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DIE REIHE:
WELTEN SÜD- UND ZENTRALASIENS - WORLDS OF SOUTH AND INNER ASIA - MONDES DE L'ASIE DU SUD ET DE L'ASIE CENTRALE

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“MASTERS” AND “NATIVES”

DIGGING THE OTHERS' PAST

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Excavating in Iran and Central Asia: Cooperation or Competition

Abstract

In the study of the human past, the Iranian plateau and Central Asia have the privilege to host some of the most significant historical, archaeological and cultural developments on the planet. From around the 2nd millennium BC, the Iranian plateau participated in the realization of a series of ever larger and powerful political units, culminating in the Achaemenid dynasty of the first millennium BC, and the numerous chiefdoms and state political formations, many of which nomadic in character, in Central Asia. The activities of the archaeological research in Iran and Central Asia, therefore, provide a framework for placing some of the most significant events of the past. In today's ongoing European cultural and economic expansion, with Iran as a future near neighbour and Central Asia as a kind of suburban farther, but at the Western border with China, the need for a more in-depth understanding and appreciation of their past and, therefore, of the present, can hardly be procrastinated over time. Those areas have been essential in the history of humanity, regardless of their historical, linguistic and ethnic background, and their political/national outcomes in the modern and contemporary times as well. The archaeological activities within those areas have been at least since one century essential as well in order to understand the related Western and native consciousness of their historical past.

Keywords: Iran, Central Asia, Archaeology, Past.

Bruno GENITO, Università di Napoli “L’Orientale”, Napoli, Italy, bruno.genito@gmail.com

Introduction¹

In the study of the human past, the Iranian plateau² and Central Asia³ have the privilege to have hosted some of the most significant historical, archaeological and cultural developments on the planet. From around the 2nd millennium BC, the Iranian plateau participated in the realization of a series of ever larger and powerful political units, culminating in the Achaemenid dynasty of the first millennium BC.⁴ The Empire stretched from the Eastern shores of Europe to the deserts of Central

¹ I would like to express my deepest thank to the organisers of this *colloquium*: Philippe Bornet (University of Lausanne), Michel Fuchs (University of Lausanne), Svetlana Gorshenina (University of Lausanne/Collège de France), and Claude Rapin (CNRS-ENS, Paris/University of Lausanne).

² Under Iranian Plateau we generally mean the large geographic and geological setting distributed from Eastern Anatolia to Afghanistan. The modern national State of Iran existed since the Safawid dynasty in the beginning of the 17th AD, and its territory, was more or less occupied, according to the majority of the scholars, by Iranian speaking peoples as early or middle 2nd millennium BC.

³ For the common terminology used for Central Asia, we could start a long discussion about its geographical, historical and even political meaning (Gorshenina 2016).

⁴ The Achaemenid clan / dynasty ruled over the Persian tribes, most probably, already in the 9th century BC, when they were still established in northwestern Iran, nearby Urmia lake. Of a king with the name Achemenes there is no any historical evidence. But it may have been under him that the Persians, under the pressure of the Medes, the Assyrians and the Urartians, migrated to the south in the Zagros, where they founded the small state of Parsumaš, near the borders with Elam. Teispes, liberated from the supremacy during the so-called Scythian *interregnum*, expanded his small vassal kingdom of Elam, according to the documents from the 7th century, conquered Anshan/Anzan and Fars. He was the first to bear the title of King of “Anshan City,” which was a traditional title until Darius. In 522 BC Teispes / Čišpiš seems to have divided, at his death, the territory of his

Asia, from the Black Sea coast to the Nile and Hindu valleys. In the footsteps of the great Achaemenid Empire, a succession of powerful states at regional level focused on Iran followed, the Parthian⁵ and Sasanian,⁶ before Iran completely reverted to Islamic influence.

The activities of the archaeological research in Iran and Central Asia, therefore, provide a framework for placing some of the most significant events of the past. In today's ongoing European cultural and economic expansion, with Iran as a future near neighbour and Central Asia as a kind of suburban farther, but at the western border with China, the need for a more in-depth understanding and appreciation of their past and, therefore, of the present, can hardly be procrastinated over time.

From the earliest times, through the numerous archaeological cultures of Iran and Central Asia, one can perceive the ancient great and crucial role of the areas in the present territory of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kirghisistan, Tajikistan and partially, perhaps, also Afghanistan.

Iran and Central Asia have been essential in the history of humanity, regardless of their historical, linguistic and ethnic background, and their political / national outcomes in the modern and contemporary times as well. And the archaeological research in those areas has been intense and full of important related discoveries, often also exceptional.

