Gemelli Careri's Description of Persepolis

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In 1693, the Italian lawyer Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri (1651–1725) set out on a five-year journey around the world.¹ Booking passage on merchant vessels, he traveled to Constantinople, the Levant, Persia, India, China (where Jesuit missionaries suspected he was a spy for the pope), the Philippines, and Mexico before finally returning to Europe aboard a Spanish treasure fleet out of Havana. He swiftly published an account of his journey in a six-volume work titled simply *Giro del mondo* in 1699–1700; translations in English and French were published in 1704 and 1719, respectively.² Through the generosity of the Getty Research Institute's (GRI) Library Council, the GRI purchased a full set of the original Italian edition of this work in 2006. According to his account, in September 1694 Gemelli Careri visited the site of Persepolis, one of the capital cities of the Achaemenid Persian Empire (ca. 550–330 BCE). The purpose of this short article is to assess his description of the site in light of modern archaeological knowledge, with a view toward elucidating Gemelli Careri's place in the history of archaeological writing about Persia.

The Achaemenid Empire was established by Cyrus the Great in the mid-sixth century BCE. In a matter of decades, Cyrus conquered the Median, Lydian, and Neo-Babylonian kingdoms, creating an empire that reached from central Asia to the Aegean. In 526 BCE, his son and successor, Cambyses, added Egypt to the empire. Cambyses died in 522, and he was eventually succeeded by a usurper, Darius I. Beginning about 515, Darius began construction of a new imperial capital, commonly known as Persepolis, about fifty kilometers northeast of the modern Iranian city of Shiraz. His successors added to the site throughout the fifth and fourth centuries, and it was burned in 330 BCE by the forces of Alexander the Great.³ Persepolis itself was never reoccupied, but in the third and fourth centuries CE the Sasanian kings carved reliefs of their own next to the royal tombs of the Achaemenids, and also founded a city nearby, called Istakhr, which persisted into the twelfth century. The ruins became known by various names, including Sadsutun ("the Hundred Columns"), Chelminar ("the Forty Columns"), and Takht-i Jamshid ("the throne of Jamshid," a mythical king who featured prominently in medieval Persian literature).⁴ By the time of Gemelli Careri's trip to Persia, however, Takht-i Jamshid had been identified as the site of Persepolis.

Gemelli Careri's description of Persepolis covers twenty octavo pages of text in the second volume of *Giro del mondo*, and includes two plates engraved by Andreas

Magliar (fl. 1690s).⁵ It contains a number of citations of other works, including those of ancient authors such as Quintus Curtius and Stephanus of Byzantium, geographic works, and accounts by other previous travelers, particularly the Spanish diplomat Don Garcia de Silva Figueroa (1550–1624) and the French scholar and traveler Jean de Thévenot (1633–67).⁶ Because of his use of these earlier accounts, and because of the swiftness of the publication of his own book, the veracity of Gemelli Careri's journey, including his trip to Persepolis, was called into question almost immediately.⁷ It is true that his description of Persepolis is often vague, misunderstands the content of the reliefs, and is sometimes difficult to reconcile with the extant remains at the site. Furthermore, Gemelli Careri implies that the plates are based on his own drawings, yet one seems to have been produced from a careless reading of his own description, while the other was clearly borrowed from an earlier work by the traveler André Dauhier Deslandes.⁸ Yet, on the whole his description is generally accurate, and it is usually possible to identify what structures he is referring to.

Gemelli Careri's description of Persepolis begins with the terrace itself, commonly known today as the "Takht," and the double staircase on its western side (fig. 1).⁹ He also notes the large cuneiform inscription at the southern end, which he characterizes as "neither Caldee, nor Hebrew, nor Arabick, nor Greek, nor of any of those Languages the Learned have Knowledge, but only Triangles of several Sorts, severally plac'd."¹⁰ This is actually a trilingual inscription, written in Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian Akkadian, in which Darius articulates the extent of the empire and appeals to the god Auramazda.¹¹ Next, he describes the small columned hall at the top of the staircase, commonly called the "Gate of Xerxes" or the "Gate of All Lands."¹² This hall features colossal guardian figures—bulls at the western doorway and winged, human-headed bull creatures at the eastern doorway—that Gemelli Careri describes fairly accurately. After that, he moves on to the Apadana, the large columned hall located centrally on the Takht. He interprets the extensive relief sculpture on the north and east facades of the Apadana as a sacrificial procession, since he purports to identify a "chariot drawn by several horses, with a little altar, out of the middle whereof a flame rises" among them, which he interprets in light of the ancient Greek historian Herodotus's remark that the Persians venerated fire.¹³ While there are several chariots depicted among the reliefs of the Apadana, none has traits that are obviously the source of Gemelli Careri's interpretation.

