

Bisotun (Iran)

No 1222

1. BASIC DATA

State Party: Islamic Republic of Iran

Name of property: Bisotun

Location: Province of Kermanshah

Date received by the World Heritage Centre: 28 January 2005

Included in the Tentative List: 22 May 1997

International Assistance from the World Heritage Fund for preparing the nomination No

Category of property:

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is an archaeological site.

Brief description:

The monument of Bisotun is located along the ancient trade route linking the Iranian high plateau with Mesopotamia. The site has remains from the prehistoric times to the Median, Achaemenid, Sassanian, and Ilkhanid periods. The principal monument is the bas-relief and cuneiform inscription ordered by Darius I The Great in 521 BC. The monument is in a strategic position some 100m above ground on the rock surface of a sacred mountain. The message in three languages declares the justification for his taking the rule for the Persian Empire and punishing the rebels.

2. ACTIONS

Background: This is a new nomination. A revised nomination sent by the State Party has been received on 2 February 2006.

Date of the Technical Evaluation Mission: 27 September-1st October 2005

Dates of request for additional information and of receipt from State Party: ICOMOS has sent a letter to the State Party on 30 January 2006 and the State Party has provided information on 28 February 2006.

Consultations: ICOMOS has consulted its International Scientific Committee on Archaeological Heritage Management.

Literature: The Bisotun monument is referred to in numerous works on ancient Iran, e.g. by H.C. Rawlinson (1846-47), A.V. Jackson (1903), W. Kleiss (1970), R. Schmitt (Encyclopedia Iranica); E. Herzfeld, *Iran in the Ancient East* (London, 1941); R. Ghishman, *Perse – Proto-Iraniens, Mèdes, Achéménides* (Paris, 1963).

Date of ICOMOS approval of this report: 10 April 2006

3. THE PROPERTY

Description

The nominated site is located on the main trade route leading from Kurdistan and the Mesopotamian region to the Iranian Central Plateau. It is some 30km north-east of the city of Kermanshah. The core zone (ca 1200 x 500m) of the site covers the heart of the archaeological site, containing remains dating from pre-historic times through the history of ancient Persia, associated with the sacred mountain of Bisotun and the renown relief and inscription by the Achaemenid king of Persia, Darius I The Great. The site has a 'specific buffer zone' extending ca 500m from the core zone on the plain side. On the mountain side, the core zone and the buffer zone coincide with the top of the mountain. The whole area, including the visible part of the mountain and a large area of the plain are covered by a landscape buffer zone with planning control.

The prehistoric remains within the nominated site include Paleolithic cave finds, the earliest evidence of human presence at the spring-fed pool of Bisotun (*Sarâb*), on the plain under the rock. These finds provide testimony to a highly developed industry datable to the Middle Palaeolithic era, indicating that Bisotun was inhabited during the Wurm glaciation. In addition there are remains from the Median period (8th or 7th centuries B.C.) as well as from the Achaemenid (6th to 4th centuries B.C.) and post-Achaemenid periods. There are excavated remains of Sassanian and Ilkhanid palaces in the western section of the core zone. On the ancient caravan route, there is a Safavid caravanserai, which has recently been restored as a guest house.

The central feature on the site is the *Bisotun Monument*, i.e. the inscription and bas-relief by Darius I The Great, dating from the time when he rose to the throne of the Persian Empire (521 B.C.). The monument is carved in a shallow recess in the cliff, ca. 100m above the plain, impossible to access without scaffolding. The bas-relief portrays Darius standing and facing right. He wears a Persian garment, the 'royal' shoes, a bracelet and a crenellated crown of a specially elaborate design. In his left hand he holds a bow as a sign of sovereignty. His right hand is raised at face level. With his left foot Darius is treading on the chest of a figure who lies on his back before him and, according to the legends, represents Gaumata, the Median Magus and pretender to the throne whose assassination led to Darius's reign. Gaumata, also dressed in Persian attire, is raising his arms as a sign of submission. On the right, a group of rebel leaders is walking towards the king. Their hands are tied behind their backs and a long rope is bound around their necks. Each one of them can be identified both by his legend, and by his specific ethnic costume. Below and around the bas-reliefs, there are ca. 1,200 lines of inscriptions telling the story of the battles Darius had to wage in 521-520 BC against the governors who attempted to take apart the Empire founded by Cyrus. The decisive battle took place on this site.

