became more mobile and pastoral. Instead of merchants shuttling back and forth, carrying finished goods such as cloth made in Uruk and bringing back metals and precious stones, Helwing and a few other scholars see nomads as the main means of trade between the highlands and the plains below. That more decentralized network allowed the highlands to maintain their culture, she believes.

Roger Matthews of University College London and Hassan Fazeli of the University of Tehran draw similar conclusions from a survey of spindles used in weaving. Those found across the highlands were not of a Mesopotamian type, suggesting that if Mesopotamian male traders were present, they did not bring their wives, who would have brought along spindles favored by lowland women. And they agree with Helwing that metal production in the highlands was used to fuel local needs first, with foreign exports a secondary matter. Although Stein believes that Helwing may go too far in her interpretation, he says that “a very interesting pattern is emerging, with the highlands as a cultural entity in their own right. They didn’t live or die by what happened in Mesopotamia.”

Even the notion of Susa as an Uruk-dominated colony is coming under fire. Abbas Alizadeh, an archaeologist at the University of Chicago who is working near Susa, argues that the marshes and dunes between Uruk and Susa made travel extremely difficult. He notes the profound differences in writing systems and religious pantheons as evidence that Uruk’s position in Susa was one of influence rather than domination. That view, however, has yet to convince many. In Susa, “they are participating entirely in an Uruk way of life,” says Holly Pittman, an art historian at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. “They are not culturally distinct; the material culture of Susa is a regional variation of that on the Mesopotamian plain.”

Stein, who excavated an Uruk site in Anatolia, cautions that the Susa data are based on a very small sample from the 1970s. And, he says, ideas about Uruk’s influence are changing across the region: An expansion once thought to have lasted less than 200 years now apparently went on for 700 years. “It is hard to think of any colonial system lasting that long,” he says.

New excavations on the plateau and in the Zagros promise to paint a much richer and more complex picture of the first state societies in the Uruk expansion. Given that complexity, Stein suggests that “we might want to abandon the term ‘expansion’ altogether.” Algaze isn’t ready to do that, but he says, “I’m perfectly willing to say I’m wrong.” The opening of Iran, he adds, will give scientists a chance to test his hypothesis. After all, if Ikea can achieve trade dominance without the use of force, so perhaps could Uruk. Says Stein: “The spread of Uruk material is not evidence of Uruk domination; it could be local choice.”

---ANDREW LAWLER

PROFILE: ABBAS ALIZADEH

Chicago Scholar Is Keystone in Bridging Two Worlds

For the past decade, Abbas Alizadeh has used his Iranian origins to persuade the authorities to let him dig. Now his persistence has beaten a path for others

PERSEPOLIS—Abbas Alizadeh’s love of Iranian archaeology has led him to some strange places in the past decade. The University of Chicago researcher has followed nomads in the Zagros Mountains, attempted to survey mine-strewn land near the Iraqi border, and reorganized nearly a million pottery shards in the cavernous basement of the Iran Bastan Museum in Tehran. Those efforts at building trust with Iranian officials are now paying off: Other Western-based researchers are following in his footsteps, and his university and the Iranian government hope to sign a sweeping agreement in the coming months that will allow for an unprecedented exchange of scholars and joint digs in Iran.

A quarter-century of suspicion separates Iranians and Americans, and that gulf is a major hurdle in reconnecting researchers in the two countries. Now those who were born in Iran but work at U.S. universities are providing the grease necessary for the wheels of cooperation to start turning, paving the way for a new generation of scholars from both nations to work together.

No one has worked harder at this than Alizadeh, a wiry 52-year-old who is graying at the temples but remains as energetic as a college student. Outspoken and determined, he initially studied psychology at the University of Tehran, the country’s premier institution, during the early 1970s. But most of his fellow players on the soccer team were in the archaeology department, so he switched majors. “I didn’t have much feeling for it,” he said during a recent visit to the ancient capital of Persepolis. “It just seemed romantic.”

But when he encountered a professor from Chicago at a dig site on the central Iranian plateau, he made a beeline for the United States. Three years later, the shah’s regime collapsed, the universities closed, and archaeology in Iran seemed all but dead. After getting his Ph.D. at Chicago in 1987, Alizadeh went to Harvard to teach about ancient nomadism rather than go back to Iran, then he returned to Chicago as a research associate. “Culturally, I’m a Midwesterner,” he says. When he finally went to Iran for a family visit in the early 1990s, he found that most of the best researchers had left the country or retired, and he chafed at being treated as a foreigner in his own native land. But shortly after, he heard that the head of archaeology in the southern province of Fars was open-minded about foreign cooperation. Armed with a small grant from Chicago, he won permission to travel for a month with a nomadic tribe in that area, gathering ethnoarchaeological data. “After that, I realized it was possible to do something in Iran, so I kept coming back.”

After innumerable delays, frustrations, and cups of tea in Tehran offices, he finally received permission in 1996 to excavate a site in Khuzistan in the country’s southwest, but without the help of any American colleagues. In 2001, after much coaxing, he won approval to dig and survey in Elam, the region north of Khuzistan on the Iraqi border in which the earliest literate civilization in that area developed, and this time he could bring a team from the United States. “It was really terra incognita,” he says, following the revolution and disastrous Iran-Iraq war.

With money from Chicago and a U.S. National Science Foundation grant, the team members set off. But they soon discovered that a survey was impossible. “When the
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.”

---ANDREW LAWLER

DEFINING 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 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 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 was a material trace.” 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.

---ANDREW LAWLER

BMAC bastion. A fortress of Bronze Age Margiana at Gonur South in Turkmenistan.

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 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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