He next describes a building near the Apadana with numerous reliefs, including images of the king with attendants and of heroes fighting fantastic creatures.¹⁴ At this point his account becomes more difficult to follow. This building, he says, has four doors, numerous windows, many rooms, and some cuneiform inscriptions. This is a fair match to the Palace of Darius, a small structure immediately south of the Apadana. He includes among the description of the reliefs "two Figures of Giants on each," which may refer to the pairs of palace guards represented on the doorways at the southern end of the building. But this identification is uncertain, since these guards are not rendered larger than any of the other figures. He further notes that on the south wall (it is unclear whether he

Fig. 1. Plan of the buildings on the Takht at Persepolis. From John Curtis and Nigel Tallis, eds., *Forgotten Empire: The World of Ancient Persia* (London: British Museum Press, 2005), 33, fig. 14. Used by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.

means the building just described or the Takht itself) there are reliefs of “Princes carry’d in Chairs, with Courtiers by shading them with Umbrelloes.” Here he must be describing the reliefs of the king enthroned atop a platform held aloft by subject peoples of the empire. But these reliefs are part of the Throne Hall, to the east of the Apadana, and not near the Palace of Darius.

Gemelli Careri then alludes to the presence of an amphitheater, which cannot be identified with any particular part of the Takht.¹⁵ He does not describe any of the buildings at the southern end of the Takht, even though the Palace of Xerxes, the Central Building, and the “Harem” were presumably partially visible at the time of his visit, since they appear in photographs taken shortly before the start of formal excavations in 1931.¹⁶ He then makes several general observations about the sculpture at the site, mostly noting iconographical features.¹⁷ He likens the costume worn by many of the Persians, including

the king, to that of Venetian senators. He also notes, correctly, the absence of images of women at Persepolis.

After this discussion of the reliefs, Gemelli Careri briefly describes two of the three royal tombs at Persepolis, carved into the slope of Kuh-e Rahmat (the “Mountain of Mercy”) on the east side of the Takht.¹⁸ He focuses on what is now known as Tomb VI, thought to be that of Artaxerxes III (r. 358–338 BCE), which is readily visible from the Takht. The tomb is readily identifiable in his description because it has only a single burial chamber containing two cists, which Gemelli Careri reports were filled with water. He notes the relief of the king holding a bow and the fire altar before him, but he describes the male figure in the winged disk as “an Idol that has a human Body, and monstrous Feet, carry’d in Triumph.”¹⁹ He also fails to recognize that the figures shown supporting the platform on which the king stood are all wearing different costumes, indicating that they are subject peoples from throughout the empire. He then briefly mentions Tomb V, thought to be that of Artaxerxes II (r. 404–359 BCE), which is approximately 250 meters south of the Takht, noting only that it has three burial chambers instead of one. Finally, he also notes the presence of a single column somewhere to the south of the Takht.²⁰ This is the end of Gemelli Careri’s description of the site.

He then dedicates several pages to affirming the identity of the site as Persepolis, followed by a rant decrying the disregard of contemporary Persians for their own antiquities.²¹ His evidence for the identification of Persepolis is curiously slim: he mentions only the fertility of the Marvdasht plain, where the site is situated, and the ancient Greek historian Diodorus Siculus’s remark that the Persian kings were entombed in a cliff face to the east of the Takht (and he cites the earlier traveler de Silva Figueroa for this latter point).²²