The inscription is written in three languages. The oldest is an Elamite text referring to legends describing the king and the rebellions. This is followed by a Babylonian version of similar legends. The last phase of the inscription is particularly important, as it is here that Darius introduced for the first time the Old Persian version of his *res gestae*,

placed in four columns below the relief. In this inscription, Darius refers to the origins of the Achaemenid dynasty:

I am Darius, the great king, king of kings, king in Persia, king of all nations, the son of Hystaspes, the grandson of Arsames, the Achaemenid. ...

Later, he states that he had the Old Persian cuneiform script specifically made for the purpose of composing this inscription:

"By the favour of Ahura Mazda, this [is] the form of writing which I have made, besides, in Aryan. ... And it was written down and was read aloud before me. Afterwards I have sent this form of writing everywhere into the countries. The people strove [to use it]."

This cuneiform writing referred to the ancient Mesopotamian system. However, in Bisotun, it was partly alphabetic partly syllabic, and each word was separated by a special symbol. The Old Persian language was revived on purpose as part of this policy. Due to the articulation of the text, also its modern interpretation, from the 18th to 19th centuries, was facilitated. In addition to Bisotun, the Achaemenid writing was used for other royal monumental inscriptions, such as those in Persepolis and Susa.

The Median fortress, just under the Darius monument, refers to a structure on the mountain slope dated to the 8th-7th century B.C., probably where Darius and his companions killed Gaumata, as reported in his inscription. Of the post-Achaemenid remains, the Seleucid figure of a resting Heracles dates from 148 B.C. Though not of high standard technically, it is important because of its datable Greek inscription. The Parthian remains comprise reliefs of Mithradates (123-87 B.C.) and Gotarzes II (ca. 50 B.C.) and the Parthian stone, which were among the earliest discoveries at Bisotun. The Parthian stone bears a crude carving of a sacrificial victim on an altar. The Sassanian remains consist of several smaller monuments and objects. They include three large sculptured capitals, which are important documents for the history of Sassanian art. On each capital the king is portrayed on one side and the goddess Anahid on the opposite side.

History

The original Old Persian form of the name *Bisotun* can be recovered from the Greek rendering *Bagistanon*, 'Mt. Bagistanon' in Diodorus Siculus, as *Bagastana* "place or stand of the god(s)". According to archaeological finds, the site of Bisotun had been occupied long before the Achaemenids. The Paleolithic caves bear testimony to the occupation of the valley and the site as early as the 10th millennium B.C. The site was a strategic point for millennia, especially during the early years of the 1st millennium B.C. when the communication with Mesopotamia increased and passed by the Mountain of Bisotun. A Median fort was probably built there in 7th century B.C. to control the access. Darius I The Great had his reliefs and inscriptions carved on the rocky face of the mountain in 521 B.C. The site was regularly occupied up to the Middle Ages.

Nevertheless, it seems that the origins of the monument of Darius fell into oblivion after the end of the Achaemenid Empire in 330 B.C. so that Diodorus writing two centuries later mentioned it as the work of the legendary Queen

Semiramis. Twelve centuries later, Yaqut noted the eroded relief of the horseman attributed to Parthian times. The site was visited by Europeans from the 16th century. In 1734, it was visited by the Frenchman Jean Otter and subsequently by other French travellers such as Olivier (1756-1814), Jaubert (1779-1847), and Gardanne (1765-1822). J. Kinneir visited the site in 1810, but could not climb up the rock. In 1818, R. Ker Porter who had tried in vain to climb up the rocky face of the mountain wrote that the reliefs might be that of King Shalmanesar. Finally, in 1837-38, Major Henry Rawlinson visited the rock-reliefs and decided to copy and to decipher the cuneiform inscriptions which resulted in the final decipherment of the Old Persian script in 1847. Another person who significantly contributed to the decipherment of the text was Rawlinson's rival, Edward Hincks, an Irish priest and explorer.

Protection and Management

Legal provision:

The nominated property is state owned through the *Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization* (ICHTO).

The property is protected as a national monument on the basis of the *Iranian Law on the Conservation of National Monuments* (1982), the *Law of Purchase of historical properties*, and the *Law of City Halls*.

