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Archaeology of Iran: Discoveries, Methods, and Contested Heritage

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Introduction

Archaeology of Iran: Discoveries, Methods, and Contested Heritage explores how the material record of the Iranian plateau—its settlements, objects, inscriptions, and landscapes—shapes both historical narratives and present-day heritage politics. From celebrated royal complexes and lowland cities to upland villages and desert corridors, the region has long been a crossroads of migrations, technologies, and ideas. This book offers an archaeology-focused account of major finds, the scientific methods that frame their interpretation, and the debates that surround conservation, repatriation, and tourism in modern Iran.

The story begins with place. Iran's diverse environments—snow-fed Zagros valleys, the Alborz foothills, high plateaus edged by the Dasht-e Kavir and Dasht-e Lut, and littoral zones along the Caspian and Persian Gulf—have conditioned human strategies for survival and flourishing. Water management through canals and qanats, seasonal mobility across mountain pastures, and the siting of towns along caravan routes all left traces recoverable through survey and excavation. Understanding these landscapes is essential for reconstructing how communities formed, traded, worshiped, and governed over millennia.

This volume moves chronologically and thematically across deep time, from Palaeolithic shelters and early farming villages to Bronze and Iron Age polities, imperial capitals, and Islamic-period cities. Landmark excavations at places such as Susa, Tepe Sialk, Hasanlu, and Persepolis are presented alongside newer research that reframes long-standing questions about urbanism, craft production, and political authority. Throughout, we pay attention to how evidence is assembled: the choices archaeologists make in the field and laboratory, and the ways those choices enable or constrain the stories we tell.

Methods are at the center of these narratives. Stratigraphic excavation, systematic surface survey, and remote sensing open expansive views of settlement and land use. Radiocarbon dating and Bayesian modeling refine chronologies; archaeobotany and zooarchaeology recover diets and ecologies; isotopic and materials analyses trace mobility, metallurgy, and ceramic production. By bringing these techniques together, archaeologists transform scattered artifacts and features into robust accounts of change, continuity, and encounter.

Yet archaeology is never only about the past. In Iran, as elsewhere, heritage is contested: earthen architecture faces seismic and climatic stress; illicit excavation and the antiquities trade threaten context; and the circulation of iconic objects raises urgent questions about ownership, repatriation, and access. Museums, local

communities, religious authorities, government agencies, and international organizations all claim stakes in how sites are interpreted, protected, and made public. These debates are not distractions from scholarship; they are integral to how archaeological knowledge is produced, authorized, and used.

The chapters are organized to guide readers from landscapes and chronological frameworks, through case studies of key sites and periods, into the laboratory where evidence is dated and sourced, and finally to the arenas where heritage is negotiated. Each chapter foregrounds the evidentiary basis for interpretation, highlights points of scholarly consensus and disagreement, and reflects on the ethical and legal dimensions of research and display. Taken together, they illuminate how material culture grounds histories of empires and everyday life alike.

This book is written for students, researchers, and curious readers who want a clear, methodologically informed introduction to the archaeology of Iran and its contemporary stakes. Technical terms are explained, transliterations are kept consistent and minimal, and attention is given to the voices of Iranian scholars and stakeholders who have shaped the field. By following artifacts from discovery to analysis to public debate, the volume shows how the past becomes legible—and why its stewardship matters.

Ultimately, Archaeology of Iran invites readers to see archaeological practice as both a science and a civic endeavor. The tools that date a hearth or source a copper ingot also help communities articulate identities, negotiate development, and envision futures. In tracing discoveries, methods, and contested heritage together, the chapters that follow aim not only to recount what we know, but to clarify how we know it and what responsibilities that knowledge entails.

CHAPTER ONE: Mapping the Iranian Plateau: Regions, Routes, and Chronologies

The Iranian plateau, a vast and varied landscape at the heart of Eurasia, has long served as a crucial bridge between East and West, North and South. It is a land of dramatic contrasts, where soaring mountain ranges like the Zagros and Alborz cradle fertile intermontane plains, and arid salt deserts – the Dasht-e Kavir and Dasht-e Lut – stretch for hundreds of kilometers, defining formidable barriers and shaping human movement and settlement for millennia. Understanding the archaeology of Iran begins with grasping the fundamental geographical and ecological divisions of this immense region, the pathways that connected its diverse communities, and the chronological frameworks that allow us to place discoveries in a coherent timeline.

