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Roberto Orazi

The Forty Columns Pavilion

Studies and Restoration Work in Isfahan, Iran



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2021

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FOREWORD

This volume contains detailed information collected by Roberto Orazi during his long stay in Iran (1968-1976). The Italian-Iranian program—both for restoration and training activities—in which Orazi participated won an Agha Khan Award for Architecture. Giuseppe Tucci, as President of IsMEO and with a skilled assistance from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was able to launch this important International Cooperation initiative and involve in it university lecturers and eminent specialists (Guglielmo De Angelis D'Ossat, Giuseppe Zander, Eugenio Galdieri, Mario Ferrante, Laura and Paolo Mora, Rosario Paone, etc.; Roberto Orazi explains all the details of the Project in his Preface).

As the author writes in his Preface, it is important that the information contained in this book, i.e. the analysis of Chehel Sotun's various construction phases and the numerous restoration interventions performed on it more than forty years ago, should be published. It is our duty, as ideal continuers of the Italian institution that collaborated with Iranian experts in the work on the monument, to ensure that future operators will be informed about the discoveries of the Italo-Iranian team and the details of their procedures—which are now preserved in secrecy inside the monument itself and which, in the absence of a publication similar to the present one, could be lost forever.

The circumstances that have delayed the printing of this volume are multiple, both historical and personal, including the events that caused the temporary suspension of cultural collaboration between Italy and Iran in the early 1980s, the fusion of IsMEO with the Italian Institute for African Studies into IsIAO (Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente), destined to live for just over 15 years before being dissolved by the Italian Government due to insufficient funding (2011-2012).

During this period Eugenio Galdieri, who had combined some of his own writings and Orazi's work on Chehel Sotun into a single collection of studies, tried without success to publish it, in continuation of the policy of dissemination and communication that Tucci's IsMEO had always pursued. The general principles, discoveries and technical solutions rapidly appeared, with funding from the Italian CNR, in the detailed reports published in IsMEO's scientific periodical East and West and in the monographs curated by the IsMEO Asian Excavation and Archaeological Research Centre in the "Reports and Memoirs" series, and the Conservation and Restoration Centre in the series entitled "Restorations."

Roberto Orazi, thanks to the Istituto di Scienze del Patrimonio Culturale (ISPC-CNR), was able to resume his preliminary studies, returning to Isfahan first in 1996, and then in 2003. Only a year ago, while looking through several “site notebooks” by him preserved with care together with a photograph album prepared long ago to present the architectural survey of the pavilion and the documentation of the many restoration interventions carried out, he decided to dedicate himself to reorganizing these records.

Without his long dedication, not only to the restoration work but also to the history of the monument and the history of the restoration itself, this book would never see the light of day and an important trait of modern restoration history in Iran would be lost for future generations.

*The still unpublished documentary mass that derives from IsMEO and IsIAO’s early works, through the Italian and Iranian scholars of the generations who have been working on it for several years now, it is a common heritage of Iran, Italy and the world, and the refounded ISMEO acknowledges its responsibility to make available to international scholars all its experiences and all the data that have remained unpublished so far. Some steps in this direction have already been taken (see e.g. Vidale, Lazzari, eds., *Lapis Lazuli Bead Making at Shahr-i Sokhta*, 2017; Kavosh, Vidale, Fazeli, Tappeh Graziani, *Sistan, Iran: Stratigraphy, Formation Processes and Chronology of a Suburban Site of Shahr-i Sokhta/Prehistoric Sistan 2*, 2019; Genito, ed., *Fieldnotes and Reports from Scerrato’s Excavations at Dahane-ye Gholaman*, forthcoming etc.), and much more will be made soon, a promise that ISMEO—through my person—is aware that can be made to friends of Iranian culture of all ages.*

ADRIANO V. ROSSI
President, ISMEO

PREFACE

This book has taken a long time to see the light. Nevertheless I think that it is important that the information it contains, which regards above all the monument's various construction phases and the numerous restoration interventions performed on it, should be published. It is our duty to ensure that one day when it is necessary to intervene again, future operators will be informed about our discoveries and the details of our procedures—which are now preserved in secrecy inside the monument and which, in the absence of this publication, could be lost forever.

The circumstances that have delayed the printing of this volume are both historical and personal. The former include the events that caused the sudden suspension of cultural collaboration between Italy and Iran (which had resulted in two archaeological missions, to Persepolis and Shahr-e Sokhtè, and one restoration campaign in Isfahan). Then came the closure of IsMEO (Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente), which became part of IsIAO (Istituto per l'Africa e l'Oriente), itself later terminated due to insufficient funding.

During this period Eugenio Galdieri, who had combined some of his own writings and my work on Chehéł Sotùn into a single collection of studies, tried without success to publish it, in continuation of the policy of diffusion and communication that IsMEO had always pursued. The general principles, discoveries and technical solutions rapidly appeared, with funding from the CNR, in the detailed reports published in the periodical *East and West* and in the monographs curated by the Asian Excavation and Archaeological Research Centre in the "Reports and Memoirs" series, and the Conservation and Restoration Centre in the series entitled "Restorations."