Management structure:

The principal management authority of the nominated property is ICHTO, and the Local office of the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization at Bisotun, Kermanshah.

The general management plan for the site was approved in 2004. It consists of short term (1 year) and mid term (5 years) programmes, referring to equipment, research, conservation work and repairs, as well as educational activities.

Resources:

The resources for the conservation and management of the site are provided from the annual budget of ICHTO (250,000\$), and from the provincial budget (1,000,000\$).

Justification of the Outstanding Universal Value by the State Party (summary)

The site of Bisotun bears a double significance for the history of ancient Iran and that of the southwest Asia in general. It is situated in a strategic location controlling the main route linking the Iranian plateau and Mesopotamia. This route was used since ancient times, and still constitutes the principal trade road between the eastern regions of Iran and Central Asia with Mesopotamia. From a historical point of view, the site of Bisotun has a continued archaeological sequence from Prehistoric times down to the 20th century. Besides and above all, it includes one of the most remarkable documents of human history, i.e. the reliefs and inscriptions of Darius I The Great, which was the key evidence for the decipherment of cuneiform script. It was, indeed, thanks to the inscriptions at Bisotun that Sir Henry Rawlinson began his long and

painstaking work which resulted in the reading of the Old Persian cuneiform script in 1847. The inscriptions also constitute a very important document for the history of ancient Iran and the southwest Asia relating the events of the Achaemenid Empire at its crisis in the years 522 and 521 B.C.

Criterion ii: The rock-reliefs and the settlements at Bisotun, considering their location on the main east-west route, exhibit an interchange of human cultures over a very large span of time, i.e. from Prehistoric times to the modern era, with an apogee between the 6th century B.C. and the 6th century A.D. The reliefs are witnesses to the development of the art of rock-reliefs in Iran over a millennium.

Criterion iii: Bisotun bears an exceptional testimony of the Symbols of Power of the civilisation of a multiethnic empire which under four dynasties (Achaemenid, Seleucid, Parthian and Sassanids) lasted more than a thousand years and ruled and shaped the destiny of South-Western Asia as well as sometimes parts of Eastern Europe and Africa.

Criterion iv: Bisotun shows exceptional evidence in the history of decipherment of the cuneiform script which paved the way for subsequent reading of many other important cuneiform documents of human history. The inscriptions of Darius I The Great were indeed the golden key to such a source of human history which had been hitherto unknown.

4. EVALUATION

Conservation

Conservation history:

Over the centuries, the Darius inscription has been subject to weathering and erosion by water. The site has been subject to systematic research and protection from the 1960s. It is fully documented, and the study and work for the protection and conservation of the site continue.

In 2004, the earlier concrete wall surrounding the sacred pool (Sarâb) has been removed, and replaced by a dry stone facing in harmony with the site. The modern road that was at the foot of the cliff has been closed and dismantled, and a new road has been built further away, outside the buffer zone. The head of the Heracles statue was stolen in 1993, but was later recovered and restored. It is now in museum, while a replica has been placed in situ.

The remains of the Sassanid and Ilkhanid buildings were earlier part of a village, which has since been removed. The ancient remains are now surveyed for conservation. Since the caravan route was no more in use, the Shah-Abbas Caravanserai was used for various purposes, e.g. as a prison. In 2002, it was acquired by the ICHTO, and has been restored to receive guests and scholars involved with the Bisotun project.

State of conservation:

After several years of conservation work, the current state of conservation of the Bisotun site is satisfactory. The Darius inscription itself has survived well, though some parts have suffered from water seepage through the rock, and water running over the surface. The other remains of ancient monument and buildings are in a satisfactory state,

though some conservation work still continues, for example of the Sassanian and Ilkhanid palace ruins. The caravanserai is in a good state of conservation and is being rehabilitated as a guest house.

Protection and Management:

The principal management authority of the Site of Bisotun is the Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organisation, ICHTO. It has close contacts with other relevant government bodies responsible for agriculture and environmental protection, as well as the National Resource Organisation, Housing and Town Planning Organisation. The management plan for Bisotun was approved in 2004, and its objectives have been integrated in the general territorial planning.

The core zone and the immediate surroundings are well protected under national legislation. The nomination also defines a relatively extensive landscape buffer zone in order to control any extension of residential areas and small industrial plants, which is important in order to guarantee a control of the surrounding landscape.

