Cultural Heritage Under Threat: Archaeology and Preservation in Iran

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Introduction

Iran’s cultural landscape is a palimpsest of civilizations layered across deserts, mountains, and fertile plains. From the Achaemenid grandeur of Persepolis to the mudbrick labyrinth of Bam, from subterranean qanat waterworks to caravanserais that stitched the Silk Roads together, the country’s heritage encompasses both monumental architecture and the everyday ingenuity of past communities. Yet these riches exist under mounting stress. Looting siphons artifacts into clandestine markets, development reshapes ancient terrain, earthquakes and erosion take their toll, and political as well as economic constraints complicate research and conservation. This book examines how archaeology and preservation intersect in Iran today—where knowledge of the past is essential to decisions that will shape the future.

Our approach is resolutely case-based. Each chapter focuses on a specific site or theme, pairing archaeological context with a candid assessment of risks, management practices, and outcomes. At Persepolis and Pasargadae, we consider conservation in landscapes of enduring national symbolism; at Susa and across Khuzestan, we confront the entanglements of archaeology with oil extraction and industrial growth; at Tchogha Zanbil and Bisotun, we look at seismic hazards, rockfall, and visitor management. Urban heritage in Isfahan and Tabriz illustrates the tension between living cities and listed monuments, while chapters on qanats and caravanserais demonstrate how infrastructure itself can be heritage—fragile, functional, and still evolving. Lesser-known but no less significant places—Shahr-i Sokhta, Jiroft, Tepe Sialk, and Tepe Hissar—reveal how discovery, debate, and stratigraphic integrity shape both scholarship and policy.

The threats are multifaceted. Illicit excavation accelerates where surveillance is thin and markets are strong, often stripping sites of context that can never be reconstructed. Large-scale development—dams, roads, pipelines, mining, and housing—alters hydrology, topography, and access, sometimes fragmenting archaeological landscapes beyond recognition. Natural hazards compound these pressures: earthquakes have repeatedly damaged monuments and vernacular quarters; climate change intensifies heat, drought, and extreme rainfall, stressing earthen architecture and rock art alike; coastal erosion in the Persian Gulf gnaws at maritime heritage. Each pressure point forces difficult trade-offs among safety, livelihoods, and cultural stewardship.

Law and policy provide both tools and constraints. We review Iran’s domestic frameworks for antiquities protection, site designation, and rescue archaeology, identifying strengths to build upon and gaps that invite reform. We situate these within international regimes—heritage conventions, protocols against trafficking, and

standards for disaster risk reduction—while acknowledging that geopolitics, sanctions, and restricted financial channels can limit cooperation, loans, training, and equipment procurement. The book emphasizes practical pathways despite these obstacles: targeted site documentation, transparent permitting, material science for conservation, and data-sharing that respects sovereignty while enabling collaboration.

Central to our argument is the agency of local communities. Heritage survives when it is meaningful to those who live with it—farmers who maintain qanats, craftspeople who sustain urban bazaars, caretakers at shrines, and youth who adopt sites as classrooms and laboratories. We highlight participatory models of stewardship, aligning economic incentives with conservation through heritage tourism that is scaled, equitable, and environmentally responsible. Community archaeology and citizen science can deter looting, expand monitoring, and enrich interpretation, especially when training and modest resources are consistently provided.

Technology is not a substitute for policy or people, but it can amplify both. Remote sensing and UAV surveys help detect encroachment and map features at risk; 3D documentation enables condition tracking and virtual access when sites are fragile or closed; conservation science refines mortar recipes and earthen stabilization techniques suited to local materials and climates. Digital archives—when open, well-governed, and ethically curated—extend the reach of research and education while safeguarding records against loss. We argue for technological adoption that is appropriate, maintainable, and integrated into long-term management plans rather than short-lived projects.

This book is written for preservationists, archaeologists, historians, planners, and cultural policymakers—professionals who make choices under uncertainty and constraint. Our recommendations are specific and actionable: strengthen legal deterrents and due diligence against trafficking; embed heritage assessments early in development cycles; invest in seismic preparedness for monuments and museums; fund community guardianship; and prioritize training, documentation, and conservation materials that are locally sourced and affordable. By situating each case within broader ecological, social, and legal systems, we seek to move beyond crisis response toward durable stewardship.