He finishes with some very brief comments on the plates.²³ Owing to the sheer number of reliefs, which he puts at over two thousand, and the cost of printing images, Gemelli Careri explains that he has drawn only “a Plan of the Palace, with some of the principal Figures.” The first plate does not contain a proper plan, but rather an oblique view of the Takht looking roughly east (fig. 2). The double staircase on the western side of the Takht is fairly accurately drawn, but the buildings themselves are shown mostly as clusters of columns. The Gate of All Lands and the Apadana are identifiable based on their locations; the other structures are drawn even more cursorily. The Kuh-e Rahmat is shown rising up behind the Takht, though the only hints of the two tombs he describes are a grotto and a staircase, which are not connected. In the foreground are four male figures, evidently meant to be Persians, two small trees, and a single broken column. Above the image of the Takht are two lines of cuneiform. Gemelli Careri states that these are “two Lines of twelve there are in the Inscription on the Pilaster of the first Floor.” This statement is roughly correct, in the sense that these lines are obviously copied from the 1677 edition of Sir Thomas Herbert’s book *Some Years Travels into Divers Parts of Africa, and Asia the Great*.²⁴ In his text, Herbert makes it fairly clear the inscription is copied from the Gate of All Lands (where Gemelli Careri also remarked on the inscriptions); however, it is so poorly copied as to be indecipherable.

Fig. 2. Andreas Magliar (Italian, fl. 1690s). Perspective view of the Takht at Persepolis. From Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri, *Giro del mondo* (Naples: Giuseppe Roselli, 1699–1700), vol. 2, illustration after p. 260 (labeled fig. 1). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (2698-167).

Fig. 3. Andreas Magliar (Italian, fl. 1690s). Motifs from buildings and tombs at Persepolis. From Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri, *Giro del mondo* (Naples: Giuseppe Roselli, 1699–1700), vol. 2, illustration after p. 260 (labeled fig. 2). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (2698-167).

The second plate, focused on figures and motifs, is divided into three horizontal registers (fig. 3). At the top are several images purporting to be reliefs from the Takht and the tombs. Two are meant to be heroic encounters wherein a man wearing a long robe and a tall, flat cap fights an animal, in this case a lion and unicorn. These are reasonable approximations of a motif that occurs on doorways in several of the buildings at Persepolis, though the unicorn must actually be a bull or a horned griffin. To the left of these is a figure carrying two objects that are probably meant to be a towel and fly whisk; these are carried by the king's attendants in reliefs from the Palace of Darius and the Harem. The final image in the top register shows the king holding a bow. Before him is a semihuman figure, with horns on his head, hooves, and a curled tail. Behind this figure is a fire on a pedestal, and the entire scene is framed by two upright goat creatures whose hindquarters are replaced by a thin spiral. This must be a rendering of the main relief scene from the royal tombs, though it bears little resemblance to the actual reliefs, which show the king standing before a fire with a male figure in a winged disk floating above it.

The middle register shows four relief panels, this time arranged variously on a flat surface along with a single column and a freestanding doorway covered in what appears to be cuneiform, all against a hilly backdrop. Two of the panels are upright. One shows the king followed by two attendants carrying a parasol and fly whisk (though holding them ineffectually). The other shows the king enthroned in front of two cylindrical objects that defy identification. Both of these motifs appear in some form at Persepolis, though they are quite loosely interpreted. The remaining two panels are flat on the ground and feature indistinct images. The bottom register depicts a cliff face with three arched grottoes cut into it. These grottoes have human figures in them, likely meant to be statues, but their forms are quite indistinct. In front of the cliff is a pool of water, with a tree in the foreground. Though it bears little resemblance to any extant remains, this cliff face may be one of the tombs at Kuh-e Rahmat, as there does not seem to be any better match for this image.

The first engraving is fairly clearly based on Gemelli Careri's textual description rather than on any drawings he may have made at the site, since the structures and features of the Takht at Persepolis that he describes most clearly are the easiest to identify in his "plan." As noted earlier, this image is taken almost directly from André Daulier Deslandes's *Les beautez de la Perse; ou, la description de ce qu'il y a de plus curieux dans ce Royaume*, published in 1673. The two images correspond almost exactly, with the only differences being some proportions and minor details, and higher mountains in the background of Gemelli Careri's plate. This practice of borrowing illustrations from other books was not uncommon in the seventeenth century, however. For example, William Marshall's engravings of Persepolis that were published in the 1634 and 1638 editions of Sir Thomas Herbert's *Some Years Travels into Divers Parts of Africa, and Asia the Great* were subsequently copied in the 1658 edition of Johann Albrecht von Mandelslo's *Morgenländische Reyse-Beschreibung* (as well as in subsequent editions) and in the 1663 French edition of Pietro della Valle's *Viaggi*.²⁵ Moreover, both Marshall's engravings and those of

Wenceslaus Hollar that first appeared in the 1665 edition of Herbert's book were based only on Herbert's text, not on drawings made on site. Thus, while Gemelli Careri's presentation of his plates as being his own work seems disingenuous to the modern reader, their production was in keeping with the practices of his day.