The site of Bisotun is under a competent management team. The recent change in the ICHTO to include tourism will give an incentive to improve the visitor reception and the presentation of the site in the future. These aspects have already been included in the site management plan.

Risk analysis:

Various types of threats affect the site and its surroundings.

- Erosion

The Darius monument is carved directly on the rock and is subject to erosion and freezing. The causes of decay have been identified, and measures are being taken to mitigate decay, for example by canalising waters.

- Earthquakes

The site is in a seismic region, though no strong earthquakes have been recorded over a century. From the past, the rock has some cracks caused by earthquakes, which are monitored.

- Urban and industrial development

The plain of Bisotun is agricultural land with some villages and small industry. The current industries are old and are expected to be removed in the future. The current master plan establishes regulations, which include pollution control. A power plant has been built recently at the far end of the valley, but it is not expected to cause problems to the nominated site.

- Visitor facilities

There have been relatively few visitors visiting the site, ca 23,000 in 2004. The presentation of the site will require attention though no major works are necessary. Nevertheless, care is needed in the design and management of any new facilities such as a permanent access for visitors.

Authenticity and integrity

Authenticity:

The authenticity of the Darius inscription has been ascertained, and also the rest of the site has been dated. Research on the site is continuing.

Integrity:

The site is located at the foot of a sacred mountain, which has certainly been yet another reason for Darius I The Great to place the monumental inscription exactly here. The current definition of the core zone covers a reasonable area enclosing the most important monuments of the site as well as part of the mountain.

Comparative evaluation

The Darius relief and inscription should be seen in the context of bas-reliefs in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, Assyria (e.g. Nineveh), and Urartu. There are compositional similarities with the bas-reliefs at Sar-e Pol-e Zohab, near the Iraqi border (3rd millennium B.C.), which may have been influenced by Akkadian and Ur III monuments, showing the symbolic gesture of supremacy of king over enemy. The Darius iconography was thus following existing traditions.

The monument of Darius I The Great acquires a particular meaning due to its political and cultural message, documenting the re-establishment of the Persian empire. It is also the first and most important inscription in Ancient Persian language, introduced by Darius I The Great for monumental purposes in the 6th century BC.

Outstanding universal value

General statement:

The outstanding universal value of Bisotun can be referred to especially being an exceptional and even unique testimony to an ancient civilisation. It has also been subject to an important exchange of influences.

The site of Bisotun is in a strategic location, controlling the main route that connected the Iranian Plateau and Mesopotamia, Ecbatana to Babylon, in the antiquity. It gains additional significance being located at the sacred mountain. In fact, its name derives from *Bagastana*, meaning 'the place of gods'. The inscription and the bas-relief have great historical significance, documenting the events that led to King Darius taking over power in the Empire and punishing the rebellion rulers, in the 6th century BC. The models for the symbolic representation of such scenes can be searched in the ancient Egypt and Middle East.

The Bisotun monument was a dynastic declaration of great significance for the whole Persian Empire, and its message was copied and widely diffused. A copy of the monument has been found, for example, at the Ishtar Gate in Babylon, then one of the capital cities of the Persian Empire. Darius I The Great decided here to introduce symbolically the Old Persian language, subsequently used in public inscriptions throughout the Achaemenid Empire. The idea of cuneiform writing was adopted from Mesopotamia, but the Old Persian writing differed from the previous, being

alphabetic and using word dividers. In modern times, this multi-lingual inscription can be compared to Rosetta stone in Egypt in the sense as it was the key to the decipherment of cuneiform writing in the early 19th century.

Evaluation of criteria:

The property has been nominated by the State Party on the basis of criteria ii, iii and iv:

Criterion ii: The monument created by Darius I The Great in Bisotun in 521 BC exhibits important interchange of influences in the development monumental art and writing in the region of the Persian Empire. The symbolic representation of the Achaemenid king in relation to his enemy reflects traditions in monumental bas-reliefs that date from ancient Egypt and the Middle East, and which were subsequently further developed during the Achaemenid and later empires. ICOMOS considers that the property meets this criterion.