Ultimately, Cultural Heritage Under Threat contends that Iran’s archaeological patrimony is not a static inheritance but a living network of places, practices, and memories. Preserving it requires humility before the evidence, solidarity across borders, and a willingness to balance access with protection. The chapters that follow trace pathways where preservation can succeed—not by isolating heritage from contemporary life, but by integrating it carefully into the aspirations of the communities it anchors and the nation it helps narrate.

CHAPTER ONE: Landscapes of Memory: Geography and Deep Time

Iran’s map reads like an agreement between stubborn stone and stubborn people, a country that tilts and folds and still manages to keep its balance long enough for wheat, poetry, and empires to take root. Rivers that choose to flow uphill in geologic time have carved corridors through the Zagros and Alborz, giving travelers rare invitations to cross ranges that otherwise behave like walls. Deserts spread in patient counterpoint, polishing plateaus and swallowing roads in haze until the wind remembers the way. Along the edges, the Persian Gulf nibbles at cliffs while the Caspian drips humidity onto rice paddies, a climatic split that lets pomegranates and rice share a nation without agreeing on the weather. Geography here is not scenery; it is a partner with its own schedule, often running late for harvests and early for earthquakes, yet somehow always present for the making of memory.

This partnership has long shaped how Iranians have lived close to the land and how they have buried their dead in it. Highland pastures and lowland floodplains have traded occupants like polite but insistent hosts, with communities learning where to stack stones for terraces and where to cut channels so water behaves like a temporary ally. Villages tucked into cupped valleys have names that sound like compass points, while cities on the edges of pans and playas have learned to store snow and ration daylight with equal precision. Even before asphalt and bureaucracy, people knew which slopes gave good mud for bricks and which rocks fractured into sharp blades or soft pigments. The land offered a syllabus written in strata, and each generation found itself rereading the same lessons with slightly different tools.

What has endured most stubbornly is time itself, layered like sediment that refuses to lie flat. Iran offers what archaeologists politely call deep sequences, meaning places where digging downward feels less like excavation and more like leafing through a book with many underlinings. At some tells, the bottommost sherds wait twenty meters below modern fields, testifying to towns that burned, rebuilt, and burned again with an almost theatrical regularity. Elsewhere, caves and rock shelters keep their older stories better, guarding blade cores and butchered bones like librarians with overdue cards. These long sequences are not always continuous, of course. Erosion, silting, and human forgetfulness create chapters that go missing, leaving gaps where whole centuries might have slipped between floors or washed downstream in a single night of rain.

Among the earliest long acts of remembering in this landscape is the rise of settled life during a period whose name has become almost musical, the Neolithic. Across broad

arc from the Zagros foothills to the central plateau, communities began to anchor themselves to particular plots of ground, choosing seeds that stayed put when planted and animals that tolerated fences. They learned to fire clay into something harder than earth but softer than stone, creating vessels that could carry water without apology. Villages grew into neighborhoods with lanes and alleys that anticipated cities long before kings arrived, and their dead were placed beneath floors with grave goods that seem to argue for continuity between the living and the departed. These were not utopias untouched by risk; they faced drought, disease, and the occasional unruly river. Still, the choice to stay rather than follow the seasons marked a turning point at which people began shaping the land more insistently.

As time thickened, so did politics, and Iran’s highlands became a stage for experiments in power that would echo for millennia. Bronze Age communities fortified hilltops not merely for show but because elevation still meant advantage, and the sight of walls climbing above the plain could make an army hesitate long enough for diplomacy or prayer to do its work. In valleys where rivers stubbornly kept their courses, towns grew orderly enough to need scribes and storerooms, while out on the margin, herders moved with an economy that valued flexibility over permanence. This was a time of connections, when lapis lazuli from far-off mountains could appear in a grave and tin from elsewhere could harden copper into something fit for a king. Trade moved in fits and starts along routes that would later be paved and policed, but even in this earlier age, the idea of Iran as a crossroads was beginning to feel true.

