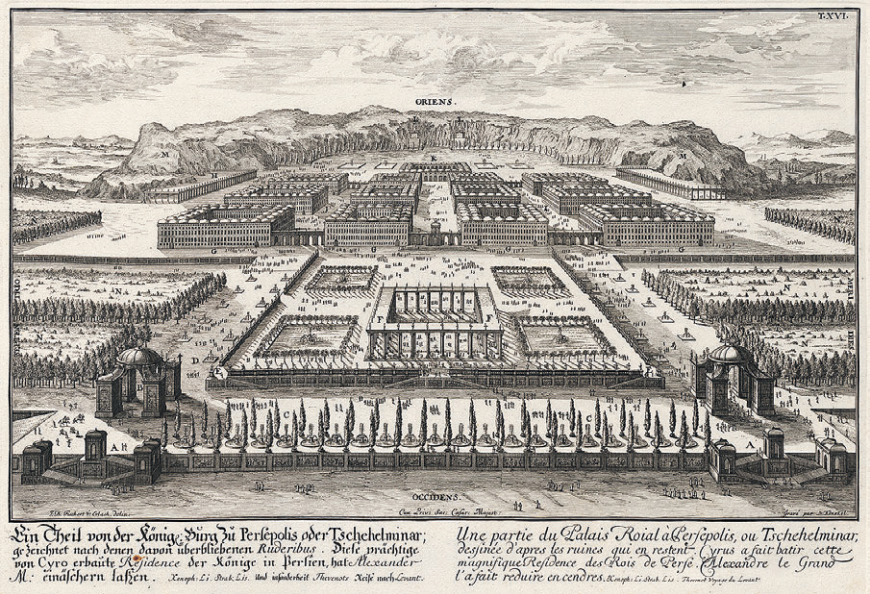


Johann Fischer von Erlach, the Mediterranean and Persepolis



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¹ Ein Theil von der Könige Burg zu Persepolis oder Tschehelminar / Une partie du Palais Royal à Persepolis, ou Tschehelminar, plate XVI of the manuscript *Entwurf* from 1712. Sammlung von Handschriften und alten Drucken, Cod. 10791 HAN MAG, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.

Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach (1656–1723) is known as one of the most prominent representatives of the European Baroque. His architectural work had a significant impact on the identity of imperial Vienna. However, Fischer von Erlach is also well-known for the *Entwurf einer historischen Architectur*. First published in 1721, the *Entwurf* consists of five books containing plates and descriptions in German and French. The scholarly literature on the *Entwurf* offers two major interpretations. The first sees it as a repertoire of architectural examples to be perused by amateurs, while the second sees it as a history of architecture, more appealing to antiquarians, and the first of its kind in its universal reach. Arguably, Fischer himself intended the *Entwurf* to be seen as the former, stating in the preface that he wanted to

provide specimens of every sort of architecture to art amateurs, and new sources of inventions to those who are devoted to this activity, rather than instruct the savants. ... This is but a sketch; a show of different specimens of architecture. Nothing more should be seen in it.

The first book of the *Entwurf*, focusing on “some buildings of ancient Jewish, Egyptian, Syrian, Persian and Greek architecture”, includes the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the Temple of Solomon and a few other monuments. The second book highlights Roman buildings, while the third book features “Arab”, “Turkish” and “modern Persian” structures, as well as buildings and landscapes from China and Siam. Then the *Entwurf* presents the buildings designed by Fischer himself, before concluding with a collection of vases in the fifth book. The design and content of the *Entwurf* amply allows for the “historical” interpretation which has dominated scholarly literature since the end of the nineteenth century. Recently, Monica Preti and Marco Folin instead gave new strength to the “collection” perspective, emphasizing the lack of coherence and improvised character of the *Entwurf*, linking it to historical atlases and “exotic geography” rather than to antiquarian scholarship or art history.

In this article, I will try to uncover the historiographical potential embedded in the very looseness and fragility of the *Entwurf* as a repertoire of architectural specimens, by focusing on some of its most understudied components: the map of the Mediterranean and the “Persian” plates included in the first book.

Fischer began working on the *Entwurf* around 1704. The National Library of Zagreb contains many of the preparatory drawings, which were engraved around 1712. A manuscript version of the work was then presented to Charles VI, the newly crowned Habsburg emperor, as a gift. The title page attributed the “short descriptions in German and French” to Stockholm-born court antiquarian Carl Gustaf Heraeus (1671–1725), but there is much debate about his actual involvement in the project. However, the connection between architectural practices and antiquarian knowledge was common in the European visualization of antiquity: even the most imaginative reconstructions often required a reference to written or material documents.