Criterion iii: The Bisotun monument bears unique testimony to the Persian Empire, being the only known monumental text of the Achaemenids to document a specific historic event, that of the re-establishment of the Empire by Darius I The Great. It was the first cuneiform writing to be deciphered in the 19th century. The site is located along one of the main routes linking Persia with Mesopotamia and is associated with a sacred mountain. There is evidence of human settlements that range from the prehistoric times to the Achaemenid, Parthian, Sassanian, Ilkhanid and Safavid periods. ICOMOS considers that the property meets this criterion.

Criterion iv: The State Party proposes this criterion referring to the history of cuneiform writing. However, ICOMOS considers that this justification does not correspond to the requirement of being an outstanding example of a type of an ensemble or landscape. The issue of bearing testimony to a civilisation is well covered under criterion iii. ICOMOS considers that the property does not meet this criterion.

The *criterion vi* has not been proposed by the State Party, but is mentioned due to association with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance. While recognizing the importance of Darius' inscription, ICOMOS nevertheless considers that criterion iii sufficiently covers also this aspect. ICOMOS considers that the property does not meet this criterion.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation with respect to inscription

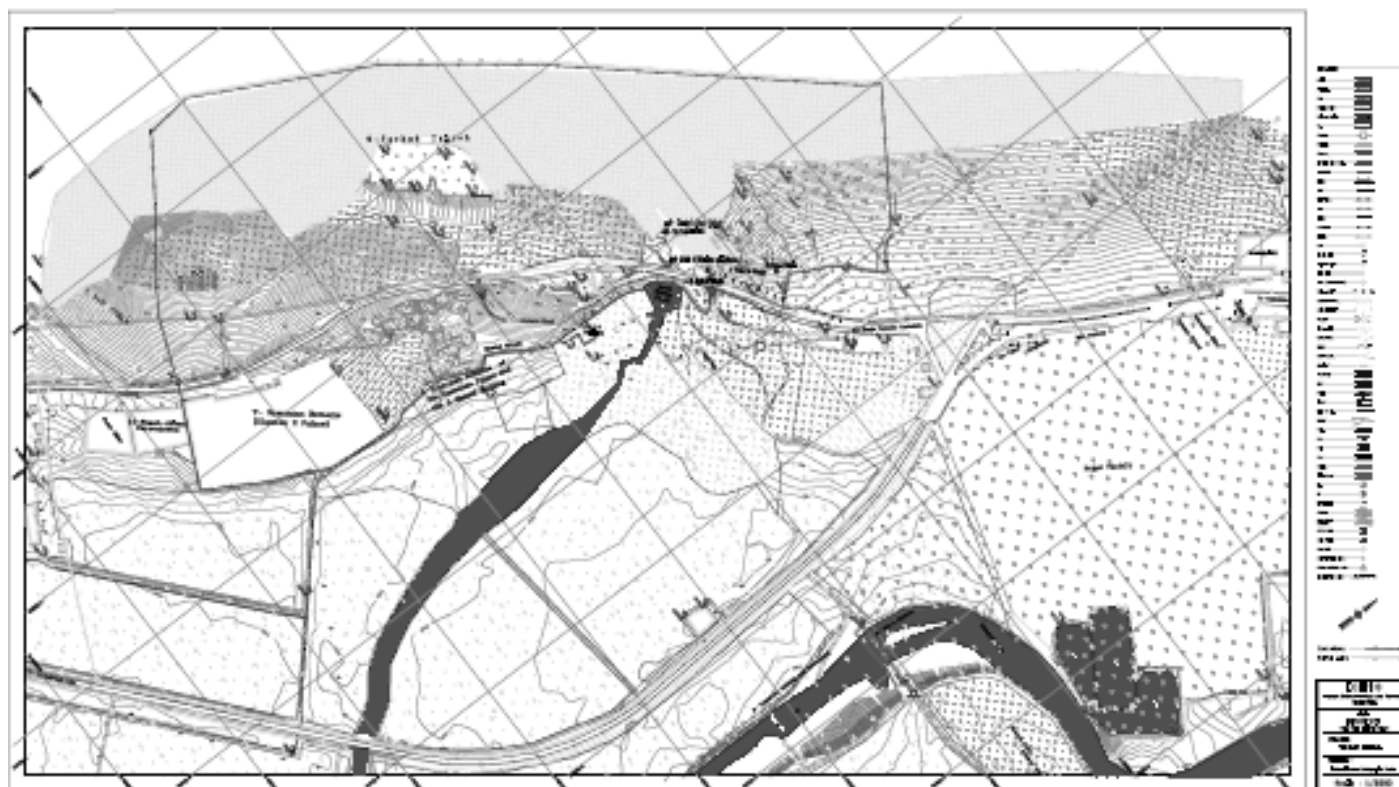
ICOMOS recommends that Bisotun, Islamic Republic of Iran, be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of ***criteria ii and iii:***

