PAKISTANI ARCHAEOLOGY FACES ISSUES OLD AND NEW

KHAIRPUR, PAKISTAN—Ghulam Mohiuddin Veesar doesn’t have to commute to find remains of the past. Just a short walk beyond his mud-brick village in southeastern Pakistan rises a small mound covered with stone tools, pottery shards, and the occasional shell bead fashionable during the glory days of the Indus civilization. A 47-year-old archaeologist at nearby Shah Abdul Latif University, the quiet and wiry Veesar has led Pakistani and Italian colleagues to hundreds of ancient sites here on the edge of the rugged Thar Desert, without needing global positioning systems, survey maps, or other tools. This is home turf. As a teenager, he rode his motorcycle up and down these sand dunes.

The finds are opening a new window on the Indus civilization, showing that this remote region was settled for thousands of years. Veesar’s Latif colleague and friend Qasid Mallah argues that the enormous variety of sites offers a rich opportunity to understand the Indus hinterland. What’s needed, Mallah says, are massive surveys and pinpointed excavations, as well as a way to protect sites from development and looting (see main text). Given the size of the area and its harsh terrain, “it’s really a huge task,” Mallah says. With support from their vice chancellor Nilofer Shaikh, herself an Indus archaeologist, they have begun the job and hope to lure foreign archaeologists to assist. “Tell people to come and research,” Mallah says. “Everyone is welcome.”

The optimism and enthusiasm at Latif, a growing rural university that is 2 decades old, is one of a few bright spots for archaeology in Pakistan. The University of the Punjab in Lahore, the country’s largest, recently organized its first archaeology department, and a scattering of other universities conduct excavations, mostly working with foreign teams. But Pakistan has long been hampered by loss of expertise when the country was created in 1947 and severities with the Archaeological Survey of India. “We had to start from scratch,” says Anjum Javaid, assistant curator at the Lahore Fort in the northern city of Lahore. Now Pakistani researchers face new problems. “We get peanuts for excavations, we’re losing all our experienced archaeologists, and the new generation is not getting trained,” frets Javaid. Most recently, Pakistan’s provinces have been pressuring the federal government in Islamabad to abolish national control over archaeological sites. Javaid fears this could lead to abolition of the central archaeology department, which would likely diminish the budget and authority of archaeologists and make it more difficult to protect sites, he says.

Already, there are tight constraints on where archaeologists can operate. Most foreign researchers steer clear of the country at the moment. And some areas rich in sites—such as Baluchistan to the west and the North-West Frontier Province—are off-limits to both Pakistani and foreign excavators. But here in Sindh province and in other areas in the east, the countryside remains relatively peaceful. Whether or not foreigners come, Veesar says he will continue to seek new sites to catalog and dig in the Thar Desert, rattling over high sand dunes in an old jeep with Mallah. “This is not only our heritage, it’s the world’s,” he says.

nomad’s land. Ghulam Veesar (right) consults with a local shepherd in the Thar Desert.

local officials say bandits and the occasional terrorist make roads unsafe after nightfall.

At Harappa, nearly 600 kilometers to the north, the problems are more prosaic but just as challenging. Local villagers own half the land area of the sprawling ancient city and are loath to be bought out by the government. They have begun to turn part of the land into a cemetery, and a mosque built 5 centuries ago with Indus brick sits on a prominent spur of the ancient city. Those areas will remain off-limits to archaeologists. “When it comes to religion, people get emotional,” says Aasim Dogar, who directs the site. Passing by the mosque, an old man shouts an epithet at Dogar, who grumbles in reply—a sign of the contentious relationship between officials and locals. But Dogar is optimistic the deal will be closed soon, allowing a fence to be put in place to protect the mounds.

Across the border in India, villages are similarly resient of archaeologists. Half of the large Indus city of Rakhigarhi is in the hands of private owners, and the town covers several of the largest mounds. Excavations by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) began in 1997 but ground to a halt in 2000, partly because of disputes with inhabitants. “The villagers are afraid that the government will grab their land,” says Tejas Garge, who worked as a graduate student for ASI excavating at the site. He recalls village women throwing stones at him: “It was horrible. At one point, a dozen villagers came with sticks and ordered us to stop.” The team eventually abandoned their effort. Fences are going up around unoccupied mounds, and one senior ASI official says the goal is to buy out the locals and remove the village. “Only then can you dig,” he says, adding that the bureaucratic and financial obstacles to doing so are huge.

Meanwhile, archaeologists say there has been extensive looting here over the years; according to one recent rumor, a villager found and sold 30 Indus seals. That traffic has almost stopped, insists the site’s lone guard. But local schoolteacher Wazir Chand Saroae disagrees. In his modest home nearby, he shows off an impressive array of pots, bangles, ivory and lapis lazuli beads, and animal figurines carefully wrapped in newspaper and numbered according to his own archival system. Saroae is an outspoken advocate for site protection and says he does not sell his finds. “The situation has not improved much,” he says ruefully. “Villagers are still digging, and the single watchman is not effective over such a large area.”

Some archaeologists call for tougher penalties for looting, but others say the key is to educate the population. “At least one man in the village has developed a passion for this,” Garge says optimistically as he leaves Saroae’s home. Just a few meters away, he points out a 17-meter-high cliff studded with 5000-year-old potsherd and bricks; an ancient mound has been sliced away for a village road. Pigeons are busy roosting, digging holes into the layers. But the site is owned by villagers and so strictly off-limits to the spades of archaeologists.

–ANDREW LAWLER