Then came a series of arrivals and reinventions that turned landscape into theater, with rulers learning to engrave their claims onto mountains and plains alike. The Elamite world folded and unfolded across Khuzestan, leaving behind ziggurats that rose like stairways to authority, while successive waves of newcomers from the north and east carried languages and gods that mixed with older ways. By the time the Medes and then the Achaemenids knit much of this territory into a single royal geography, rulers had discovered that architecture could be propaganda that outlived armies. Gateways carved with rows of tribute-bearers and processional ways broad enough for parade elephants made the empire visible and legible, turning geography into governance and rock into record.

This imperial habit of marking the land proved durable, long outlasting the states that first perfected it. The Seleucids and Parthians that followed continued to plant cities on old routes and to carve reliefs into living rock, adapting old forms to new audiences with varying degrees of finesse. Under the Sasanians, fire temples rose next to fortifications, and Zoroastrian cosmology found expression in ground plans that aligned with cardinal points, as if the world itself could be squared and sanctified. Each dynasty left fingerprints on the terrain, from the size of bricks favored in different centuries to the way canals skirted around hills that mattered to local spirits. These were not merely stylistic choices but assertions of belonging, ways of saying we are here because we know how to work with this land.

With the rise of Islam, a new vocabulary of memory took root, one that favored domes and courtyards over columns and cavetto cornices, yet often reused the older stones as if to acknowledge that time is thriftier than ideology. Cities like Isfahan and Nishapur rewrote themselves around congregational mosques that gathered neighborhoods like magnets, while caravanserais began to punctuate the horizon like punctuation marks in a long travel sentence. In arid regions, qanat technology refined the ancient art of coaxing water from mountains and coaxing taxes from farmers, creating subterranean networks that would survive dynasties and disasters alike. Even as political centers shifted and borders blurred, the landscape retained its teachings, offering lessons in resilience to anyone willing to listen and dig.

What has made this layered record at once rich and vulnerable is the simple fact that Iran sits atop seams of value as well as history. Rivers that made agriculture possible also made industry possible, and mountains that sheltered caravans also shelter copper and oil. As modernity arrived with its machines and maps drawn to different scales, the relationship between people and land began to accelerate, compressing centuries of slow negotiation into decades of sudden change. Railways cut across ancient tells, pipelines slipped beneath qanat routes, and cities swelled into spaces that had once been reserved for fields or tombs. Progress, as it tends to do, asked fewer questions about what lay beneath than about what might lie above.

This acceleration has not erased memory so much as crowded it, forcing archaeologists and planners to make choices with shorter timelines and louder stakes. Looting has long been a shadow companion to discovery, but easier roads and stronger markets have made the shadow darker and faster, carrying artifacts away from the landscapes that give them meaning. At the same time, earthquakes have continued their ancient habit of reminding everyone that mortar and stone have limits, while wind and rain have gone about the quieter work of sanding inscriptions into illegibility. The result is a landscape that feels simultaneously well documented and poorly understood, full of sites that are known, named, and yet still slipping away.

Understanding this landscape begins with acknowledging that geography does not yield its stories all at once. Some places keep their counsel, revealing little more than scattered stones until a particular angle of light or a careful trench coaxes them into clarity. Other places give up their secrets too easily, offering up artifacts that arrive in distant collections before local scholars have had a chance to ask basic questions. The difference often comes down to methods and patience, to the willingness to work at the speed of sediment rather than the speed of headlines. For a country with so much history, the temptation to skim rather than study is constant and understandable.

What makes the study bearable, even invigorating, is that Iran’s geography remains generous to those who pay attention. Aerial views still reveal traces of roads that once linked oases, while soil stains hint at walls that have returned to earth but not yet to

anonymity. Local names often preserve clues about what stood in a place before fields or factories did, and farmers still turn up pieces of the past while tending crops that their grandparents would recognize. These moments of recognition create a conversation across centuries, in which the present acknowledges the past without being trapped by it. They also create responsibilities, because every new building permit or irrigation channel risks cutting that conversation short.