The names of the disciplines in Europe related to the archaeological activity in those areas have been particularly important and full of unexpected meanings. Faced with the definitions of *Archaeology of Iran* and *Archaeology of Central Asia*, often also correlated each other, this apparent simple terminology is related to the following important and very complex aspects:

- colonial and postcolonial history of the European and Western archaeological research;

kingdom between his two sons; perhaps Cyrus himself ruled over Parsumaš, Ariaramnes again Anšan and Fars. These two kings and their immediate successors played a minor role in the contemporary ancient Near East, which was divided between the Medes and the Assyrians. Cyrus, king of Parsumaš, in an inscription from 639 BC, seems to have paid homage to Assurbanipal. Later he recognized the king's sovereignty. The Persian kingdom was, then, assembled under Cyrus II as a vassal state; Cyrus II, in the chronicle of Nabonidus, is therefore called "Anshan King" and "King of Parsu." In 550 BC Cyrus (called "the Great" by the Greeks) overthrew the Median Empire of Astyages and led the Persians to dominate the Iranian peoples; reached control over all Iran as the first real monarch of the Achaemenid dynasty. Within a few years he founded an unprecedented multinational empire – a world prime of historic importance, as it included all the evolved states of the ancient Near East. In 547-546 BC, Cyrus conquered the crescent kingdom of Croesus, that is, almost all of Asia Minor, and in 539 BC, Babylon and the neo-Babylonian empire. Cyrus's state, which was to be further expanded under his successors, far surpassed all his predecessors. His son Cambises II conquered Egypt (525 BC), Nubia and Cirenaica (Libya). With Darius I, no doubt the greatest of the Achaemenid kings, a collateral branch of the family reached power.

⁵ The Parthian political unit (247 BC-224 AD), also known as Arsacid, whose name comes from Arsaces I of Parthia, leader of the Parni tribe, was an important Iranian political and cultural power mostly in ancient Iran and Iraq. He conquered the region of Parthia in the northeast of Iran, a rebellious satrapy against the Seleucid Empire. Parthia's Mithridates I (171-138 BC) greatly expanded the power by ripping the Media and Mesopotamia to the Seleucids. By the time of its utmost splendor, the Parthian political unity stretched from the northern slopes of Euphrates river to what is now central Eastern Turkey, to Eastern Iran. Located on the trade routes of the *Silk Roads* between the Roman Empire in the Mediterranean basin and the Han Empire in China, it became a very important center for the global trade of the time.

⁶ The Sasanian political unit, also known as Ārānshahr, was the last dynastic power in Iran before the spread of Islam from 224 to 651 AD. The Sasanian political unit, which succeeded the Parthian, is recognized as one of the world's greatest powers of the time, next to its closest rival the Roman-Byzantine, for over 400 years. Founded by Ardashir I, after the fall of the Parthian and the defeat of the last Arsacid king Artabanus V, the Sasanian political unit, to its fullest extent, included all the present Iran, Iraq, East Africa (Bahrain, Kuwait Oman, Qatif, Qatar, Arab Emirates), the Levant (Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan), Armenia, Caucasus area (Georgia, Azerbaijan, Dagestan, Ossetia, Abkhazia), Turkey, Central Asia (Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan), Yemen and Pakistan.

- the use and abuse of the past, culturally and politically manipulated both in the West and in the East, since the beginning of modern archaeology;
- the difficult and tortuous journey of the socio-political and cultural emancipation process of most of the less developed local peoples.

Without necessarily going into the details of the reasons that led scholars of all kinds to create and use this terminology up to the present time, it is certain that in Western university systems it is very difficult to find definitions of national (?) archaeological traditions such as those of Britain, Italy, France, Germany, etc. On the contrary, definitions of such archaeologies as that of Iran, Central Asia, etc., have always appeared rather plausible. It is certainly difficult to try to propose, now, different definitions, changing the old ones, but it would have been extremely useful to rethink in time the history of European and Western academic disciplines and their research in those areas, as it could help to restore the whole issue. For example, it would be useful to clarify, where possible, the great common responsibilities of local and foreign scientific communities: the former doing little to achieve a sufficient level of emancipation from the Western colonial ideas, the latter being very focused on the development of their own opinions in building the realities of the outside world.

The main issues in the background

Since it is easy to understand these aspects, already dealt with by many and extraordinary scholars, and sharing out with different areas and perspectives of research, they are closely related to the following issues: the meaning and concept of *nation*⁷ and of its outcome of nationalism;⁸ the *history of the nations* in Iran⁹ and Central Asia;¹⁰ the *archaeological*

⁷ The concept of “nation” is historically very complex and it may refer to: a community of individuals sharing common features such as language, geographic location, history, traditions, culture, ethnicity and possibly typology of power; and also a “sovereign state” of people, ethnicity, or tribe with a common descendant, language, and perhaps a history. Different currents of thought for “nation” also include the concept of blood or a community of individuals of one or more nationalities with their own territory and government or even a “tribal federation.” Some authors regard the traditional notion of “nation” obsolete, and prefer to refer to a free social contract between peoples who recognize themselves in a common constitution and extend it to national patriotism. For the history of the concept in Europe cf. Chabod 1961a, 1961b.

⁸ The term was used for the first time around 1770, but was commonly used only in the last decades of the 19th century. It is not possible to reconstruct the whole complex story of nationalism, but three are the recognized phases of the “nationalization” process in Europe: Restoration (1815/1848) which can be identified when nationalism constitutes a progressive and liberal ideology supported by a bourgeoisie still struggling with the old aristocratic classes for the government of the state; the age of free trade (1848/1871) which seeks to consolidate bourgeois hegemony based on the binomial state of the liberal state; the age of imperialism (1871-1914) when, also because of the long and severe economic crisis known, the national bourgeoisie uses the new combination of imperialism and protectionism in a growing and emerging competition in the first World War.

⁹ The Iranian nation had a great political and cultural influence on both its neighbors in the Middle East and around the world. Since the time (namely indefinable) of the Prophet Zoroaster, of the powerful Persian political unities, to the arrival of Islam in the 7th century AD, the Saljuq and the Safawid times until the 1979 Revolution, the different ethnic, cultural and linguistic entities of Iran managed to survive until the constitution of the modern nation, held together by a common culture.