Imagine standing on a vantage point high in the Zagros Mountains, looking eastward. To your immediate west, the fertile lowlands of Mesopotamia beckon, a cradle of early civilization that profoundly influenced, and was influenced by, the cultures of the Iranian plateau. Below you, the rugged topography of the Zagros unfolds, a series of parallel ridges and valleys running roughly northwest to southeast. These valleys, watered by seasonal snowmelt and perennial springs, have been home to human populations for hundreds of thousands of years, offering pockets of arable land and abundant pasturage for herding communities. The mountain passes, though challenging, have always been vital arteries, connecting the plateau to the Mesopotamian plains and providing routes for trade, migration, and conquest.

Moving further east, beyond the formidable barrier of the Zagros, lies the vast central plateau, a drier, more open expanse. This central region is fringed by the towering Alborz Mountains to the north, which separate it from the lush, subtropical shores of the Caspian Sea. The Alborz, like the Zagros, presented both obstacles and opportunities, with its lower slopes providing rich resources and its passes facilitating movement to and from the Caspian littoral. To the south and east of the central plateau, the immense salt deserts, the Dasht-e Kavir and Dasht-e Lut, dominate the landscape. These hyper-arid environments, while seemingly inhospitable, were not entirely devoid of human activity; oasis settlements dotted their fringes, and specialized knowledge of desert routes allowed for daring trans-desert journeys, albeit with considerable risk.

To the southeast, the plateau gradually descends towards the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, forming a littoral zone with its own distinct ecological and cultural characteristics. This coastal strip, with its access to maritime trade routes, played a crucial role in connecting the interior of Iran with the wider Indian Ocean world. The

varied topography and climate of Iran thus created a mosaic of micro-environments, each fostering unique adaptations and contributing to the rich tapestry of human experience across the plateau. The archaeological record reflects this diversity, with distinct regional traditions and material cultures emerging in response to local conditions and external interactions.

The primary corridors of movement across the Iranian plateau have largely been dictated by its geography. One of the most significant routes, often referred to as the "Great Khorasan Road" or segments of the "Silk Road," traversed the northern reaches of the central plateau, connecting Mesopotamia with Central Asia and beyond. This ancient highway facilitated the movement of goods, ideas, and armies for millennia, leaving a trail of settlements, caravanserais, and fortified sites. Other vital routes ran through the intermontane valleys of the Zagros, linking the plateau with the Mesopotamian plains and providing access to valuable resources such as metals and timber.

The southern and eastern flanks of the plateau also featured important, though often more challenging, arteries. The routes connecting the central plateau to the Persian Gulf coast were critical for maritime trade, allowing for the exchange of goods from India and Arabia with the interior. Even the formidable salt deserts were not entirely impassable; specialized desert routes, often known only to local guides, permitted limited but significant movement and trade between oasis communities. Understanding these ancient routes is paramount for archaeologists, as they often correlate with the distribution of archaeological sites, the spread of cultural influences, and the patterns of resource exploitation.

Archaeologists rely on a robust chronological framework to organize the vast amount of material evidence uncovered across Iran. This framework is a constantly evolving construct, refined by new discoveries and increasingly sophisticated dating techniques. At its broadest, Iranian prehistory and history are divided into several major periods, each characterized by distinct technological, social, and political developments. These periods are not always neatly demarcated, and transitions can be gradual and regionally varied, making the job of the archaeologist both challenging and immensely rewarding.

The story begins in the Palaeolithic period, stretching back hundreds of thousands of years, when early hominins roamed the Iranian landscape, leaving behind stone tools and traces of their hunter-gatherer existence. This vast epoch is typically subdivided into Lower, Middle, and Upper Palaeolithic, each marked by advancements in tool technology and subsistence strategies. Following this, the Epipalaeolithic period bridges the gap to the advent of agriculture, witnessing intensified foraging and the development of more specialized tools.

The Neolithic period, beginning around 10,000 BCE in some parts of the Near East,

marks a revolutionary shift to settled village life, the domestication of plants and animals, and the emergence of pottery. In Iran, key sites like Ganj Dareh and Ali Kosh provide crucial evidence for the early stages of this transformation, demonstrating regional variations in the adoption and development of agricultural practices. This period lays the groundwork for the increasing complexity that characterizes subsequent eras.