Despite its ambiguities, Gemelli Careri's description of Persepolis is a reasonable match to the extant remains at the site. That he identified specific structures and did not simply borrow descriptions from earlier works indicates that he did indeed visit the site himself. In fact, his description is considerably more accurate than that of Herbert, and differs in content and structure from that of de Silva Figueroa.²⁶ It follows Thévenot's account to a certain extent but improves on its precision. That said, accounts published in the early eighteenth century, especially those of Jean Chardin (1711), Engelbert Kaempfer (1712), and Cornelis de Bruijn (1714), still further improved on his work.²⁷

Gemelli Careri wrote at a time when the genres of fiction, ethnography, and travelogue were not clearly distinguished from one another, and it is likely that his literary outlook affected his understanding and presentation of the ruins of Persepolis. At the same time, the accuracies in his account point to a genuine interest in objective description. In this respect, his work straddles the more imaginative approaches of earlier travel writers and the more scientific approaches of subsequent ones.²⁸ Gemelli Careri is now largely forgotten in the modern study of Achaemenid historiography, and his account adds relatively little to our present-day knowledge of the site itself. But his visit to Persepolis is nevertheless a noteworthy episode in the modern study of ancient Persia, and it provides interesting insight into his methods and process as a writer and traveler.

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1. For the life, career, and travels of Gemelli Careri, see Angela Maccarrone Amuso, *Gianfrancesco Gemelli-Careri: l'Ulisse del XVII secolo* (Rome: Gangemi, 2000); and Piero Doria, "Gemelli Careri, Giovanni Francesco," in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1999), 53:42–45.

2. Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri, *Giro del mondo*, 6 vols. (Naples: Giuseppe Roselli, 1699–1700). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, acc. no. 2698-167. All quotations are drawn from the English translation published in Awnsham Churchill and John Churchill, eds., *A Collection of Voyages and Travels, Some Now First Printed from Original Manuscripts, Others Translated out of Foreign Languages, and Now First Publish'd in English, to which Are Added Some Few that Have Formerly Appear'd in English, but Do Now for Their Excellency and Scarceness Deserve to Be Reprinted* (London: Awnsham & Churchill, 1704), 4:1–606 (at 170–75).

3. For the ancient history of Persepolis and the buildings constructed there, see Erich F. Schmidt, *Persepolis*, vol. 1, *Structures, Reliefs, Inscriptions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); Margaret Cool Root, *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art: Essays on the Formation of an Iconography of Empire* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979), 76–110; and Ali Mousavi, *Persepolis: Discovery and Afterlife of a World Wonder* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2012), 9–72.

