

PROFILE: 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-blond 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.



**Fresh air.** Seyyed Mohammed Beheshti is a leading light in the push to bring back foreign researchers.

**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 here increased substantially?**

**A:** We now spend \$1.3 million a year on

ed looting in places such as Jiroft. "They are getting a lot of money in this market and forcing villagers to do the illicit excavations," he says. "We are trying to control this new wave of looting through various means: army, laws, whatever we can."

The Iranian government recently announced the creation of a special brigade called Guardians of Cultural Heritage to fight illegal digs and antiquities trafficking. Those who try to smuggle such material out of the country could face between 5 and 20 years in jail or even capital punishment.

The underlying cause of the trade, Beheshti and other Iranian officials maintain, is the hunger abroad for antiquities. Recent purchases by the Louvre are underscoring that tension between Western curators and collectors and Iranian and foreign archaeologists. Jean Perrot, a distinguished French archaeologist who headed Susa excavations before the revolution, complained at the August meeting in Tehran that a stone bowl

purchased by the Louvre bears all the stylistic hallmarks of a Jiroft piece. He says he has no proof, just a strong suspicion that it is part of the cache coming recently out of the Jiroft graves.

But his accusation meets with a hot denial from Annie Caubet, head curator of the Louvre's Department of Oriental Antiquities. In a 17 September letter to Perrot, she said she was "dismayed by the accusation" and insisted that prior to the 2002 purchase, "this work was owned by a private collection which has been in Europe since the end of the 1960s."

An official with the Paris law firm the Bureau of International Legal Services, which is representing the Iranian government, told *Science* that Iran intends to begin legal action soon to recover what Iranian officials say is the country's property. Archaeologists such as Perrot say they hope that the controversy will not interfere with their efforts to return to work in the country.

—ANDREW LAWLER

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

DEBATE REOPENED

## Uruk: Spreading Fashion Or Empire?

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

**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.



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

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.

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,