¹⁰ Central Asia is here a geographic macro-region, composed today of approximately five states: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The history of this geographic area is dotted with epic events, thriving cities and great conquerors, which have greatly contributed to writing the history of the world. Central Asia enters for the first time in the history in the 6th century BC, when that area, for the most part, is incorporated into the Persian Empire of Cyrus the Great. In the following centuries, although largely independent, the region continued to belong to the Persian Empire and subsequently to its successors, the Seleucid Empire, which emerged after the conquests of Alexander the Great, the Parthian and finally the Sasanian Empire. The stability of the area was finally shaken in the 7th century AD, when the Sasanians were quickly overwhelmed by the Arab invasion.

research in those areas; and, last but not least, the *cultural and ethnic identity*¹¹ pursued by peoples of Western and Asian culture.

It is basically with the help of these aspects, proposed and interpreted in a different way, that the relationship between “masters” and “natives” in the archaeological research in Iran and Central Asia, can historically find the most meaningful reason for its being, and contribute to the full understanding of the current debate. Meanwhile, I would say that I have experienced such a long, intense and complicated professional activity in the field in several countries, such as Iran under the Shah, Hungary, Turkmenistan, USSR (Soviet period), Russia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Iran of the present time, and finally China, which I fear do not have the necessary balance in this kind of discussion.

Finally, as an Italian, I would say that my country, once a part of the Roman empire,¹² and later involved in the ridiculous and tragic colonial experience in Africa at the end of the 19th century and during Mussolini’s time, was never a “real” and consequently full “colonial” political power.¹³ Even Marco Polo and his family, who ran his own commercial affairs in the name of the Venice republic, cannot be considered as a colonialist *tout court* in the 13th century.

Nationalism, Colonialism and Archaeology

Nationalism, archaeology and colonialism have long been in close relationship.¹⁴ Since mid-19th century, the territories of Iran and Central Asia have been a real resource for archaeological materials that have begun to enrich the Western collections, and which, at the same time, has helped to exclude peoples who lived there, from the need to recover their heritage and history. This disparity has been very complex in nature, and it oscillates between the perception of local workers as unskilled, and that of workers requiring constant supervision by non-residents. In addition, in the past there has been a profound lack of local interest that has, unfortunately, been most neglected. Financing Western projects in the Middle East¹⁵ has far exceeded the advantages that these countries could afford for their

¹¹ Skin color and facial features have long been a base for classifying humans. No matter how much it has been possible to advance, it is natural that most of us make stereotypes and base our behavior towards one person on his aspect and racial affinities. This is more pronounced in the Western world or among whites, although skin-based discrimination is common across the globe. Sociologists have always been fascinated by racial, cultural and ethnic differences between different people, and the words of ethnicity and culture have always been confused and often used interchangeably even if there are many differences between them.

¹² That certainly was not an Italian Empire!

¹³ Italian colonialism began in 1882 with the possession of Assab in Eritrea and with the greatest Italian expansion, the colonial possessions included four territories of Africa (Libya, Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea), Dodecanese, Albania, and the small Chinese concession in the city of Tienstin. On May 9, 1936, through the declaration of full sovereignty of the Kingdom of Italy on Ethiopia and the assumption by the King of Italy of the title of Emperor of Ethiopia, it was proclaimed a colonial empire destined to fall following the overthrows suffered by Italy during the World War II. In the postwar period only Somalia remained under Italian trust until 1960: Del Boca 1985; Iacona 2009.

¹⁴ Kohl 1998; Kohl/Fawcett 1995.

¹⁵ The term “Middle East” originated in the British Office of India in 1850, became more known when Alfred Thayer Mahan used it in 1902 to designate the area between Arabia and India. He was a United States naval officer and historian, considered by some the most important American strategist of the 19th century. His books (Mahan 1890, 1892) made him world-famous and perhaps the most influential American author of the 19th century. During this time, the British and Russian empires were fighting for the influence in Central Asia, a rivalry that would become known as the “Great Game.” Mahan understood not only the strategic importance of the region, but also of its central area, the Persian Gulf. He pointed out to the area surrounding the Persian Gulf as the Middle East, and stated that after the Suez Canal in Egypt, the Persian Gulf was the most important maritime checkpoint for Britain to prevent the Russian advancing to British India. Mahan used the term for the first time in an article entitled “The Persian Gulf and International Relations” published in September 1902 in the

own projects, leading to some sort of economic neocolonialism within archaeology as well. Reports that provided studies and data on investigated archaeological sites are rarely published in the language of the host country. Despite all the studies of intercultural interactions related to the Middle East excavations and their impact on the lives and opinions of local inhabitants, archaeology-related issues rarely find themselves in major journals. In addition, objects from local territories can be easily hosted away in Western countries and local museums, and on the other hand, remain unavailable to the local inhabitants. Direct access to various archives has helped to create a self-critical story of discipline, which has led to a better understanding of the dynamics of the production of the knowledge. Ultimately, today's goal is to create productive means by which to raise awareness of the importance that local communities attach to their past. Looking at how local museums have become distant from local communities, more insights have been gathered on how to approach the cognitive experience of local societies. This opened up further discussions, reflections and guidelines for archaeology of the future.

