After nearly a quarter-century of isolation, Iran is again admitting foreign archaeologists. Although politics could easily derail this exciting new development, Western and Japanese researchers are willing to take the risk in order to gain access to this data-rich land.

Iran Reopens Its Past

Persepolis—The ruins of this ancient Persian capital, burned by Alexander the Great in 330 B.C.E., were almost laid to waste a second time nearly 25 years ago. A mob led by a mullah set out from the southern Iranian city of Shiraz bent on destroying the storied site, a symbol to Islamic revolutionaries of both paganism and the shah’s tyrannical rule. Cooler heads prevailed, however, and the provincial governor convinced the mob to disperse.

This summer, another eager group left Shiraz for Persepolis, this time by air-conditioned bus after a lavish poolside banquet hosted by the governor’s successor. This party of foreign archaeologists was here as part of an unprecedented attempt by Iran’s leaders to entice researchers from abroad to return and start digging again. For more than 2 decades, the wealth of archaeological treasures in this country—a center of early agriculture, a crossroads between Europe and Asia, and a cradle of great empires and religions—has been off-limits to outsiders.

But in recent years, reformers gained prominent positions in government, and the economy has boomed. Now Iran’s tens of thousands of important archaeological sites are under threat from rampant development and looting, and its small, fragmented, and isolated community of archaeologists is struggling to protect them.

So the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization (ICHO), part of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, is ready to reopen the doors to foreigners. But unlike in earlier decades, they want visiting researchers to work in equal collaborations with Iranian archaeologists. Many foreign researchers have taken up the offer. Already, German, Australian, Japanese, and U.S. teams have started work on joint projects with Iranian colleagues, and plans for a half-dozen more are being drawn up. The top three American universities in the field—the University of Chicago, the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) in Philadelphia, and Harvard University—are now negotiating long-term agreements with ICHO.

To make Iran more hospitable for re-
An “unavoidable land”

Iran’s pull on archaeologists such as Stein is magnetic. Nearly three times the size of France, the country stretches from Turkey and Iraq in the west to Afghanistan and Pakistan in the east. Hunter-gatherers wandered on the central plateau 30,000 years ago. In the jagged Zagros Mountains, humans first domesticated animals around 8000 B.C.E. However, the door could easily be slammed shut again because of, among other obstacles, Western worries about Iran’s nuclear program, internal power struggles between reformists and conservatives, or bureaucratic infighting among the fiefdoms of archaeology here.

Visas were hard to obtain, and dig permits were denied to foreigners. That attitude was due in part to a century of foreign excavations that operated under few constraints and tended to sideline Iranians. At Susa, for example, European visitors were treated to elegant dinners with fine wines; the gift of a recently excavated artifact was sometimes part of each guest’s table setting. “There was the smell of neocolonialism back then,” says Remy Bouchart, who directs the French Institute of Archaeology in Tehran.

At the same time, the shah’s regime increasingly used archaeology to suggest links to glorious ancient rulers such as Cyrus and Darius of the 6th and 5th century B.C.E. “We had the impression that archaeologists served to enhance certain ideological aspects of the regime before the revolution,” says Azarnoush. The shah’s extravagant

IRAN’S RICH AND TURBULENT PAST

8000 B.C.E. First domestication of sheep and goats in Zagros Mountains
7500 B.C.E. First agricultural villages
4200 B.C.E. Susa founded on Mesopotamian plain
2700–1500 B.C.E. Elamite kingdom in southwestern Iran
circa 2500 B.C.E. Jiroft civilization flourishes in southern Iran
1000 B.C.E. Nebuchadnezzar I of Babylon destroys Susa
550–330 B.C.E. Achaemenid (Persian) Empire
500–425 B.C.E. Persepolis constructed
331–247 B.C.E. Alexander and successors control Iran
247 B.C.E.–224 C.E. Parthian Empire
224–651 Sassanian Empire
634 Arab armies and Islam arrives
1200 Genghis Khan devastates Iran
1380–1501 Timurid Empire
1501–1722 Safavid Empire

