TEHRAN—The Bronze Age Middle East may not have had international retail giants like Ikea, but for a while it did have something similar. Around 5000 years ago, large numbers of people in a vast area stretching from Anatolia to Iran to the Arabian Peninsula were eating and drinking from the same kinds of bowls and cups, all of which incorporated a style set by the southern Mesopotamian city of Uruk.

How Uruk’s influence spread so far and wide is a contentious issue among Near Eastern archaeologists. Was this ubiquity, known as the Uruk expansion, simply a successful trading network or was it a proto-empire? The prevailing theory holds that Mesopotamian imperialists dominated large parts of the region, including the ancient city of Susa and its surrounding plain, in modern-day Iran, and exerted control as far as Iran’s central plateau to the east. New access to these sites will allow Western archaeologists and their Iranian colleagues to put this theory to the test. “The opening of Iran will have a revolutionary effect on our understanding of the Uruk expansion,” says Gilbert Stein, director of the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute.

Uruk-style pottery began to appear throughout the Middle East from 3500 B.C.E. By this time, exciting technological advances were taking place in the region around Uruk. Artisans were using a fast potter’s wheel, making mass production of pottery more tenable; farmers were starting to use plows and wheeled carts; and scribes were experimenting with ways to record trade. The archaeological record there shows a growing appetite for copper, lapis lazuli, and other goods found only in the distant highlands of today’s Syria, Turkey, and Iran. At the same time, Uruk material culture—primarily in the form of pottery—appears in settlements or quarters within towns in those highlands.

Current theory holds that Uruk peddled its wares by imperial domination. New access to Iran is painting a more complex picture. 

**Clean sweep?** Guillermo Algaze believes that Uruk’s influence was spread through waves of empire building.

**Uruk: Spreading Fashion Or Empire?**

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**DEBATE REOPENED**

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**Q: Will archaeologists object?**

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: 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: 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 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, “like a chain, 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,
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 trading domination 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 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