The question of the “different” and of the “unknown” was born at the beginning of the discovery of new and unexplored territories, especially in the Century of Enlightenment (18th century) and of new rationalism, the forerunner of scientific progress that has permeated the whole 19th century culture. The exploration of unknown lands, contact with local populations, and the creation of new geographic maps prompted an incredible increase in demands that go beyond pure mapping.

The debate on the approach to other cultures and identities and the perception of the latter in the eyes of a constantly evolving world, has been and is of paramount importance whereas anthropology and ethnography have known a very successful period, which from anthropometric data paved the way for a psychological and costume dimension.

The theme of “barbarians,” as the Greeks said, is ancient and historically very well documented from Greece to China, and is endowed with the descriptions of peoples and customs, even in times very far from the period in question: Herodotus gives us an example in his *Stories*, and this is a theme that emerges also in the *De Bello Gallico* by Julius Caesar, whereas, besides the description of the military campaigns of conquest of Gallia, one can observe the narratives of the habits of the local populations. The explorers' diaries of the following centuries are full of anecdotes and descriptions of mysterious and unknown places and indigenous peoples.

This theme, therefore, originates from immemorial time, and constitutes a story of the conquests, discoveries and interpretations of “the other” at the same time. From the 18th century, the focus of analysis has been on the relationship between the conception of the state of nature and the scientific and ethno-anthropological knowledge of the “wild,” represented in diaries and in writings left by travelers of the time. Thus, the antithesis between the “civilized world” and the “wild world” emerges, and sometimes, it represents the superiority of one on the other and the anticipation of a racial problem, leading to its extreme consequences and tragic speculations on the theme. It will find justification for the colonialism and imperialism of Victorian memory.

The concept of education will become the premise of various justifications for colonialism: the “savages” appear educated and civil, superior to animals only if they receive the education from the “most advanced” peoples. Conquest, colonization and exploitation, therefore, merge together in a sort of paternalistic claim to enlighten and redeem peoples still immersed in the darkness of a ruthless nature, ready to overthrow fragile human destinies. Sometimes the “savage” becomes a metaphor, in

National Review, a British magazine. The ancient cultures that refer to this area have been, however, traditionally designated by the term as *Ancient Near East*, sometimes even including Iran.

all its candor and naivety, of the criticism of the *status quo*, according to a new reading of Voltaire; other times this perception is enriched with the narratives of anthropophagic episodes or cruel human sacrifices. A classic example of the wild as the bearer of evil, the archetype of self-destruction, can be seen in the fate of the population of Easter island, who have lived in isolation for centuries and symbolize the violence of nature and who naturally suffer from violence. The first Europeans to arrive in the island, in fact, reported scenes of great physical and moral degradation.

The question of the relationship between “civilians” and “savages”, the primacy of education, and the need to extend development to other territories and their peoples to move them from their original primordial state, lies properly in the colonialism and imperialism which, on behalf of a civilizing mission, have provoked an unnatural extension of the national sovereignty of the late 19th century European powers, and found a particularly significant role and aspect. J.A. Hobson¹⁶ addresses the theme of imperialism with a lucid analysis highlighting the different aspects of the English economic expansion describing that type of evolution critically. The wild assists as a lower entity and as such, require the intervention of more socially efficient nations. From the myth of the “good savage” comes the transposition of social Darwinism as a justification adopted by nationalisms and ideologies of the 19th and 20th century. The catastrophic world wars and the blind consequent widespread violence should not have taken place in the Europe of the last century. Not to speak about the Napoleonic enterprise in Egypt in the beginning of the 19th century, which in fact gave origin to the Egyptology. Last but not least, the modern way of digging into the past – which was not a colonial phenomenon in Europe from the excavations of Pompeii and the contemporary beginning of the formation of the collections of St. Petersburg’s Hermitage – remains a discipline of Western origin, dating back to the Middle Ages with the humanistic concept of *Res Antiquitatum*. Not to mention the collecting habits of the ancient noble men of Greece and Rome, many times literally documented, including Pausanias’s information, depicting the antiquity of his time.

Iran and Central Asia

Now, although Iran and Central Asia have lived different stories, cultural identities, politics and ethnicities, and have developed and lived through complex historical events, we will try to briefly illustrate the main aspects that marked the relationship between the “natives” and “masters” in the two related areas. Of course it should be noted that Iran has been a sovereign country for centuries, and so it is difficult to compare it with the reality of several central Asian countries, which have only recently become independent.

The issue of “masters” and “natives,” though significant and historically important in relation to the cultural relations between socially and culturally asymmetrical countries, presented as a phenomenon in itself, is probably very misleading. Ever-challenged by the most advanced countries, where social and political differences have encountered similar problems, Italy has always been the subject of various foreign archaeological activities.

The relationship between nationalism, politics and the development and practices of archaeology has recently become a popular theme among archaeologists around the world. The local reaction to foreign interference in Iran and Central Asia, has played an important role in strengthening nationalist feelings and needs to be studied and explored. It is stated that every time the political situation provides a favourable environment, intellectuals and politicians have, in various abilities, exploited archaeological and historical documentation, especially that of the Achaemenid, Parthian and Sasanian

¹⁶ Hobson 1974 [1902].

political unities in Iran, and those of the Scythians, Saka, Sogdians, Eftalites, and Turkish political unities in Central Asia. Nationalism – as an ideology that confers rights and political achievements in a nation as a whole – in its various social, functional, temporal and spatial manifestations, has long been a fascinating theme for socio-cultural anthropologists.

