

PILLOW OF AIR

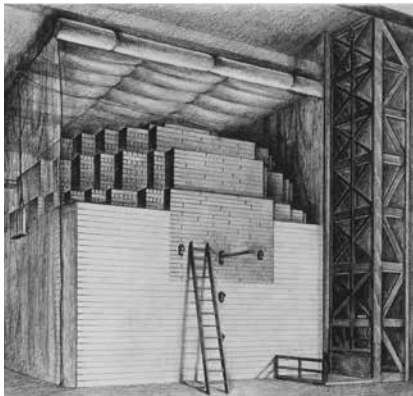
A MONTHLY AMBLE THROUGH THE VISUAL WORLD

by Lawrence Weschler



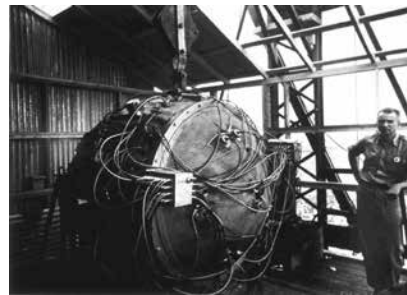
ATOMIC CUNEIFORM

One morning a few years back, I happened to be walking along South Ellis Avenue on the University of Chicago campus when I noticed a plaque marking the site where Enrico Fermi and Leó Szilárd and their colleagues achieved the world's first nuclear chain reaction, on December 2, 1942, right there inside what were then the squash courts, tucked under the bleachers of the university's Stagg Field. Drifting into a nearby building, I came upon a little commemorative display, including a drawing of the atomic pile itself, a remarkably makeshift-looking



The atomic pile.

assemblage of graphite blocks housing uranium pellets which bore an uncanny resemblance to some sort of Babylonian temple from the times of Nebuchadnezzar (or, anyway, Indiana Jones's approximation of same), and then, as well, a photograph of the Trinity device, direct descendant of that



The Trinity device.

Chicago pile whose detonation in the New Mexico desert a mere two and a half years later, just as the sun was rising on the morning of July 16, 1945, signaled the astonishing triumph of the Manhattan Project and of course plunged mankind into a portentously new era all its own. ("Now I am become death, destroyer of worlds," the project's leader, J. Robert Oppenheimer,

subsequently recalled thinking as he watched the mushroom cloud rising high into the blackened sky, famously invoking that harrowing line from the Hindu Bhagavad Gita.)

A few minutes later, and not a hundred yards farther along on my morning amble, I came upon the university's storied Oriental Institute, no mean pile itself, and wandered on in.



The Oriental Institute.

On the spur of the moment I inquired of the receptionist whether my old pal the eminent Assyriologist Matthew Stolper might be around in his attic office upstairs, and as it turned out he was.

I've written about Professor Stolper before. He's the fellow whose day (and night and weekend) job consists of methodically making his way, one instance at a time (and often for months at a time per instance), through the thousands upon thousands of Shredded Wheat-sized, chicken-scratch-festooned cuneiform clay tablets that make up the astonishing treasure trove that is the Perse-



A typical clay tablet.

polis Fortification Archive. Originally gathered following a major discovery by archaeologists sent out from the Rockefeller-financed Oriental Institute near what is now Shiraz, in southwestern Iran (the find, as it happens, having first been reported on March 4, 1933, the very day of the inauguration, back in America, of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who would go on to order the construction of the atom bomb in question, and just a week after the Reichstag fire, in Berlin, which Chancellor Hitler would use as his excuse for consolidating power, a situation whose horrible compounding consequences would come to form the rationale for Roosevelt's own eventual order), the haul would

turn out to offer a minutely detailed inventory of the inner workings of the imperial storehouses of the Achæmenid dynasts Darius and Xerxes (famed scourges, readers of Herodotus will recall, of the Attic Hellenes of the fifth century BCE). As such, any individual shard (all of which were presently transported on loan from the Iranian regime to the Oriental Institute in Chicago) might not prove that interesting in itself, though some, as Stolper never ceased delighting in relating, featured such delicious finds as tabulations on the amount of beer to be allocated to pregnant women during any given season, or the expense account of one of the Pony Express riders bringing back word of the imperial defeat at the Battle of Marathon. The true value of the trove, however, is the way that, taken as a whole, it affords an incredibly vivid sense of daily life as it was experienced at the heart of the vast Persian Empire in those days, and ever the more so with each new, painstakingly exacted translation. (Eighty years in, and the generations of successive Elamite and Aramaic language experts have still processed—which is to say cleaned, cataloged, translated, and published—only 2,100 of the well over 20,000 total tablets.) I was looking forward to hearing about the latest of Stolper's discoveries.

