

A VESSEL FROM IRAN IN WASHINGTON DC: DIGGING ARTIFACTS AND MODERN ARCHIVES AT THE SMITHSONIAN

July 29, 2011 Alex Nagel Day of Archaeology 2011, Museum Archaeology Ancient Near Eastern Art Department, Archaeological sites in Iran, archaeologist, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Assistant Curator, Caspian Sea, co-author, collector, DC, dealer, Ernst Herzfeld, Ezzat Negahban, Freer|Sackler Gallery, Georges Contenau, Gold Medal, Hurrians, Iranologists, Iraq, Islamic Republic of Iran, Nahavand, New York, Northwestern Iran, Roman Ghirshman, Sarah Johnson, Smithsonian, Smithsonian Institution in Washington, Smithsonian's Museum of Asian Art, Syria, Takako Hauge, Tehran, Victor Hauge, Washington, Washington DC



Many Greetings from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC!

Living in DC, there is an [active archaeology program](#) on the early history within the beltway with many exciting discoveries. What is visible for the hundreds of thousands who visit the [Smithsonian](#) every year for free, though, are artifacts from the past and present of many cultures around the world. Over the decades, the Smithsonian was also actively involved in scientific excavations (Think [Shanidar in Iraq](#) in the 1950s! Think Tell Jemneh! in the 1970s! Think the fantastic [Archaeology Conservation Program!](#)), and while being studied and researched upon, artifacts from around the world are on display to promote an understanding of responsibilities and shared cultural heritage.

In December 2010, I became Assistant Curator at the Smithsonian's Museum of Asian Art, the Freer|Sackler Gallery. Two weeks ago, we opened a small installation on Iron-Age ceramics [from the area south of the Caspian Sea in Northern Iran](#). As a curatorial intern in the Ancient Near Eastern Art Department, Sarah Johnson, co-author of this entry, who worked herself on an excavation in Syria in 2010, has helped to prepare the installation, and is currently doing research on the museum's collections. This little blurb on a well preserved vessel from Iran currently not on display (S1998.326), gives an idea on only one aspect of what we can do in a museum, and reminds us upon one aspect of archaeology, minutely and more detailed record keeping and publishing.

It is both ironic and fitting that a photograph, we only recently rediscovered in the archives of archaeologist and early Iran explorer [Ernst Herzfeld](#) (1879-1948) sheds light on vessel S1998.326. Thanks to an early fine pencil label "Tepe Giyan" written on the back of the photograph, the jar can now

placed with certainty to the site of [Tepe Giyan](#), a large archaeological mound in Northwestern Iran near the modern city of Nahavand.

The jar had entered the museum in 1998. It was purchased by Victor and Takako Hauge in a shop at a Bazaar in Tehran between 1962 and 1965. Interestingly, Herzfeld came by his first Tepe Giyan ceramics in nearly the same way. In his own words: “In 1926 I found, in a shop at Hamadan ... two little vases ... They had a *prehistoric air*, but the dealer did not know whence they came. Mere chance, a year later, led to the discovery of their provenance—Tepe Giyan near Nihawand—whence some more pieces were brought to me.” Just as Herzfeld used older excavation records to identify his vases, “mere chance” led us to discover this photograph of a vessel, acquired by the Hauges, in Herzfeld’s records a few weeks ago. The vessel and its connection to Herzfeld underline the important connection between archaeology, objects and archives in a museum setting. The gap in provenance for this vessel resulted from the separation of the vessel from the excavation photographs and a paucity of published materials on Herzfeld’s own work at Tepe Giyan and at other prehistoric sites.

The site of Tepe Giyan presented challenges from the start of excavations there. Herzfeld first became interested in the site after finds from Tepe Giyan appeared in the market. The French held a monopoly over excavations in Iran from 1895 to 1927, but in 1928 motivated by rampant looting occurring there, Herzfeld began hurried excavations at Tepe Giyan. In 1930, he mentions that excavations (he does not provide the name of the excavators, so one must assume it was local archaeologists) have left only one third of the hill standing. This article in 1930 remained his only published material on Tepe Giyan until the 1930s when he suggested in the preface of *Archaeological History of Iran* that he would complete a three volume work on prehistoric art in Iran. This work never appeared largely because of political reasons. In the 1930s, Herzfeld was increasingly shunned by his German colleagues due to the rise of Nazism, and as a result, he lost much of his German funding. His section on prehistoric art in *Iran in the Ancient East* (1941) remains his most comprehensive contribution to the study of Tepe Giyan and prehistoric ceramics. His emphasis on his exhaustive editing of the prehistoric section in the introduction to this book suggests that he had more to say on prehistoric Iran, which was unfortunately never published. Fortunately, the site was excavated in the early 1930s by a French team lead by Georges Contenau (1877-1964) and Roman Ghirshman (1895-1979), who later received a Freer Gold Medal for his accomplishments in Iranian archaeology. Most of what we know today about the early excavations at Tepe Giyan stems from the published excavation records of Contenau and Ghirshman.

While we can now place S1998.326 at the Tepe Giyan site, one of the many questions we may not be able to answer is how the vessel got to the Tehran Bazaar of the 1960s. Herzfeld often photographed and documented objects not from his own excavations so it is possible that he saw this object in Tehran or at a market of a neighboring town to the site. Evidence that he sold many of the seals found at Tepe Giyan and other prehistoric sites to a dealer in New York suggests the possibility that Herzfeld himself may have sold the jar. Difficult to fathom today, archaeologists often played the role of both the collector and the scholar in the early 20th century. The rediscovery of a single photograph is sometimes a testament to the benefits of the recording of artifacts in minute detail.