Archaeologists, on the other hand, have recently begun to invent new approaches to nationalism by exploring the relationship between their profession and that ideology and the effects that nationalistic sentiments may leave on the development and practices of archaeology in different parts of the globe. Iran and Central Asia, thanks to their rich archaeological and historical past and to their contemporary socio-cultural diversity, are particularly interesting to be explored, mainly in the connections between nationalism, archaeology and political manipulation of the archaeological documentation to promote nationalist policies.

In the 1970s, when I participated (1972-1977) in the work of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Iran, the feeling that those jobs would have a continuity and development throughout our lives took us over. Of course things went differently, and despite the dramatic and irresolvable dilemma of what was more important, the fate of a scholar or that of a people, a whole generation of young scientists and scholars had to accept the inevitability of a forced choice.

Something similar happened to many of us between 1989 and 1992, near the end of the Soviet Union, when the collapse of the political control over Central Asia started a long and painful process of national independence in the differing countries of Central Asia, whose epilogue is still well far from over. Paradoxically, that major break, on the one hand, contributed to the growth of numerous archaeological foreign field activities, and on the other hand, some exaggerations in the construction of their own national independence, have created numerous other difficulties for foreign placement in those countries.

We know how nationalistic exasperation brings along forcefulness and manipulations in the construction of the national identities. The Europeans are well aware just because (as in Italy and Germany) they have directly experienced the political misuse of their cultural policy. There is no need to make comparisons unlikely, but the extreme forms of political nationalism all lead in the same direction of a strong control and manipulative skills of the past.

The political use of the past may be more or less soft, and the limitations can be more or less democratic, or more or less undemocratic: one thing is certain, it cannot seriously contribute to an impartial historical reconstruction of the ancient world.

The case of Iran

It is common knowledge that Iran became a political modern unity, at the beginning of the 17th century with the Safawid dynasty, when many other European countries were not yet nations (as Italy for example). This could have allowed the new country, despite numerous European interferences, to develop an autonomous, though controversial, state-building process which went, with its up and downs, to the present time.

It is also known that during the 1979 revolution and the Iran-Iraq war (1979-1988), all the archaeological activities of the foreign expeditions were stopped. Among the European archaeologists, including Japanese and North Americans who were active in Iran, the younger generation looked for other field job opportunities, and senior generation sought to publish the findings of their research before retirement or death.

As a result, Iran, once an important research center, gradually became a rather marginal area. Recent developments in relations between Iran and many Western countries, including the United States, have shown an improvement in the cultural exchange, and archaeological research of foreign shipments could begin.¹⁷ Therefore, today seems the ripe time for a review of the development of archaeology, nationalism and political developments in Iran over the last 100 years. Among the many lessons to learn from this, one can begin to understand why Iran has undergone drastic socio-political changes and has chosen so long to survive in a political and archaeological isolation.

The foundations of the Iranian culture and identity have proved to be resistant to socio-political changes both in pre-Islamic and Islamic times, through what a famous Italian scholar called a sort of archaic appeal to the past.¹⁸ With this, the various processes of political legitimacy characterizing the whole story of the country have always been crossed by a strong call to the past. In the Pahlavi period, pre-Islamic traditions were quite influential on Iran, and especially in the case of the establishment of royalty, it was always claimed that the Qajar dynasty modelled its sovereignty in accordance with the canons of the Sasanian monarchy, transmitted through general stories, instructions for royalty and various versions of the *Shah Nameh (Book of Kings)* of Ferdowsi. One of the most vital factors in this cultural continuity and the distinctive sign of the Iranian national identity is certainly the language. Having been used in Iran at least since the time of the Achaemenid in the 6th century BC, the Persian language has assumed a distinctive character and is intertwined with identity and nationalist unity, albeit always written, as it is known, in Semitic characters (Cuneiform, Aramaic, Arabic).

Academic archaeological researchers trained by Iran and abroad in the 1960s and 1970s have had to free themselves from nationalist factors. In fact, very little in the archaeological literature of this period seems to convey particularly nationalist connotation.¹⁹

Nationalism and Archaeology in Iran

The impact of the anti-monarchical position of the new Iranian society was really profound.²⁰ In the early years following the revolution, everything associated with monarchy was despised, the noun “shah” was removed from many words or replaced by nouns such as Islam or Imam. The government also made an attempt to abolish the Nowruz party or to shorten the New Year holidays, but gave up in the face of serious objections from the general public. Textbooks, especially those of Iran’s history, have been rewritten, emphasizing the Islamic period and religious figures and movements, marginalizing the pre-Islamic period as the age of ignorance, and denouncing the Iranian kings as

¹⁷ Niknami 2000.

¹⁸ Bausani 1962.

