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

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 banks of the Halil River. The discovery of hundreds of stone vessels and massive architecture near the town of Jiroft exposed part of a huge building—30 meters by 62 meters—said in an interview with Science in his Tehran office. “This new discovery puts Iran in the center of civilization and cultural activities in the 3rd millennium B.C.E.”

This rich agricultural area north of 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-animal, half-human 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 Yousef Majidzadeh, the Iranian-born archaeologist in charge of the dig.

The vessels from around Jiroft are reminiscent of those previously found scattered throughout the region. “There was obviously tremendous cultural activity in this area, since small numbers of manufactured pieces similar to the ones from Jiroft are found over...”

“...If it is done as now planned, it will be an advantage to cultural heritage,” says Gholshehan. “But if ICHO is somehow subordinate to tourism, then it would be a disadvantage.”

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.”

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
News Focus

Well traveled. Stone vessels like those found at Jiroft have also turned up everywhere from Uzbekistan to the Arabian Peninsula.

A vast area, from the Persian Gulf to Central Asia,” says Azarnoush. These artifacts—although usually devoid of carving—have turned up in the Royal Tombs of Ur, the Sumerian city of Mari in today’s Syria, and the Arabian Peninsula. A few pieces have been found as far north as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

Scholars had guessed that this region was the source, and Lamberg-Karlovsky found one manufacturing center at nearby Tepe Yahya during the 1970s. But the sheer number of vessels from Jiroft as well as the massive number of large mounds make it the likely central homeland, Lamberg-Karlovsky says. Because the Jiroft material was looted, came recently from the jiroft area and was purchased by the Louvre Museum in Paris.

Majidzadeh says that not much was done to stop the looting at first. “Officials did not pay attention, since the peasants were poor because of the drought, and they thought that it was one way for them to get some money.” Eventually the authorities stepped in and seized hundreds of artifacts from nearby villages, but these have little scientific value because it is extremely difficult to date stone vessels once they are removed from the ground. “We know the context of none of this,” says Holly Pittman, an art historian at the University of Pennsylvania.

The origins and demise of the Jiroft people are obscure, although some scholars suspect they might have influenced the Bactrian-Margiana Archaeological Complex, which developed to the north in later centuries (see p. 979). “This is another Bronze Age civilization comparable to the Indus and Mesopotamia, but smaller in scale and less complex,” says Holly Pittman, an art historian at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. “It will be extremely important.”

The prospect of revealing Jiroft’s secrets excites researchers. “This is going to be one of the major excavations in the next 10 years,” says retired archaeologist Robert Dyson of the University of Pennsylvania. “This changes fundamentally our understanding of southeastern Iran,” adds Lamberg-Karlovsky. “And it is something quite new.”

—ANDREW LAWLER

Looting Savages New Site

TEHRAN—The looters brought picnics, and whole families dug together. Villagers in southeastern Iran, suffering from an extended drought during 2000, were desperate. So when a rare flood along the Halil River exposed a grave with decorated stone vessels, people rushed to the site to dig up strange dark jars and beakers, which they then sold. “There was unbelievable destruction,” says Yousef Majidzadeh, an Iranian-born archaeologist who is in charge of legal excavations there.

Now, at least 400 people are in jail, including a government official accused of complicity, and many hundreds of vessels have been impounded as evidence. The impact of the looting—which continues over a vast area around Jiroft—is also rippling overseas. The Iranian government hopes to retrieve a piece that it and a prominent French archaeologist believe—based on the style and type of the stone bowl—the date and authenticity of the vessels are open to dispute; the artifacts themselves are impounded by the courts in Kerman. But many Iranian and foreign archaeologists and art historians who have examined the objects or photographs date them to mid–3rd millennium B.C.E. based on similar vessels found elsewhere.

Azarnoush ordered a survey last year when he heard about massive looting in the area, and excavations began this year. “We hope to be able to find the center of production of these goods,” he says. During the intense heat of summer, a survey team examined the sources of the Halil in the northern mountains to ascertain the boundaries of this civilization; this winter, a team led by Majidzadeh will resume digging.

They have quite a task ahead of them: Azarnoush estimates that there are nearly 300 tells, or mounds, in the area yet to be examined. “The first excavation hints at huge cities, 100 square hectares in size,” marvels Jean Perrot, who led French digs at Susa before the revolution. Majidzadeh says, “This area covers 400 square kilometers and had some cultural political unity.” But much of the material is buried under 3 to 4 meters of sedimentation, say Iranian archaeologists.

Beheshti says in the past there had been little looting in this part of Iran, which is remote from the capital. He believes that during the drought, drug smugglers turned to lucrative antiquities trafficking and are now organizing target-

Free-for-all. At first, officials did little to stop the looting at Jiroft.

said an ICHO official who worked in the Jiroft area was arrested during an international archaeology meeting in Tehran for alleged involvement in a looting ring. ICHO representatives decline to discuss the matter.

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