In the event, now that I'd made it up to his office, I found the good professor far from his normally ebullient self: indeed, he looked grimmer than I'd ever seen him, and with good reason, as now became evident. He went on to describe how the entire collection had suddenly and quite

improbably become entangled in a veritably Dickensian lawsuit, and it was far from clear that the archive as such was even going to survive.

The story, as he proceeded to relate it, was as follows. In 1997, five American tourists had been killed, and many others wounded, in a "terrorist" suitcase bombing of a Jerusalem shopping mall, an attack for which Hamas subsequently assumed responsibility. In 2001, in various US courts, the survivors of the attack and the families of the victims mounted a series of suits for damages against Hamas and the organization's alleged sponsors in Iran (Iran didn't even bother to show up for the trial), and the court presently awarded the plaintiffs almost \$400 million in damages in one case, and \$2.6 billion in another. In 2004, lawyers for the plaintiffs began suing a whole range of American institutions in order to acquire objects currently being held on behalf of various Iranian entities (as was the case with the entire Persepolis Fortification Archive, which had always been destined for return to Iran following completion of that epic labor of translation and codification) so that the plaintiffs could in turn break up the resultant proceeds and sell them at auction in order to recoup their damages.

Stolper was appalled at this development. Setting aside the looming catastrophic prospect of breaking up a collection each of whose elements might be likened to a single bone, or even just a shard of bone, in what might otherwise someday come to be understood as an entire dinosaur skeleton, or indeed group

of skeletons, the whole notion of using cultural artifacts on temporary international loan in this manner, as chess pieces in arcane politicized legal battles, foretold dismal consequences for the fate of global scholarship as a whole. For that matter, the jig was going to be up with regards to the Persepolis Archive, no matter what. Even if, as was hoped, on the far side of years and years of litigation yet to come, the final decision ended up favoring the institute (and other such entities around the country), the Iranians had now become sensitized to the peculiarities, shall we say, of the American legal system, and the consequent precariousness of their own property rights in America, and were going to be demanding the earliest possible return of these remarkable instances of their cultural patrimony, such that the entire decades-long effort at interpreting this extraordinary horde had now itself come into dire jeopardy.

Why, I asked, couldn't they just photograph all the untranslated tablets before either surrendering them to the plaintiffs or else sending them back to Iran?

At which point a smile broke over Stolper's face for the first time that morning, the usual gleam returning to his eyes. "It's not as simple as you would think," he explained. "First you have to establish all sorts of things about each object, where they fit within the horde as a whole, then you have to clean and catalog them before you start trying to interpret their meaning, and in order to do that kind of interpretation, you

really need to be able to hold the object in your hand, shift it under the light so as to be able to catch the incredibly subtle details, which become visible only when you hold it this way or that. Individual photographs won't do the job. But"—and now his smile grew wider still—"well, follow me. I think we've come up with a solution for that problem."

We proceeded downstairs, negotiating a labyrinth of halls, to a little warren at the far back of the other side of the museum. He opened the door, and there, tucked in a corner, was the bomb from the Trinity explosion:



The PTM dome at the Oriental Institute.

Well, OK, not that very bomb (presumably that one had been blasted to smithereens back on that 1945 morning), and not even a bomb at all, of course, but something that looked damn like the Trinity device, a black hemisphere all wrapped in nodes and wires. Only this one had a circular hole in its side and inside, on

a little platform, was one of those clay cuneiform tablets.

The whole thing, known as the Polynomial Texture Mapping Dome (PTM), was wired to a nearby computer, and Stolper now proceeded to explain that the thirty-two nodes contained flash devices wired to go off in rapid-fire sequence, thereby allowing cameras to record first one side of the tablet, then (turn it over) the other side, in such a way that the computer would be able to stitch the resultant images into a 3-D-like approximation of the object, one that any researcher anywhere in the world could then manipulate on their own computer screen, zooming in or out, angling the image or its light source to the left or the right, whatever.