¹⁹ In those years only a few archaeologists expressed nationalist feelings in their writings, including Ali Sami and Ali-Akbar Sarfaraz. Ali Sami (1910-1989) born in Shiraz, was a teacher who when he met Erich Schmidt in 1936 was involved in Persepolis’s work. After the departure of Schmidt, he served as Hosein Ravanbod’s assistant and in 1941 replaced him as Persepolis director until 1949 and from 1952 to 1961. Between 1949 and 1951, Sami also excavated at Pasargadae. He wrote more than fifty books and articles on various aspects of ancient Iranian civilization (Mousavi 1990), including Achaemenids (Sami 1962-1969) and Sasanians (Sami 1963-1965). Both books constitute a tour de force of the knowledge available on these two periods of the Iranian history. In his introduction to the first volume of the Achaemenid civilization, Sami (1962: 3-4) exalts the greatness of the ancient people of Iran, hoping that the remains of archaeological remains can be preserved. Similarly Ali Akbar Sarfaraz resumed digging in the Sasanian city of Bishapur, and in his introduction to the excavation report on a monumental structure of the Achaemenid period, presumably believed by him in the time of Cyrus II, near Borazjan (Sarfaraz 1971: 19) celebrates the 2500th anniversary of the foundation of the Empire and the year of Cyrus the Great, the founder of the glorious empire.

²⁰ Abdi 2001; Boucharlat 2006.

oppressive despots. Pre-Islamic monuments have not been remembered as sources of national pride, but as symbols of monarchical tyranny imposed on popular masses. In harmony with this antagonism towards the Iranian past, nationalism has largely been rejected as a Western concept promoted by colonialist and “pro-Western” intellectuals. The term *mellat* (nation) has given way to *ommat* (the Muslim community) and nationalism, as soon as the Islamic government has been stabilized, and nationalists have been outlawed along with leftists and royalists. After a brief period of admiration, Mohammad Mosaddeq, a symbol of the Islamic State, has been rejected for a fraternity among Muslims in the world. Iranian political nationalism has been discredited and its opponent, Ayatollah Kashani, has been eulogized. Fortunately, the antagonism towards the past of Iran has never materialized in concrete actions, although during 1978 many government buildings, banks, liqueur shops and a number of foreign embassies were attacked by revolutionaries, there is no tangible evidence that they vandalized museums or archaeological or historical sites.²¹ Archaeology in Iran had suffered enormously from Pahlavi’s self-critical demonstrations. Consequently, the new ideology interpreted archaeology as nothing but a pseudoscience serving as a tribune to glorify despotism and justify the real oppression of the masses against the new belief system. As a result, archaeology fell into disarray. The Department of Archaeology at the University of Tehran, the only academic institution teaching archaeology in Iran at the time, was temporarily closed during the Revolution (1979-1982), attempting to abolish or incorporate it into the Department of History despite many objections from the professors of archaeology. The Institute of Archaeology at the University of Tehran survived only nominally, not to resume its activities until 1990. In general, most foreign archaeologists were accused of being agents and banned from work in Iran, while some Iranian archaeologists were forced to retreat or leave the country.

Although the *Archaeological Service* and the *Office for the Protection and Conservation of Historical Remains* have remained functional for the first years after the revolution, archaeological work has been reduced to a few operations per year, largely in nature urgent or safeguarding. Problem-oriented research has ceased and archaeology has become a mere bureaucratic activity.²²

The ICHO (Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization), who initially worked under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education and subsequently under the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guide, was entrusted with a large responsibility for the recovery, protection, preservation and introduction of archaeological and historical remnants in its widest sense.²³

²¹ According to various rumours, during the riots in February 1979, the Golestan Palace was attacked and some items were stolen. A curator of the palace seems to have gone straight on to the revolutionary officials asking for their help. It was immediately announced on radio that this should not have happened because those objects belonged to the people. All stolen objects were returned the next day.

²² For a brief summary of the archaeological activities in Iran between 1979 and 1984, see the *Archaeological Service of Iran 1983* and the *Vice-directorship for the Protection and Conservation in 1984*. It took almost 10 years for archaeology in Iran to recover. On January 30, 1985, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran established the ICHO (Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization), which incorporated the *Center for Archaeological Research*, the *Center for Traditional Crafts*, the *Center and the Museum of Ethnography*, the *Office for Historical Remains*, the *Iran Bastan Museum*, the *Provincial Cultural Heritage Office*, the *Museum Office*, the *Office of Historical Structures*, the *Office of the Palaces*, the *National Center for the Protection of the Antiquities of Iran* and the *Office of the Associations of the Golestan Palace*. On April 22, 1988, the parliament ratified the constitution of the ICHO.

²³ To achieve this goal, the ICHO originally had four vice-presidents: for archaeological, ethnographic, folk art and epigraphic research; for protection and preservation of archaeological and historical remains; for education; and for administration and finance. In September 1996 the ICHO was transformed into a research institute. Former Research Offices have been transformed into five distinct research centers: Archaeological Research Center, Language and Dialect Research Center, Ethnographic Research Center, Center for Architecture and Historic-Cultural Monuments and Research Center for the Storage. In November 2000 a sixth palaeo-

In addition, local communities have been formed in rural areas for the protection of archaeological and historical sites. Illegal excavations and looting of archaeological and historical sites, which had become an ordinary activity in remote areas in the early years following the revolution, were largely avoided; dealing with antiquities was abolished and in 1990 the government launched massive repression against illegal excavations and antique dealers. Antique shops were closed, hundreds of people arrested, tens of thousands of artefacts seized, and some members of staff from some foreign embassies allegedly linked to illegal diggers and antique merchants were expelled from the country. After the ICHO has resumed the Iran-oriented archaeological research in 1990, archaeological activities have considerably increased. Various large-scale national projects involving investigation, excavation and storage have been planned. In addition, some smaller scale projects are operating on a regular basis.²⁴ The ICHO has also sponsored the first symposia on archaeological research activities in Iran, the first in Susa on 14-17 April 1994²⁵ and the second in Tehran on 18 and 21 November 1997; these symposia have continued in different forms and organization until now. These conferences have provided the Iranian archaeologists with the opportunity to meet and discuss the latest findings of their research and the problems in the Iranian archaeology.²⁶ In addition to the Department of Archaeology at the University of Tehran, along the only academic center for the teaching of archaeology in Iran, there are archaeology departments in several other Iranian universities, including the Tarbiyat-e Modarres University (MA degree and Ph.D.), Free University of Abhar and Kazerun (BA) and Teheran (MA), Zahedan University and Bu-Ali Sina University of Hamedan (BA). The ICHO also had its own training centers, with BA degree in various fields including archaeology, museum studies and ethnography.

