

## Rationale and research context

The network is located in Achaemenid Studies, a discipline whose focus is a state that ruled for two centuries over diverse communities (from the Aegean to Central Asia) to which it spoke with a flexible attention to local conditions combined with a strong central apparatus of control and extraction. The extent and cultural complexity of this empire (the largest pre-Roman state-formation in Europe/Western Asia) mean that understanding its history inescapably involves archaeology, visual arts, epigraphy, papyrology, linguistics and literary interpretation, and crosses major disciplinary boundaries, notably between Greco-Roman and Near Eastern studies.

The development of Achaemenid Studies in the last three decades has throughout been characterised by networks (Achaemenid History Workshop; Association pour la recherche sur la Syrie-Palestine à l'époque perse [Paris]; Réseau internationale d'études et de recherches achéménides [Paris]), major research projects (e.g. Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium [Vienna], Persepolis Fortification Archive Project [Chicago]), cross-disciplinary colloquia, and multi-participant work on particular texts, while Pierre Briant's *Histoire de l'empire perse* (1996; English edition 2002) recently provided a comprehensive reference point and a coherent vision of how the empire worked.

The network inhabits this framework of academic endeavour but has two distinctive features. (1) Previous networks and projects have been located in continental Europe or North America. This network will create a community of UK-based Achaemenid historians which will exploit existing expertise, stimulate further engagement with the discipline in UK HEIs and open up possibilities for future projects. (2) The network's immediate focus is the correspondence of Aršama (satrap of Egypt) – 34 documents (33 in Aramaic, one in Egyptian demotic) from, to or about Aršama, of which 26 form a single archive from an unknown Egyptian site, seven come from Elephantine and one from Saqqara. This corpus is not only largely conserved in the UK but also a pressing candidate for intensive study. Although the texts have been edited to modern palaeographical and philological standards and are often adduced individually by historians, they have never received the systematic investigation and commentary merited by documents personally linked to the governor of the empire's second richest province. Recent advances in knowledge of documentary sources from other imperial regions (Levant, Babylonia, Persia, Bactria) and Egypt's prime importance within the empire make it imperative to rectify this situation. Study of the material will offer opportunities for fruitful interaction with *Mechanisms of Communication in an Ancient Empire*

(AHRC-funded London project on Neo-Assyrian royal correspondence) and *Imperium and Officium* (multi-period Vienna project on ancient imperial bureaucracies), with both of which it dovetails very neatly. In a wider perspective, properly informed understanding of *any* aspect of Iranian history has cultural and intellectual resonances that extend beyond the purely academic.

### **Aims and objectives**

The **aim** is to draw scholars with varied stakes in study of the Achaemenid Empire into a conscious academic network appropriate to immediate and future research activities. The Aršam correspondence is ideal for this. It is a compact corpus from a specific environment (late fifth-century Egypt) that can be positioned within the politico-military narrative of Achaemenid history. It is associated with a high official known from other Greek and Near Eastern sources: this and the letters' contents immediately link it to other parts of Egypt and of the empire, while the documents as such invite comparison and contrast with many other bodies of texts. The archive is a perfect *entrée* to Achaemenid Studies and encapsulates much of its interdisciplinary diversity.

The **objectives** are linguistic, textual, historical and pedagogic.

- Close study of the archive (originals and edited text) and parallel material by historians with some training in Achaemenid Aramaic will illuminate the palaeography, philology and linguistics of the documents, leading to better appreciation of a bureaucratic rhetoric that was open to Iranian, Egyptian and Semitic culturo-linguistic influences.
- The archive offers a vivid snapshot of social, economic, cultural, organisational and political aspects of the empire as lived by a member of the Achaemenid elite and his entourage. These include: accountancy-culture, land-holding, satrapal remuneration, corvée labour, cross-regional ethnic movement, storage and disbursement of resources for state use, military systems, long-distance travel, boat-building, the employment of skilled craftsmen, ideologically-driven iconography, religious language and belief. Examination of such topics in the light of improved awareness of comparable data from other well-defined documentary contexts and in a fully interdisciplinary context will promote better understanding of the Egyptian satrapy and the content, manner and limits of provincial government in the Achaemenid empire.

- Full participation in network activities will contribute to an optional paper for Oxford MA (Ancient History) candidates. Some will proceed to doctoral research in Achaemenid Studies in Oxford or elsewhere; and those who elect to work in other areas will gain from the broadened perspective created by detailed engagement (including linguistic) with non-Greco-Roman material. Either way study and teaching of ancient history in UK HEIs will benefit in the long term.