For all its complexity, the terrain offers a kind of clarity when it comes to preservation. Certain sites are simply more exposed than others, either because they sit in floodplains or because they have become symbols that attract more visitors than they can comfortably host. Some require interventions that are as much about managing people as about managing stone, while others need quieter, steadier forms of care that involve drainage, shelters, or simply fewer boots on fragile floors. The common thread is the need to think like a geographer as much as like an architect, to see the site not as an isolated monument but as part of a system that includes water, wind, and human desire.

The chapters that follow will apply this lesson to places both famous and obscure, but it is worth pausing here to note that the most effective preservation often begins long before a scaffold appears or a conservation plan is signed. It begins with the recognition that heritage is not a single object but a relationship among land, law, and livelihood. In Iran, where high-speed change meets deep time, that relationship is under constant negotiation, brokered by farmers, engineers, archaeologists, and officials who do not always speak the same language or share the same fears. Success, when it comes, tends to look like a carefully maintained balance rather than a total victory.

This book argues that such balance is achievable, not by freezing landscapes in time but by working with the grain of geography as much as possible. There are sites that can and should remain places of active use, where traditional crafts and modern tourism share space with ancient walls. There are others where the best option is restraint, where access is limited to those who can contribute to knowledge rather than consumption. And there are many places where the greatest need is simply better information, gathered quickly and shared openly, so that decisions about roads, dams, and housing can account for what lies beneath as a matter of routine rather than surprise.

In practical terms, this means supporting forms of archaeology that are fast without being reckless, using remote sensing and targeted excavation to answer specific questions rather than to clear entire landscapes. It means encouraging local museums and storerooms that keep materials close to where they were found, so that context remains attached to object and community pride can grow alongside knowledge. It also means acknowledging that preservation costs money and time, and that both are easier to justify when people can see a return, whether in jobs, education, or a quieter,

more legible landscape.

Iran’s deep time is not merely a backdrop for modern development but an active participant in it. The land remembers earthquakes, floods, and invasions, and it repeats its lessons to those who are willing to learn. The goal of this book is to translate some of those lessons into suggestions that can guide practice and policy, not with the idea of turning Iran into a museum but with the idea of helping its many layers coexist with the lives of the people who now inhabit them. The next chapters will focus on individual places, but the underlying premise is the same everywhere: memory is worth keeping, geography is worth listening to, and careful work can tilt the balance toward endurance.

This balance is especially urgent where landscapes have become stages for national pride and global curiosity. Places like Persepolis and Pasargadae carry meanings that extend far beyond their stones, and the management of such sites requires sensitivity to symbolism as well as to rainwater and root systems. Even there, however, the principles remain grounded in material reality. Walls crack, foundations settle, and visitor numbers wax and wane with currencies and headlines. The task is to ensure that the needs of the present do not permanently obscure the evidence of the past, while also recognizing that preservation without purpose can become a kind of amputation.

As we move from the wide view of geography to the close-up of specific sites, it helps to keep in mind that many of the threats facing Iranian heritage are not unique to the region. Looting, development pressure, and climate stress are global patterns, and so are the tools for mitigating them: transparent laws, trained professionals, community involvement, and honest accounting of risk. Iran’s distinct contribution is its remarkable continuity of occupation, which makes almost every site a palimpsest and every decision a negotiation among many pasts. This complexity need not be paralyzing, but it does require humility and a willingness to revise plans when the land offers new information.

Ultimately, the aim is to make heritage legible and durable without making it lifeless. This requires accepting that not every ruin can be saved in place, and that some forms of preservation are better understood as careful recording rather than physical conservation. It also requires accepting that the line between success and failure is often drawn by small, unglamorous choices: a better roof tile, a well-timed excavation, a local craftsman trained to mix mortar the old way. These choices are the threads that hold the larger fabric together, and they are easiest to make when the landscape itself is seen as an ally rather than an obstacle.

By beginning with geography and deep time, this chapter sets the stage for those choices, offering a lens through which to view everything that follows. The coming chapters will explore how particular places have navigated the tensions between

memory and modernity, and how law, technology, and local agency have combined to protect or fail to protect what matters. Throughout, the guiding idea remains the same: Iran’s heritage is not a problem to be solved but a condition to be tended, one that asks for patience, skill, and a readiness to work at the speed of the land itself.

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