Central Asia

More complicated is the story of the archaeological research activities conducted in Central Asia, both in the pre-Soviet, Soviet²⁷ and post-Soviet times. Different were the cultural traditions in the differing areas which since 1917 constituted the wide geo-political area of Soviet Union (Russian and different other regional cultural values), and profoundly distant are, now, the aims and the results expected from the nationalist epoch of new independent countries since 1991.

anthropological and palaeolithic research center was set up. Now the ICHO works under the auspices of the Research Council, consisting of the Director of the ICHO, the Vice for Research, the Research Center Directors, and three to five university scholars or other research institutes. In summer of 1997, the Center for Archaeological Research developed three departments to design, organize and undertake research on prehistoric, historical and Islamic periods. The foundation of the ICHO in 1985 marks the beginning of a new era for archaeological activities in Iran. Shortly after its establishment, the ICHO established offices in centers of all provinces, with secondary offices in major cities. Recording of archaeological and historical sites has gained momentum, and guards, operating in provincial and regional offices, have been assigned to protect archaeological sites.

²⁴ In addition, for the first time after the revolution, a joint ICHO-Oriental Institute project at the University of Chicago conducted some surveys in the northwestern Fars in March 1995, followed by a joint excavation at Chogha Bonut in Susiana in September-October 1996, and a joint Iranian-German excavation at Arisman in April-May of 2000.

²⁵ Mousavi 1998.

²⁶ The second symposium was followed by the inauguration of a new series, *Archaeological Reports of Iran (ARI)*, the official journal of the Archaeological Research Center, mainly relating to the publication of reports on archaeological projects. *ARI* will join the small family of journals published by ICHO: *Miras-e Farhangi* (1989-), *Asar* (1980-) and *Muzehd* (1980-), as well as the *Iranian Journal of Archaeology and History* (published by Iran Press University, 1986-).

²⁷ Field/Prostov 1937.

The prehistory of Western Central Asia remained almost entirely unknown until after the Russian conquest of most of the region in the second half of the 19th century. Archaeological research soon followed, and by the 1880s investigations of prehistoric sites were underway.

Although Marxist ideas were introduced in pre-Revolutionary Russia, the development of Soviet archaeology started since the beginning of the post-revolution times. The establishment of the Academy for the History of Material Culture and the rivalry between the two leading centers, Leningrad and Moscow, gave major changes in the approach to theory with political developments, especially those related to the Great Purges and the cult of personality during the Stalin times. Subsequently, a thaw and loosening of ideological grip occurred during the Khrushchev and Brezhnev era. The real critical point today is to establish what the Marxist Soviet archaeology was, and if it was possible to develop a genuine Marxist archaeology. The Perestroika and the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s allowed to gain more freedom in pursuing academic research, but certainly archaeology as an academic discipline declined inexorably. During the Soviet era, systematic research on the prehistoric archaeology of Soviet Central Asia began, and, by means of a series of field campaigns, surveys and excavations, a spatial framework and a chronological sequence for the prehistoric past of Turkmenistan and the other Central Asian republics, were established. Great advances in knowledge were made, particularly after the Second World War, when the investigation of tell-like sites on the Kopet Dagh piedmont, revealed the former existence there of numerous Neolithic agro-pastoral villages and larger, more urban settlements of the Chalcolithic period and the Bronze Age. Most Western archaeologists remained unaware of these new discoveries, and the way in which research results were interpreted and reported was constrained by Marxist ideology, as is very evident when the voluminous Russian archaeological literature of the period is studied. The history of research on prehistoric archaeology in Turkmenistan and adjacent areas in Uzbekistan, northeastern Iran, and northern Afghanistan is quite long. Most of the detailed publications in Russian have not been synthesized by Soviet scholars, and very few Western archaeologists have summarized the Russian literature in any comprehensive way, with the notable exceptions of Philip L. Kohl²⁸ and Fredrik T. Hiebert.²⁹

There are some basic overviews in Russian, but these tend to omit much of the significant detail in the original research publications. This situation appears to be due, in part at least, to rivalry and lack of collaboration during the Soviet era between the Institute of Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR in Moscow and the branch of the Institute in Leningrad, as well as the strong although unofficial direction exerted by Moscow and Leningrad over the institutes of archaeology of the Academies of Science in the Central Asian republics. A secondary reason for the lack of Soviet attempts to synthesize archaeological data (although this situation has changed following the dissolution of the Soviet Union) is the formulaic system of conducting archaeological research and interpreting archaeological data that was prescribed by Soviet ideology. It required investigators to fit an archaeological site into a three-tier hierarchy of local variant, archaeological sub-culture, and ultimately a designated group of archaeological cultures, and it encouraged comparison of like with like within the hierarchy across geographical regions while discouraging comparison of like with unlike. This favored the perception and study of archaeological sites and prehistoric cultures as separate entities and militated against attempts at regional synthesis. Forty-four originarian agricultural sites in Western Central Asia, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan pre-Soviet archaeological investigations in the present territory of Turkmenistan, began to be detected during the 1880s. The initial stage of

²⁸ Kohl 1981, 1984.

