WHAT IRAN MEANS TO ARCHAEOLOGISTS

Guardian UK – Chicago's Oriental Institute woos Iran with return of ancient tablets

Three hundred ancient clay tablets which helped to provide information on the languages and daily life in the Persian empire 2,500 years ago are on their way back to Iran.

The tablets are being returned by the oriental institute of the University of Chicago, which is trying to re-establish relations with Iranian scholars and archaeological sites.

It says this is the first time lent Iranian artefacts have been returned since the Islamic revolution. Its director, Gil Stein, and several other officials will escort the tablets to Iran this week.

While they are there Dr Stein hopes to negotiate an agreement for new excavation work, joint publications and the training of Iranian students in conserving antiquities.

The tablets would help “establish good faith”, he said.

Tens of thousands of tablets were found in Persepolis, the ancient Persian capital, by Chicago archaeologists in 1933. They vary in size from a dishtowel to a packet of chewing gum and in colour from peachy beige to reddish brown.

The close relationship between the institute and Iran ended with the revolution in 1979, when the US broke off diplomatic relations.

The university had to get permission to return the tablets from the office of foreign assets control in the US treasury. The treasury could not confirm that this was the first return of Iranian artifacts.

I recall lunching at Harvard Faculty Club late in 1992. At the next table several distinguished members of the Peabody Museum were entertaining a party of archaeologists from what had been, until 1989, one of the southern states of the Soviet Union. The conversation was quite candid – how much Harvard was willing to pay to excavate one of the early neolithic sites to the north of Mesopotamia and considered to be of key importance in understanding the origins of agriculture.

All in the service of archaeological science.