The revolution abruptly halted all foreign digs, closed universities, and prompted Iranian archaeologists to either flee the country or wait for an intellectual thaw. Foreign Asia specialists took their expertise and new techniques to Turkey, Israel, Syria, and then Central Asia when the Soviet Union collapsed a decade later. “An unforeseen consequence of the Iranian revolution has been a far better understand-
ing of its neighbors,” Harvard archaeologist Karl Lamberg-Karlovsky told participants at the August conference in Tehran. Azarnoush—who himself emigrated for a time to the United States—says that Iranian digs never entirely ceased. But the revolution and subsequent Iran-Iraq war left little support or funding until the late 1990s.

Opening windows
In 2000, reformist President Mohammad Khatami, speaking at the United Nations, called for a “dialogue among civilizations.” The same year, a joint Iranian-German team began excavating an ancient mining site near the village of Arisman on the edge of the central Iranian plateau in a bid to understand ore production and trade during the 3rd and 4th millennia B.C.E. Soon a team of Iranians and Australians started a survey of Elamite sites, and an Iranian-born researcher from Chicago won permission to work in the eastern province of Khuzistan.

The ministry leadership then decided in 2001 to make a dramatic appeal to foreigners by organizing a meeting to bring them to Iran, an idea proposed by Abdoul Majid Arfaee, an Elamite specialist who worked at Tehran’s Bastan Museum. “When you are in a room which has been shut up for a long time, the air is stale,” explains ministry adviser Keyvan Sepehr. “We are trying to open a window and change the atmosphere a little.” The effort to bring in foreigners has met with some resistance, he admits. “We have some conservative academics who disagree with this approach, but we can convince them we cannot close the door forever.” When the meeting finally took place, in August this year, the ICHO chief was blunt in his welcoming address. “Isolation will result in backwardness,” said Seyyed Mohammad Beheshti. “We have no other alternative but to cooperate.”

Iranian officials are paying particular attention to relations with U.S. universities. They have asked Chicago, Penn, and Harvard first to each put together a more general framework outlining a long-term relationship—an unusual step. Holly Pittman, an art historian at Penn, says Iranian officials are keen to ink these deals before the upcoming Iranian presidential election. “They want to get these agreements in place so if there is a change in administrations, it would be harder for conservatives to turn things around.”

Hold the sugar
Foreign archaeologists are arriving just in time. Innumerable ancient sites are disappearing under highways, plowed fields, and expanding cities as Iran’s population and economy mushroom. “That exerts tremendous pressure on us,” says Azarnoush. The only remnants of many sites are bags of shards collected long ago and stored in the Bastan Museum.

A couple of dozen kilometers south of Tehran, for example, one side of a pre–Bronze Age mound called Tepe Chesme Ali is covered with houses, but the other half has been rescued by being turned into a park with grass and fountains. Other sites have not been so lucky. Tepe Pardis is a pre–Bronze Age mound nearly surrounded by vast brickyards feeding Tehran’s endless appetite for building material; bulldozers have already taken a chunk off the northern edge. “We are turning our cultural heritage into bricks; it’s a great tragedy,” says Rahman Abbassnezhad, an archaeology graduate student at the University of Tehran who wants to start excavating the site in 2006 but isn’t sure what will be left.

Perhaps one of the greatest archaeological tragedies is unfolding in Khuzistan, the southwestern province that borders Iraq and was the center of the Elamite civilization in the 2nd millennium B.C., maintaining close contacts with nearby Mesopotamia. First the region bore the brunt of the brutal war, and now it is being intensively planted with sugar cane. “Sugar cane is the most destructive crop for archaeological sites; they plane off the ground, and there is unremitting cultivation using heavy hydraulic machinery,” says Nicholas Kouchoukos, a University of Chicago archaeologist who has recently worked in the province.