²⁹ Hiebert 1994, 2003.

activity was marked by the plundering of sites for the international art market as well as the use of *ad hoc* or haphazard techniques of excavation. More systematic investigations began when general A.V. Komarov, the Imperial Russian governor of Transcaspian areas,³⁰ organized exploratory excavations at several sites. They included the great urban center of ancient Merv in the Murghab delta, northeast of the present-day city of Mary, which occupied a pivotal position on the *Silk Route* between China and the West. Then in 1886, he turned his attention to the large mounds at Anau on the Kopet Dagh piedmont east of Ashgabad, where he bisected the north mound with a massive trench, expecting it to contain a royal burial, possibly that of Alexander the Great. Although no such burial was found, he realized that he had unearthed evidence of stone and Bronze Age occupation, and his trench was the earliest large-scale excavation of prehistoric deposits undertaken in Turkmenistan.³¹

Within the archaeology in Transcaucasia, an area of exceptional ethnic and linguistic diversity, and recently, a scene of numerous and often bloody territorial disputes, political activity extends to the destruction of cultural monuments. More commonly, archaeological interpretations simply mirror political claims. The large amount of artifacts of cultural origins and the difficult their ethnic attribution produce hyperbole that makes impossible a detailed synthesis of the Caucasian prehistory. There are serious obligations for archaeologists working in politically charged situations, and these obligations are best met by the establishment of criteria for acceptable “readings” of one’s prehistoric past that are not chauvinistic or nationalistic.

In the history of the Khorezmian Archaeological-Ethnographic Expedition from its inception (1937) to its end (1997) after the dissolution of the USSR, three stages are distinguished: pre-war beginnings (1937 to 1941); post-war heyday (1945 to 1976), the most prolific and successful stage of work; and final decline (1976 to 1997) during which work was eventually wound down in the wake of the collapse of the USSR. The charismatic director of the expedition, Sergej P. Tolstov, has been an innovative archaeologist and outstanding organizer, but also a skilled self-propagandist and (up to a point) a collaborator with the Soviet authorities on ideological issues and “imperial” expansion. On the other hand, he offered Jewish colleagues a refuge in his own little “empire” during Stalin’s anti-Semitic campaign. Through the many students trained on the Khorezmian Expedition, Tolstov and his senior assistant directors had an immense impact on the current generation of Russian archaeologists.

³⁰ Aleksandr Vissarionovič Komarov, general-of-infantry, was born in 1830. After finishing the General Staff Academy in 1855, he served in the Caucasus until 1883, holding positions that included military chief of southern Daghestan and chief of the directorate for military relations with the Caucasian populace. In 1883 Komarov was named commander of the Transcaspian Region. His greatest achievement was effectively incorporating into the Russian empire the oases of Merv, Tedžen, Serakh, and Iolotan, without bloodshed or the extraordinary expenditure of government funds. These acquisitions were definitely sealed on 18 March 1885 as a result of Russia’s battle with the Afghans on the Kuška River. It is not amiss to remember that we are obliged to the English for this battle, as they greatly feared our influence on the Afghans following our successes in the Transcaspian.

³¹ Hiebert 2003: 24-25; Kohl 1984: 17. A very particular case is that represented by the Soviet-Italian and then Russian-Turkmenian-Italian joint work in the Murghab’s delta (Koshelenko et al. 1998; Salvatori/Tosi 2008). This complex and intense work, almost always directed by Maurizio Tosi, has formed a massive methodological laboratory and high-level scientific comparison, almost exclusively linked to tedious and complex topographical investigations, with not always the maximum of local collaboration. But this should be part of another story that will also need to be written, sooner or later. Another rich season of fieldwork in Central Asia on the Italian side was carried out in Uzbekistan by Rome University La Sapienza, Bologna University Alma Mater and Naples University L’Orientale. Even here we would have to draw up a long series of works, articles and publications that would be impossible to accomplish on this occasion; we limit ourselves to reporting the volumes of Chiara Silvi Antonini and Džamal Mirzaachmedov in Uč-Kulak, not far from Bukhara (Antonini/Mirzaachmedov 2009), Bruno Genito and Kazim Abdullaev at Kojtepa (Abdullaev/Genito 2014) and soon to print volumes of the University of Bologna regarding the topographical work begun by Maurizio Tosi in 1999 in the Samarkand oasis (Berdimuradov et al. in press).

Post-Soviet time

International interest in the prehistory and archaeology of the Eurasian steppes and Mongolia has increased dramatically since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Important new evidence and interpretations emerged from several collaborative projects in the past two decades. A particular emphasis is placed on issues that are crucial to regional studies in the steppe ecological zone; however, it also is suggested that steppe prehistory must come to play a more significant role in developing more comprehensive understandings of world prehistory. Key developments connected with the steppe include the diffusion of anatomically modern humans, horse domestication, spoke-wheeled chariot and cavalry warfare, early metal production and trade, Indo-European languages, and the rise of nomadic states and empires.

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