Iraqis left, they planted mines all over the place,” Alizadeh recalls. “Work was impossible and extremely risky.” Instead, he and his team relocated to Khuzistan, where they stumbled on rare evidence of an ancient nomadic encampment. He and his colleagues now are working on a 5-year excavation and survey project in the region.

At the same time, Alizadeh took up the challenge of organizing the Bastan Museum’s important pottery collection at the request of the senior staff. Giant bags of shards were stored in a damp cellar, and museum staff were on the verge of throwing away the unorganized material. But Alizadeh intervened, and today the museum boasts an impressive collection of nearly a million shards, cataloged according to region and type, in a basement newly renovated with government money. “So many of these sites no longer exist,” says University of Chicago anthropologist Nicholas Kouchoukos, who helped with the work. “This was an irreplaceable collection which we assumed was all lost.”

In the course of the reorganization, Alizadeh was able to train Iranian students in the important art of shard recognition. Given Iran’s long period of isolation, such training is critical. And newer methods are slowly gaining attention. “Before I came to Iran, nobody collected bones or seeds at all. They had not heard about ethnobotany,” he says. “They just collected objects and pottery. Now at least they feel it is very shameful not to collect these things.”

After his years of devotion to Iranian archaeology, officials here clearly trust Alizadeh, although he says some still suspect him of being a double agent. “The fact that I’m Iranian and American has helped immensely, and they use me for that purpose.” During the recent Tehran conference, Alizadeh was all movement, introducing foreign archaeologists to Iranian colleagues and escorting a delegation of Chicago academics to a series of appointments with senior Iranian officials. “If things continue this way, I think foreigners can come and apply independently; you won’t have to have an Iranian name.”

Kouchoukos gives him credit for smoothing the way for others. “Come hell or high water, he’s been here,” he says. “He’s made a difference through his sheer force of presence and will.” Alizadeh’s next project will be to help Iranian archaeologists conduct a comprehensive survey of the Persepolis region, one of the richest archaeological areas in all of Iran. But he remains a realist about the future of this politically volatile region. “Tomorrow, everything could be ruined. I work as if there is no tomorrow; I plan as if I can be here for another 100 years.”

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**DEFFINING CENTRAL ASIA**

**Neglected Civilization Grabs Limelight**

New access to Iranian sites will allow Western researchers to shed light on a little-known culture that once dominated the Asian steppes

Four thousand years ago along the banks of the ancient Oxus River, which now separates Afghanistan from Uzbekistan, there were people who lived in vast compounds protected by high walls, produced their own bronzes, ceramics, and stone seals, and traded their wares as far as the Persian Gulf and Palestine. Although these people would have been key players in Bronze Age Central Asia, their civilization remains an enigma because it appears around 2200 B.C.E., only to fade some 500 years later. In its heyday, people crammed into compounds measuring 100 meters on a side that dotted the landscape. “It looks like a single culture,” with cities spread over hundreds of kilometers, says Hiebert, an archaeologist at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

Metal appears to have come to the BMAC from as far afield as Kazakhstan and Siberia and other locations across the northern steppes. The presence of BMAC artifacts to the south and west hints strongly at regional trade. What the BMAC got in return from the older Indus and Mesopotamian cultures is unclear: BMAC peoples appear not to have adopted foreign styles or have bought many foreign goods—or at least, goods that would have left a material trace.

“There is abundant evidence of BMAC contact” with Iran, Karl Lamberg-Karlovsky, a Harvard University archaeologist, told a conference in Tehran last August. “This is a challenge for Iranian archaeologists to tackle.” Lamberg-Karlovsky hopes to get in on the action himself; he is interested in digging at a possible BMAC site near the Iranian border with Turkmenistan.

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