Criterion ii: The monument created by Darius I The Great in Bisotun in 521 BC is an outstanding testimony to the important interchange of human values on the development monumental art and writing. The symbolic representation of the Achaemenid king in relation to his enemy reflects traditions in monumental bas-reliefs that date from ancient Egypt and the Middle East, and which were subsequently further developed during the Achaemenid and later empires.

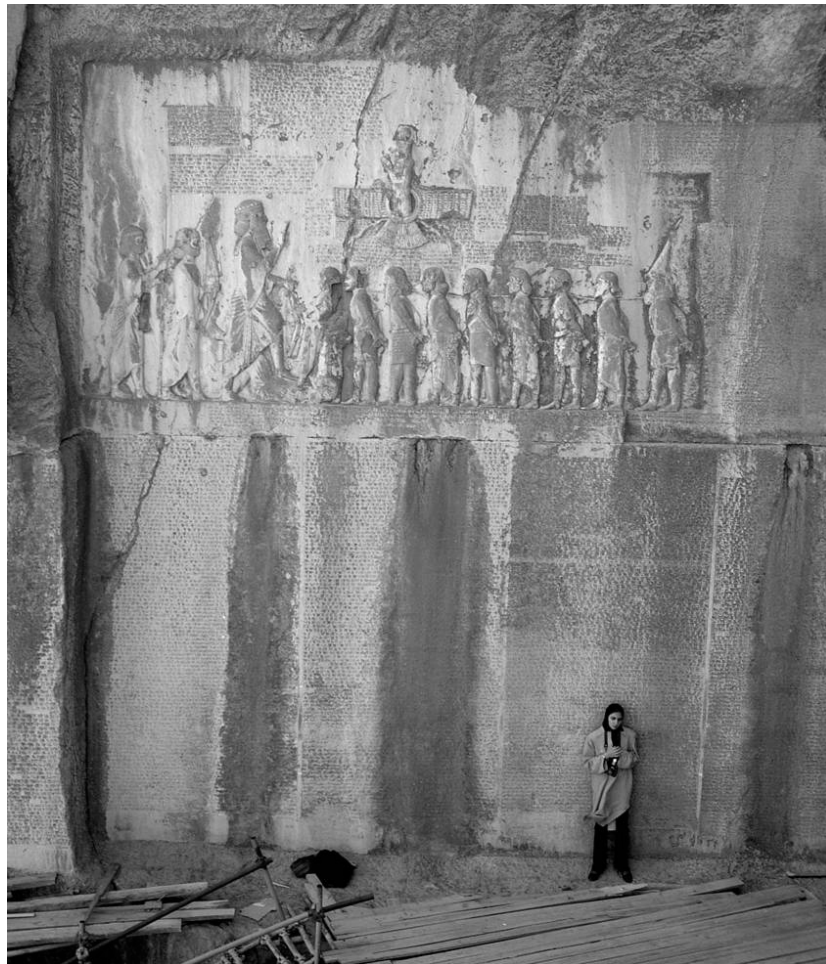
Criterion iii: The site of Bisotun is located along one of the main routes linking Persia with Mesopotamia and associated with the sacred Bisotun mountain. There is archaeological evidence of human settlements that date from the prehistoric times, while the most significant period was from 6th century B.C. to AD 6th century. The Bisotun inscription is unique being the only known monumental text of the Achaemenids to document a specific historic event, that of the re-establishment of the Empire by Darius I The Great. It was the first cuneiform writing to be deciphered in the 19th century.

ICOMOS requests the State Party to report to the World Heritage Committee on the design and construction of access routes to the site and the development and design of eventual visitor facilities, before such works are undertaken.

ICOMOS, April 2006



Map showing the boundaries of the property



Inscription and bas-relief by Darius The Great



The Seleucid figure of Heracles