538 BC, possibly as late as the early 5th century BC. Ištar Gate Phase 3 must lie between them, suggesting that the

11 Note also the fragments of a Darius I. relief from the site (Seidl 1999).

Babylonian technique of glazed brick relief production lasted for the better part of the 6th century BC.

Not only have these two major traditions of architectural decoration moved closer in time, the importance of a Babylonian craft tradition for the nascent Achaemenid arts is reaffirmed. In its earliest stages, Neo-Babylonian public imagery was considered an appropriate embellishment for the new centres of imperial power, and continued to be employed into the early years of Darius I in Susa. Caution must reign with respect to the official arts of the Achaemenid Empire. Probably into the early 5th century, the production of monumental art contained some room for experimentation and development. The same may be true for later periods less well represented archaeologically.

Lastly, it is reconsidering our notions of Babylonian cultural development in the mid-first-millennium BC. Doubts are rising concerning the attribution of several major monuments (or parts thereof) to the Neo-Babylonian period, and more specifically to the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II. One should therefore consider the possibility that our alluringly clear conceptions of “Babylonian” and “Achaemenid” have blinded us to the fact that the Achaemenid period may have witnessed a last flowering of the Babylonian monumental arts and architecture, quite in contrast with the persistent image of the Great Kings, particularly Xerxes I, as destroyers of Babylonian culture and traditions.

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