Sites such as Jundi-Shapur, an important city under the Sassanian empire that flourished during the time of Rome, boasted universities and palaces in the early centuries of the common era. Now Jundi-Shapur has been turned over to farmers despite ICHO protests. “We are always trying to coordinate with development plans,” says ICHO deputy of research Jalil Gholshan. “The problem is that Iran is full of archaeological sites.” He says ICHO can only hope to limit the destruction: “We can’t keep the entire country intact.”

Tourist trade
Influencing developers requires clout, and under Beheshti’s leadership, ICHO—which receives about $30 million annually—is starting to gain some political and financial muscle. The Bastan Museum, for example, plans a $2.5 million renovation and expansion, and the basement storage areas have already been modernized with well-organized storerooms, thick steel doors, and video cameras in freshly painted hallways. In addition, the museum is establishing research centers for specific periods.

After the revolution, Iranian authorities focused on building a modern facility for the Islamic collections next door to the Bastan. As a result, much of the pre-Islamic material was neglected. “There were many problems; nothing was organized,” says Mohammad Reza Kargar, the Bastan director. A bevy of young researchers in the past 2 years has taken on the task of “re-excavating” the dusty storage rooms containing more than 300,000 artifacts as a precursor to the renovation. Shahrokh Razmjou, a Ph.D. student heading the Center for Achaemenid Studies—devoted to the era of the first Persian empire—says he recently found dozens of boxes of artifacts, some wrapped in Persian newspapers from the 1930s, that had not been opened since they were excavated.

ICHO also is creating independent research institutes at specific sites, such as the

Quality control. Isolation has taken a toll on Iranian archaeology, says Hassan Fazeli, director of the University of Tehran’s Archaeological Institute.

New face. Western researchers such as Remy Boucharlat say they are happy to leave old colonial days behind.

PHOTO: R.P. LAMMER
Researchers had long suspected that a Bronze Age civilization flourished between Mesopotamia and the Indus River. Now a huge haul of stone vessels has pinpointed it to Jiroft.

TEHRAN—Destitute villagers in southeastern Iran have uncovered what appears to be a Bronze Age civilization that flourished between ancient Sumer in Mesopotamia and Harappa in the Indus River Valley more than 4000 years ago. Scholars already had hints of a mysterious society in the region, but the new find nails down its heartland along the Hormuz Strait is bordered by deserts and is feverishly hot in the summer. But it seems that the ancient Jiroft people lived here in large numbers and specialized in making vessels covered in unfamiliar iconography and semiprecious stones. Made of chlorite, a dark stone that is easy to carve but wears slowly, the objects portray a bewildering variety of plants, buildings, and half-human, half-animal figures including strange scorpion men and kneeling women between horned animals. They also depict the outlines of monumental buildings resembling ziggurats, and archaeologists may be close to finding examples of such buildings. The legal excavation conducted earlier this year at Jiroft exposed part of a huge building or fortress, 30 meters by 62 meters, protected by a massive wall, says Youssef Majidzadeh, the Iranian-born archaeologist Karl Lamberg-Karlovsky is jumping at the chance to return to Iran.

Much will depend as well on the director. Both foreign and Iranian researchers are hoping Beheshti will get the job. Despite the internal wrangling, foreign researchers with experience in Iran aren’t discouraged. “The conference is a good start,” says Barbara Helwing of Berlin’s German Archaeological Institute, who has several seasons at Arisman under her belt. “Just having scholars here to explain new ideas is already very important.” Still, she adds, “you can’t predict anything here.” And for those who want to start digging here, “you have to convince them; they aren’t just throwing open the doors.”

And there are good reasons to want to try. Dig permits in Syria and Turkey are increasingly difficult to obtain, and neighboring Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan remain virtually off-limits to researchers. So even the hint of a welcome mat in the region is drawing the avid attention of scholars. “It will all get going again,” predicts Robert Dyson, a retired Penn archaeologist who spent his formative years in Iran. Adds Azarnoush: “There’s plenty to do all over this country.”

—ANDREW LAWLER

Jiroft Discovery Stuns Archaeologists

Researchers had long suspected that a Bronze Age civilization flourished between Mesopotamia and the Indus River. Now a huge haul of stone vessels has pinpointed it to Jiroft.