It occurred to me that the nodes and wires wrapped around the Oriental Institute device had functions not unlike those wound around its Trinity forebear, the latter, too, having consisted of an astonishment of lens-like contours and a meticulously timed sequence of mini explosions designed to concentrate the requisite energy onto that tablet of fissile material lodged at the heart of the device, enough to set off a far-grandder version of the sort of atomic chain reaction that had first been glimpsed, two and a half years earlier, in that squash court just around the corner from this very institute.

Nor was I oblivious to the fact that the prospect of the Iranian regime's inching toward a culmination of its own alleged Manhattan Project seemed to be very much on people's minds these days (notwithstanding the fact that the only state in the

region known to have any actual nuclear weapons was Israel: talk about a balance of terror).

Anyway, the reason all this comes back to me just now is that I received word the other day that Professor Stolper is retiring from his aerie high atop the Oriental Institute (though he will stay engaged in the Persepolis documentation project). I decided to call him up, see how things were going, and he informed me that though the legal case itself continues to stagger endlessly along,

the photo-imaging team has managed to record copies of more than 4,700 of the remaining tablets (copies that even you can access: just go to *inscriptifact.com*, download the requisite app, and start cracking!).

Truly, a lemon-laced scholarly ambrosia, wrested from the bitter lemons of judicial misprision. ★

IMAGES (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE): PAGE 64: Stagg Field reactor drawing and Trinity device images are courtesy of the United States Department of Energy. Oriental Institute photo © 2010 by Daniel Slather, danielslather.com. PAGE 65: Tablet photo courtesy of the Persepolis Fortification Archive Project at the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago. PAGE 66: Image courtesy of the Persepolis Fortification Archive Project at the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago. THIS PAGE: Photo by Lloyd DeGrane, courtesy of the University of Chicago.



The good professor, engoggled and entranced.

Daniel Handler, continued from page 63

the doomy comedown. Gamelin embarks on his career with a fierce enthusiasm, and there's a bit of a vicarious thrill, since you can't help imagining, as fiercely as our hero, just whom you might choose if you got to march anyone you wanted to the guillotine. Despite France's finger-wagging—I'm speaking of the author here, not the country—I got the sense that the author felt a certain relish for Gamelin's dirty dealings and double-crossings, which first make him an object of respect and then of suspicion.

Meanwhile, though, Gamelin isn't just running his enemies through the meat grinder of the revolution. He's also picking up women:

You embroider skillfully, citizeness, but, if you wish me to speak frankly, the pattern you've made isn't simple enough or plain enough; it's inflated by the affected taste which lasted too long in France in the art of dress, furniture and wainscoting; all these clusters and garlands recall that pitiful, paltry style everybody favoured under the tyranny.

As with rock musicians, what might sound to some like the ravings of a paranoid adolescent is hot and alluring to the ears of certain young women, and soon enough Élodie the seamstress falls more or less into Gamelin's arms. The author seems to offer Gamelin's romantic entanglement in

order to introduce the notion that a man can be tyrannical and human at the same time, but neither the hero's nor his creator's heart is really in it; in the end, between the brashness of Gamelin and the other historical incidents that get crammed into this short book, the notion reads more along the lines of the idea that a man can be tyrannical and horny at the same time, which creates less of a dual tension than France might like.

And, also, than France might like. Soon enough the republic has no taste for Gamelin, and the hero's sputtering and panicked justifications help along his fate, which comes at him from above, with his head perched above a basket. I was grateful for the novel's brevity, as the predictable plot and fist-pounding dialogue would have become tiresome over a long work. For a short bout, however—as it must have been back in the day—the blood-splattery thrill of giving sway to one's most fanatical fantasies is quite the spectacle to behold at a distance. Up close, less so. The author is so intent on Gamelin's ideas, and their inevitable gruesome consequences, that Gamelin himself is little more than the sum of all his zealous speeches. In the end, I closed *The Gods Will Have Blood* with a vivid picture of the Reign of Terror, but my picture of the hero was a little vague. He was just a guy with a guillotine, maybe dressed in a peasant blouse. You know, like that guy in the old movie or book or whatever. I think his name was Anatole France. ★