The Chalcolithic, or Copper Age, generally dated from around 5500 to 3000 BCE, witnesses the first widespread use of copper metallurgy, alongside continued advancements in ceramic production and the emergence of more hierarchical social structures. This era sees the development of larger settlements and the expansion of trade networks, laying the foundation for the rise of early urban centers. Sites such as Tepe Sialk provide valuable insights into this period of technological and social innovation.

The Bronze Age, spanning roughly 3000 to 1200 BCE, is a period of significant urban growth, the development of sophisticated craft specialization, and the emergence of complex political entities. This era is characterized by the rise of city-states and, in some regions, territorial states, along with extensive long-distance trade networks. The civilizations of Elam in southwestern Iran, centered around sites like Susa, are prominent during this period, engaging in complex interactions with Mesopotamia. This period also sees the proliferation of bronze metallurgy, giving the age its name.

The Iron Age, following the Bronze Age collapse around 1200 BCE and lasting until the Achaemenid Persian Empire's rise around 550 BCE, is marked by the widespread adoption of iron technology and significant migrations and cultural shifts across the plateau. This era is complex, with distinct regional cultures emerging in areas like Luristan and the northwest, exemplified by sites like Hasanlu. It is during the later Iron Age that various Iranian-speaking peoples, including the Medes and Persians, begin to consolidate their power, setting the stage for the first great empires of the region.

The Achaemenid period, from approximately 550 to 330 BCE, represents the zenith of the first Persian Empire, a vast dominion stretching from Egypt to India. This era is characterized by monumental architecture, such as the royal cities of Pasargadae and Persepolis, and a sophisticated administrative system. The archaeological record of this period offers unparalleled insights into imperial power, ideology, and the rich artistic traditions of ancient Persia.

Following the conquest of the Achaemenid Empire by Alexander the Great, the Hellenistic period (c. 330-150 BCE) saw the imposition of Greek cultural elements and administrative structures, resulting in a fascinating blend of Hellenic and Iranian traditions. This period is succeeded by the Parthian Empire (c. 250 BCE - 224 CE), an indigenous Iranian dynasty that successfully challenged Roman power and presided over a vibrant cultural synthesis. Archaeological sites from this era often reveal

evidence of this hybridity in architecture, art, and burial practices.

The Sasanian Empire (224-651 CE) marked a resurgence of Iranian imperial power and culture, establishing a highly centralized state with a strong Zoroastrian identity. Sasanian art and architecture are distinctive, characterized by monumental rock reliefs, elaborate fire temples, and grand urban centers. This empire was the last pre-Islamic Iranian superpower, leaving an enduring legacy that profoundly influenced the subsequent Islamic period.

The Early Islamic period, beginning with the Arab conquests in the mid-7th century CE, ushered in a new era of profound cultural, religious, and political transformation. Archaeology of this period examines the continuity and change in urbanism, material culture, and religious practices as Islamic civilization took root and flourished across the Iranian plateau. Later Islamic periods continue to be rich areas of archaeological investigation, tracing the development of cities, trade networks, and artistic traditions through various dynasties.

This chronological framework, while providing a necessary structure, is not rigid. Archaeologists constantly engage in debates about specific dates, the nature of transitions between periods, and the regional variations that complicate a single, overarching narrative. Radiocarbon dating, dendrochronology, and increasingly, Bayesian statistical modeling, are critical tools in refining these chronologies, allowing for greater precision and a more nuanced understanding of the temporal relationships between sites and events.

Beyond the broad strokes of periodization, archaeologists also employ relative dating methods based on stratigraphy – the study of layered deposits – and typological analysis of artifacts, particularly pottery, which evolves rapidly and can be highly diagnostic of specific periods and cultures. The careful recording of these contextual details in excavations allows for the construction of localized chronologies that can then be correlated across wider regions.

Ultimately, mapping the Iranian plateau involves not only understanding its physical geography and the historical routes that crisscrossed it, but also establishing a robust chronological framework that allows us to trace the ebb and flow of human societies over immense spans of time. This foundational understanding is crucial for all subsequent archaeological inquiry, enabling us to interpret the material remains of the past and weave them into a coherent and compelling story of human endeavor in this pivotal region of the world.

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