PROFLE: SEYYED MOHAMMED BEHESHTI

Bringing Cultural Heritage Out of the Shadows

In a few short years, this unorthodox official has transformed the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization and is turning Iran into a destination of choice for archaeologists.

In a nation where somber, turbaned clerics dominate politics, Seyyed Mohammed Beheshti stands out. Shortly after he took over as head of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization (ICHO), a colleague complained that he didn’t go to the mosque for public prayers. “But if I did, my toupee would fall off,” he replied. Beheshti’s striking reddish-blonde mop is only the superficial manifestation of his nonconformist approach.

Son of a senior parliamentarian and friend of Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, Beheshti is a leading reformist. As head of the Film and Serials Group in the 1990s, he won acclaim for his bold support for the blossoming Iranian film industry, considered today as a star of international cinema. Since 1997, he has brought his skills to bear on ICHO, which oversees archaeology and had long been a backwater in the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. He has won greater government funding, instituted an impressive news service and Web site, and championed the return of foreign archaeologists. “He is a breath of fresh air, and the reason we’ve been able to do anything is because of that man,” says University of Chicago archaeologist Abbas Alizadeh.

Beheshti recently spoke with Science on the grounds of the shah’s former Niavaran Palace in northern Tehran.

Q: What challenges does archaeology face here?
A: We have to deal with more than 200,000 archaeological sites around Iran. Because of development projects threatening so many of these sites, we don’t even get to choose our projects. We have to come up with a strategy to save them.

The other problem is that we don’t have many international connections, and our current knowledge in archaeology is limited. But we’ve started to change this in the past 4 years, and things are getting better. We need scientific knowledge and time to do more than just salvage archaeology.

We also have to change the image of cultural heritage. It has been in the shadows; it is time to put it in the sun. Once it was perhaps the 15th or 20th important issue in the country. Now it is perhaps among the first three.

Q: Why are you pressing for foreign archaeologists to return?
A: This started 4 years ago, and now we have cooperation with many nations. We are quite aware that Iran is an important place archaeologically. Therefore it is our duty to provide facilities and possibilities for such work. We have to become part of the larger international system of archaeology; otherwise we will be left behind. So it is good to have this cooperation, but we have our own terms and standards. If there is to be scientific cooperation, it should be real cooperation. That means 50-50.

Q: But are there enough trained Iranian archaeologists for this to work?
A: We do have some knowledge foreign delegations don’t, because this is our land. A foreigner might try to understand mud-brick structures, but we are still living in mud-brick structures. Our knowledge could be very constructive and informative for foreign archaeologists. There is the chance for learning on both sides.

Q: Are there conservative factions here who oppose the return of foreigners?
A: Nobody in the country has any problem with people coming here for scientific purposes.

Q: Could that change?
A: I am worried about what’s happening in America. I’m worried that 11 September could happen again. But on the eve of the American attack on Iraq, we had U.S. archaeologists working very close to the Iraqi border.

Q: Has the budget for archaeological work increased substantially?
A: We now spend $1.3 million a year on
archaeology. Compared to 10 years ago, it has increased 70-fold. It is still not enough, but it is much better than it was. I think it will increase much more in the next 5 years, as the image of cultural heritage changes, as people come closer to understanding the importance and value of our work.

Q: Does Iran have plans to reconstruct ancient sites for tourism purposes?
A: We are very strict about our methods. Of course there are sites tourists want to go to, so we need services there to forge a new quality of tourism. We will do this, but we won’t reconstruct. And we will invite tourists to visit sites under archaeological excavation or restoration.

Q: Won’t archaeologists object?
A: At the start they were very unhappy—as would be any archaeologist anywhere—but we pushed them to this. We convinced them this is not a bad thing. In fact, it is a good development, since it allows us to bring cultural heritage out of the shadows. And it also doubles and triples protection of sites, since locals see them as valuable, and they are made part of the team protecting them.

Q: How are you coping with looters?
A: The army and the police all contribute, but the most important factor is the attitude of the people. If you compare coverage in the mass media to 10 years ago, there is perhaps 10 times as much coverage about looting of archaeological sites, but perhaps in reality actual looting is much less. People are simply talking about it more.

In Jiroft, there are many efforts going at the local and national levels to stop illicit excavations, paving the way for us to expand our scientific activities there. What happened in Jiroft (see p. 974) has become an example for what other regions do not want to have happen. We are working with Interpol and are pursuing legal claims in foreign countries. If we can stop the hunger for artifacts internationally, perhaps we can stop the illicit excavations. What we need is international awareness. We expect those in Western countries to speak out against this trade. This material belongs to humanity, not just Iran.

—ANDREW LAWLER

In the 1980s, Guillermo Algaze, an anthropologist at the University of California, San Diego, first put forward the idea that Uruk organized colonies and established an informal empire to ensure a steady flow of goods. Research in the past decade shows that in some areas, such as today’s Syria, Urukian control took the form of trading quarters in existing towns. In others, such as the plain of Susa east of Uruk, that control was more forceful. “I argue they took Susiana lock, stock, and barrel,” dominating the local peoples, says Algaze. That influence, he maintains, was felt far to the east, in trading outposts such as Sialk and Godine in the central highlands, which some scholars believe were staffed by merchants from Susa.

But Algaze’s theory came to the fore only after the 1979 revolution closed Iran to foreign researchers. “The recent theoretical debate has largely passed Iran by,” says Barbara Helwing of Berlin’s German Archaeological Institute. Now, however, researchers are finally able to examine some of the sites that will reveal the eastern extent of Uruk’s control. Early results from Iran paint a more complex picture than simple domination. Helwing and Iranian colleagues have excavated for the past 2 years the site of an ancient highland mine at Arisman on the same plain as Sialk. Neither site, she says, can be considered a trading post, and she believes that Arisman’s production was primarily for local use. “Neither does anything within the material record of these two sites justify the label ‘Uruk.’ ” It is high time, she adds, “to reconsider the merchants-of-Susa scenario,” because “nothing attests to the presence of Uruk-affiliated foreigners in the highlands.”

Helwing proposes instead that pastoralists were the key to trade between the plain and the plateau. She notes evidence that between 4000 B.C.E. and 3000 B.C.E., village life in the Zagros Mountains, which separate the Susa plain from the eastern plateau,