

The Dead End of American Archaeologists in Iran

Despite all the optimism spurred about all the potentials of opening new windows of opportunity for the Iranian civil society in the aftermath of the election of a moderate government and followed by the proposed nuclear agreement to lift sanctions in exchange of putting cap on Iran's nuclear activities, so far not much has changed. This is especially true with regard to the status of academic and scientific exchange between the United States and Iran.

I look at this issue from my own perspective based on my background in archaeology. There is a long and rather productive history of Iranian archaeology in the United States. After 1930 when the ridiculous French monopoly on all archaeological excavations in Iran expired, gates opened for others. Robert Braidwood from the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago was one of the first Americans to excavate in Iran. His pioneering work in the Zagros region made a breakthrough in discovering the origins of farming and food production in the ancient Near East. Later during the 70's, the involvement of the American Universities in archaeological excavations heightened. Important archaeological surveys and excavations in the Dehluran plain, sites of *Hasanloo*, *Malyan*, *Tappeh Yahya* trained the next generation of prominent near eastern archaeologists whose work focused heavily on the Iranian cultural sphere. Like many other fields, this trend ended after the Islamic Revolution. There has been some sporadic collaboration among the Iranian and American archaeologists, but due to their short-term and unpredictable nature there has not been any significant results. Which would be namely, the training of a new generation of Near Eastern archaeologists whose work focuses on Iran.

Before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the United States and Iran had deep academic ties and at one time, Iran sent more students to the U.S. than any other country. Today, although Persian is considered a critical language in the United States, very few college graduates have proficiency in it. Most US students interested in Persian are limited to studying in Tajikistan. Many would like to visit and study in Iran, but very few have the opportunity to do so. Naturally this situation has affected the field of Iranian Archaeology in the US significantly.

A few weeks ago I participated in the annual conference of the American School of Oriental Research [*ASOR*](<http://www.asor.org/>) . The session engaging the archaeology of Iran was ever more minimized compared to all the other long-term projects conducted everywhere else in the Near East (with their considerable depth and breadth). Today, The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago is the sole leader of the Iranian archaeology in the US thanks to their rich archives and Persepolis tablets (which were recently saved from being sold, thanks to the appeal court reversing the previous ruling). The University of Pennsylvania and to a certain degree UCLA are following U. Chicago's lead. All of this is despite the fact that in recent history the number of these departments involved in studying the different eras of Iranian past was many more.

This is especially unfortunate because the American school of archaeology is

different from and better than other schools of archaeology. I am critical of the constructed idea of American exceptionalism, but in this case I argue for the uniqueness of the approach American archaeology takes to study the human past. In America archeology is one of the branches under the four-field anthropology founded by Franz Boas. This school is characterized against others (such as European schools) by conceiving anthropology as the integration of many different objects into one overarching subject: the human being. This “anthropological archaeology “ is beyond the discourses of race and nationalism, defining its object of inquiry as the human species in totality. It considers the essence of the human species to be their tremendous variation in human form and activity and seeks to reveal human resiliency, ingenuity and creativity through thousands of years without attaching evolutionary value to any of them. As Ruth Benedict once said: “the purpose of [this] anthropology is to make the world safe for human differences”. In the face of a growing populist nationalism in Iran that appears to have concerned at least some official and religious figures, the universal approach that American archaeology takes to understand the human past (and “record”) is a much needed discourse inside Iran’s academia as well as its civil society.