4. Mousavi, *Persepolis*, 73–94; Lindsay Allen, “‘Chilminar olim Persepolis’: European Reception of a Persian Ruin,” in *Persian Responses: Political and Cultural Interaction with(in) the Achaemenid Empire*, ed. Christopher Tuplin (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2007), 313–42 (at 316–20).
5. His account of this visit appears in Gemelli Careri, *Giro del mondo*, 2:241–63; it is also excerpted in Antonio Invernizzi, ed., *Il genio vagante: Babilonia, Ctesifonte, Persepoli in racconti di viaggio e testimonianze dei secoli XII–XVIII* (Alessandria: Edizione dell’Orso, 2005), 388–91.
6. Figueroa’s and Thévenot’s accounts of Persepolis are excerpted in Invernizzi, *Genio vagante*, 206–13 (Figueroa), 288–92 (Thévenot).
7. Doria, “Gemelli Careri,” 44.
8. André Daulier Deslandes, *Les beautés de la Perse; ou, la description de ce qu’il y a de plus curieux dans ce Royaume* (Paris: Gervais Clouzier, 1673), plate following p. 60; and Invernizzi, *Genio vagante*, fig. 61. For Daulier Deslandes, see Anne Kroell, “Daulier Deslandes,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 7.2, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1994), 127–28.
9. Gemelli Careri, *Giro del mondo*, 2:242–45 (*Collection of Voyages and Travels*, 4:170–71).
10. Gemelli Careri, *Giro del mondo*, 2:243–44 (*Collection of Voyages and Travels*, 4:170).
11. Translations in Amélie Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period* (London: Routledge, 2007), 483, 486–89.
12. Gemelli Careri, *Giro del mondo*, 2:245–47 (*Collection of Voyages and Travels*, 4:171).
13. Herodotus, *Histories* 1.131.2.
14. Gemelli Careri, *Giro del mondo*, 2:248–51 (*Collection of Voyages and Travels*, 4:171–72).
15. Gemelli Careri, *Giro del mondo*, 2:251–52 (*Collection of Voyages and Travels*, 4:172).
16. See Ernst Herzfeld, *Iran in the Ancient East: Archaeological Studies Presented in the Lowell Lectures at Boston* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), pl. 47.
17. Gemelli Careri, *Giro del mondo*, 2:252–53 (*Collection of Voyages and Travels*, 4:172).
18. Gemelli Careri, *Giro del mondo*, 2:253–54 (*Collection of Voyages and Travels*, 4:172–73). For these tombs, see Erich F. Schmidt, *Persepolis*, vol. 3, *The Royal Tombs and Other Monuments* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 99–107. The third tomb, usually identified as that of Darius III (r. 335–330 BCE), was never completed and is located approximately 500 meters south of the Takht. It is thus no surprise that it escaped Gemelli Careri’s notice.
19. The figure in the winged disk is usually understood to be Auramazda, the god referenced most prominently in Achaemenid royal inscriptions, but this interpretation remains subject to debate.
20. Gemelli Careri, *Giro del mondo*, 2:254–55 (*Collection of Voyages and Travels*, 4:173).
21. Gemelli Careri, *Giro del mondo*, 2:254–55 (*Collection of Voyages and Travels*, 4:173).
22. Diodorus Siculus, *Historical Library* 17.71.7.
23. Gemelli Careri, *Giro del mondo*, 2:260 (*Collection of Voyages and Travels*, 4:174).
24. Sir Thomas Herbert, *Some Years Travels into Divers Parts of Africa, and Asia the Great* (London: R. Everingham, 1677), 142; reprinted in Invernizzi, *Genio vagante*, fig. 72; see further Michael Vickers, “The Views of Persepolis by William Marshall and Wenceslaus Hollar in Sir Thomas Herbert’s *Travels*,” in *Through Travellers’ Eyes: European Travellers on the Iranian Monuments*, ed. Jan Willem Drijvers and Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 1991), 59–69 (at 65). Earlier editions of this book, published in 1634, 1638, and 1665, have slightly different titles.
25. References in Vickers, “Views of Persepolis,” 62.
26. It is interesting to note, however, that Herbert, *Some Years Travels* (1677), 143, also compared Persian garments to those of Venice.
27. Invernizzi, *Genio vagante*, 305–27 (Chardin), 365–75 (Kaempfer), 410–22 (de Bruijn); see Josef Wiesehöfer, “Engelbert Kaempfer und die achaimenidischen Stätten von Naqš-e Rostam und Persepolis,” in Drijvers and Sancisi-Weerdenburg, *Through Travellers’ Eyes*, 71–87; Jan Willem Drijvers,

“Cornelis de Bruijn and Gijsbert Cuper: A Skilled Artist and a Learned Discussion,” in Drijvers and Sancisi-Weerdenburg, *Through Travellers’ Eyes*, 89–107; and Pierre Briant, “The Discovery of Persepolis in the 18th Century: Accounts of Travelers and the ‘érudits de cabinet’ (a Contribution to the History of Achaemenid History),” in *The Art of Empire in Achaemenid Persia: Festschrift in Honor of Margaret Cool Root*, ed. Mark B. Garrison and Elspeth R. M. Dusing (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, forthcoming). Chardin and Kaempfer both visited Persepolis before Gemelli Careri (in 1674 and 1686, respectively), but published their accounts of it only after he did (Chardin first published an account of his Persian travels in 1686, but his description of Persepolis first appears only in the 1711 edition).

28. Stefania Buccini, “Coerenza metodologica nel *Giro del mondo* di Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri,” *Annali d’Italianistica* 14 (1996): 246–56.