Time passed, and the drawings and discoveries from Chehéł Sotùn ended up taking second place to professional engagements and projects that developed in other countries (Yemen, Turkey, Sultanate of Oman etc.). However after a few years, thanks to the Istituto di Scienze del Patrimonio Culturale (ISPC-CNR), I was able to resume these studies, returning to Isfahan first in 1996—on the occasion of a visit aimed at re-examining and cataloguing the abundant excavation material preserved in the Jameh Mosque, and in 2003—on the occasion of a conference on adobe architecture held in Yazd, where the first international conference on this subject had been held in 1972.

Only a year ago, while looking through several "site notebooks" that I conserve with great care and a photograph album that I prepared long ago to present our

architectural survey of the pavilion and the documentation of the many restoration interventions carried out, I decided to dedicate myself to reorganizing this mass of records, with the warm encouragement of friends and colleagues to whom I had shown them.

I must say that taking up these site notes, writings, the drawings and photographs of this work, has carried me back to those wonderful years in which a group of Italian scholars, architects, technicians, craftsmen, assisted by Iranian scholars, architects, technicians and craftsmen, found themselves involved together in the task of studying, reinforcing and restoring the most important monuments in Isfahan. Starting with Ali Qapù, Chehél Sotùn and Hasht Behesht, then continuing with Maydan-e Shah, and lastly the Jameh Mosque. This work was, however, conducted without losing sight of other equally important architectural manifestations—Pir Bakran, the Natanz Caravanserai—and with specific studies and surveys which allowed us to understand and appreciate the huge abundance of Iranian cultural heritage.

Merit for the initiation and completion of this work (1964-1976)—which, for both the restoration and the contemporary training activities, won an Agha Khan Award for Architecture—undoubtedly belongs to Giuseppe Tucci, who as president of IsMEO and with assistance from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was able to launch an important International Cooperation initiative and involve university lecturers and eminent specialists. Among these were Guglielmo De Angelis D’Ossat, Giuseppe Zander, Eugenio Galdieri, Mario Ferrante, Laura and Paolo Mora, Rosario Paone, restorers Roberto Cerbino and Raimondo Boenni, technicians Giuseppe Piccone and Roberto Giua (lighting system for the monuments), site manager Augusto Miggiano, and many others who participated for periods of varying length.

During my own stay in Iran (1968-1976), initially continuous and later alternating with intervals of study in Italy, I had the opportunity to explore Safavid epoch construction techniques and discover intriguing architectural creations that often helped one to understand the traditions and social customs of the local culture better than anything else.

The desire to study and document the great Iranian artistic patrimony led me to discover and examine the imposing roof of the great *talar* of Chehél Sotùn (hidden by a beautiful painted wooden ceiling decorated with mirrors), to strengthen with iron structures the columns that were losing all their supporting function, to design new wooden gratings in keeping with the original design, to uncover the system of channels and water-jets that surrounded the building, and make function once more the fountain in the centre of the *talar*, a cool murmuring spray of water.

It was a profoundly formative experience, individual but also partly collective, which deeply marked not only my professional life, but also and above all inspired interest in acquiring knowledge of different culture which, to paraphrase Vita Sackville West, constitutes perhaps “the most personal of pleasures.”

ROBERTO ORAZI

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A publication that comes out after so long requires a long series of acknowledgements that, following a hypothetical chronological order, must start with Eugenio Galdieri. Thanks to his guidance and friendship I started the long adventure of restoration work in Iran, and the study and practice of the discipline of architectural restoration in general.

With his natural cheerfulness and pungent irony, Eugenio was able to convey his ability to approach the study of a monument with great genuine curiosity to determine its state of deterioration, its history and any removals or additions that had occurred over time. In addition to being an unforgettable friend he was also a great teacher: the works he left us are ample proof of this.

I am also most grateful to Giuseppe Zander for the valuable advice he gave during the preparation of my first publications on Safavid wooden gratings and the Maydan-e Shah renovation project—suggestions that in addition proved useful for subsequent writings, this one included.

I wish to thank as well my numerous colleagues, Roberto Cerbino (restorer of paintings), Rosario Paone (architect), Roberto Giua (illumination system) and Augusto Miggiano (site foreman), for the creation of a particularly united team that worked in complete harmony.

And a particular thank-you to Raimondo Boenni (restorer of paintings) with whom I shared unforgettable moments of work, study and leisure and a journey that would now be unrepeatable.

I would like to thank as well Massis Gharapetian, who came from the nearby Armenian community of New Julfa; during his collaboration with the IsMEO Mission and in particular while working at Chehél Sotùn he quickly learnt the Italian language, becoming highly proficient in a few years in the field of architectural drawing and design, which was rewarded by a prestigious scholarship to study Architecture at La Sapienza in Rome.

My grateful thanks for their care and meticulousness to Giovanna Cresciani and Elisa Fidenzi, who using computer techniques have brought back the initial sharpness to the relief drawings of the monument; the originals on transparent drawing film had been lost and only the blueprints remained.

Special thanks are due to Adriano Rossi, president of the new IsMEO, who considered it important to link this publication to the many that have preceded it and that testify to the long-standing collaboration between Iran and Italy on the protection and enhancement of Cultural Heritage.