This connection was at play in the case of Persia too. In particular, the ruins of Persepolis had been regularly visited by European travellers since the early seventeenth century and attracted the attention of learned milieus such as the Royal Society of London and the scholarly circle of Amsterdam politician and polymath Nicolaas Witsen. Over the course of several decades, as qualitatively different visual descriptions accumulated in printed accounts, access to the Persian antiquities was provided by a diverse range of interconnected printed materials, with or without the mediation of antiquarian milieus. Fischer’s attention to them can therefore be interpreted as participation in a widespread and even “fashionable” trend, rather than as an exceptional fact.

The high cultural status of Persian antiquities in early-eighteenth-century Europe may be the primary reason for Fischer’s inclusion of them in the first book of the *Entwurf* and in the “general chart meant to mark the position of each of the buildings contained” therein (*Fig. 2*). At first glance, the *Allgemeine Landkarte / Carte generale* resembles a typical map of the eastern Mediterranean, reprising a long-established format in the European cartographic tradition of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Some specific features stand out, however. The first is the variation on the conventional cartographic device of miniature city views enclosed in square frames and distributed along the edges of the map. Fischer instead used this thumbnail device to display monuments. Each box is placed near the supposed original location of the monument, while the captions are given in the legend set out in the lower left corner of the map. The *Landcarte* thus gave a cartographic and miniaturized visualization of the iconographic programme reproduced in the plates included in the 1712 manuscript version of the first book of the *Entwurf*.

Another striking feature of this map is its longitudinal span, extending to the Iranian plateau. Here, the easternmost thumbnail represents the royal palace of Cyrus. Cyrus was one of the few historical figures to play a pivotal role in both sacred and profane history as Europeans understood it. Not only did he liberate the Jews from their Babylonian captivity, but he was also the good prince par excellence in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, a centrepiece of *specula principum* literature well into the early modern era. While the inclusion of Persia in this "cultural geography" of the ancient Mediterranean presented the viewer with an expansive depiction of art and architecture in antiquity, it may also have guided Fischer's selection of a cartographic blueprint for his map.

Preti and Folin recently argued that Fischer repurposed the map of the Mediterranean included in the first volume of Chatelain's *Atlas historique*, published in Amsterdam in 1705. While the resemblance between the two maps is striking, the framing of Fischer's map may also have been indebted to European cartographic representations of the Ottoman Empire. George Kunoth suggested that Fischer's map derived from the *Atlas nouveau* published by Alexis-Hubert Jaillot in 1692. However, any map of the Ottoman Empire could have served as a blueprint for the architect's work, from the Hondius editions of Mercator's maps to those of Joan Blaeu.

Thus, a cartographically trained eye may have recognized the underlying blueprint when looking at Fischer's map. While it is impossible to know for sure what the viewers' reactions may have been, we can nevertheless ask ourselves what complex temporal,

geographical and cultural intersections were evoked by this visual palimpsest. In fact, whether we see the *Entwurf* as a collection of loosely connected sights or as a “history of architecture”, for the European learned elites the content of the first book was very much part and parcel of a shared cultural legacy. The very role of the plates as “sources of invention” allowed readers to establish connections between the past and the present as they went through them. Furthermore, while the novelty of Fischer’s operation was the superimposition of an architectural subject over a map of the eastern Mediterranean, this case of visual contamination was not unique. Chatelain himself was able to map the military expeditions of Alexander the Great onto the eastern portion of his map, just as Nicolas Sanson had done for “sacred geography”.

Using a chart of the Ottoman Empire to lay before European eyes such a temporally loaded landscape from the heart of the Habsburg dominions may have been seen as an attempt to shift a present move to appropriate space back into a foundational past. On the other hand, considering the *Entwurf*’s appreciation of Ottoman architecture, the use of the “Ottoman” map for the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World could be troubling, since it could have reminded viewers that those lands were now the abode of a powerful polity whose eventual demise – even after the humiliating Treaty of Karlowitz (1699) – was all but certain. However, the framing of Fischer’s *Landkarte* is best seen as part of a constellation of different cartographical visualizations of both sacred and profane history centred around the eastern Mediterranean. Arguably, such a context provided for historical interferences and contaminations more than for linear and clear-cut narratives.

This point is further illustrated by the two “ancient Persian” plates in the first book of the *Entwurf*. In the manuscript from 1712, Fischer included a depiction of the royal palace of Cyrus that he had drawn (*Fig. 1*), along with a lengthy textual description which drew on evidence from Greek and Latin authors as well as eye-witness accounts from travellers in order to support the architectural reconstruction.

Likewise, Fischer did his best to incorporate architectural elements supported by travel reports in his Persepolitan fantasy. However, the architect gave the complex a markedly “orientalized” appearance by shaping the roof of many of its building as clusters of onion-shaped domes. This did not necessarily entail a pejorative view of the monuments on Fischer and/or his readers’ part, if we follow Kunoth’s hypothesis that the accounts of Persepolis had played a significant role in Fischer’s original projects for the Palace of Schönbrunn. In fact, around 1712, Fischer viewed Chehelmenar (one of Persepolis’s modern Persian names) as the royal palace of Cyrus. It may have seemed appropriate for Fischer to present the newly appointed emperor with a view of the marvellous palace of one of history’s most highly regarded princes.

This beautiful plate was replaced with another in the first printed edition of the *Entwurf*, published in 1721. Instead of featuring Cyrus’s royal palace, the new plate depicted two rock-cut tombs (*Fig. 3*). While the dating of the preparatory drawing is uncertain, it is likely that this change occurred after 1712, since the engraving was directly derived from plates LXVII and LXVIII of Jean Chardin’s *Voyages en Perse*, published in Amsterdam in 1711.

What can we infer from this substitution? For one thing, it matches the historiographical narrative of antiquarianism as an intellectual force driven by empirical evidence. Fischer probably preferred to have a “real” visualization of an ancient monument instead of a fanciful reconstruction, however laden with aesthetic and political values the latter may have been. However, it also reinforces the idea of accumulated knowledge as a resistant force, since the *Landkarte* still reproduced the plate of Cyrus’s palace in the thumbnails. This was most likely because it was not practical to redesign or engrave the plate anew for such a small detail. At the same time, the lengthy explanatory text had been removed and the plate’s new caption made two interpretive shifts.

After the simplicity of the pyramids of Egypt, in no other place does posterity find remains of more ancient

architecture than in these mausoleums. For more than 3,000 years they have borne witness to the arts and to the pagan cult of the ancient Persians. Their true representation dispenses us from a more detailed description. ... [the letter B in the picture on the right indicates] columns of a strange order, similar to those of the temple of Tschehelminar [Chehelmenar].
Figuroa, Herbert, de la Valle, Thevenot, the chev.
Chardin mention this building.

The first interpretive shift was chronological. In the 1712 version, the reader was left assuming that the complex dated from five to six centuries before Christ was born, as Persepolis was associated with Cyrus. However, the 3,000 years of the 1721 version pushed the construction of the complex much further back in time, positioning it right after the pyramids and before the Temple of Solomon (whose foundation Fischer calculated at around 1,000 years before Christ). The foundational role played by the Temple of Solomon in the development of architecture was confirmed by the descriptive text attached to the corresponding plates. However, the ancient Persian art to which the tombs bore witness could now claim a greater antiquity than the temple, thus constituting an alternative pole of achievement which deserved a place in the *Entwurf* while not playing an explicit role in the ancient history of architecture.

The other interpretive shift is functional. While the caption of the 1712 plate explicitly defined Chehelmenar as the ruins of a royal palace, in 1721 the same site is connected to a temple and, moreover, to the pagan cult of the ancient Persians. The combination of the religious function of the complex and the early chronology attributed to the tombs points to the specific interpretation provided by Chardin. The traveller had argued that Chehelmenar was a more than 3,000-year-old temple, by drawing on the Persian historiographical and poetical tradition that viewed Chehelmenar as the ancient abode of the first mythical kings of Persia, the Pishdadians. His description of the ruins overflows with references to

King Jamshid and to the common Persian, starkly religious definition of these antiquities as *bot-khané*, “houses of idols”. We may argue that the shift towards empiricism witnessed in the substitution of the plates also allowed for and even legitimized the introduction to the *Entwurff* of a bit of “alien wisdom”, as Arnaldo Momigliano would have called it.

In conclusion, Fischer’s map of the ancient Mediterranean and his “Persepolitan” plates reveal the instability and flexibility of the historical outlines of artistic development – and of the very notion of antiquity – that could derive from collections of architectural examples. Before the Greek-centric representations of art history became dominant in the late eighteenth century, there was a period of experimentation which allows us to apply the concept of “inclusive Eurocentrism” – proposed by Jürgen Osterhammel for eighteenth-century culture at large – to the domain of art history. The mobile and tentative nature of these experimentations, as seen in the *Entwurff*, is demonstrated even more clearly by the abrupt shift in the “Persepolitan” plates. While this allowed for a broader perspective and the percolation of “alien wisdom”, it also meant inherent fragility. Eventually, these extra-European connections would break and be rearranged in more hierarchical patterns, ultimately failing to translate into an inclusive history of art and architecture.

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