

# Returning to Iran

By MICHAEL  
D. DANTI

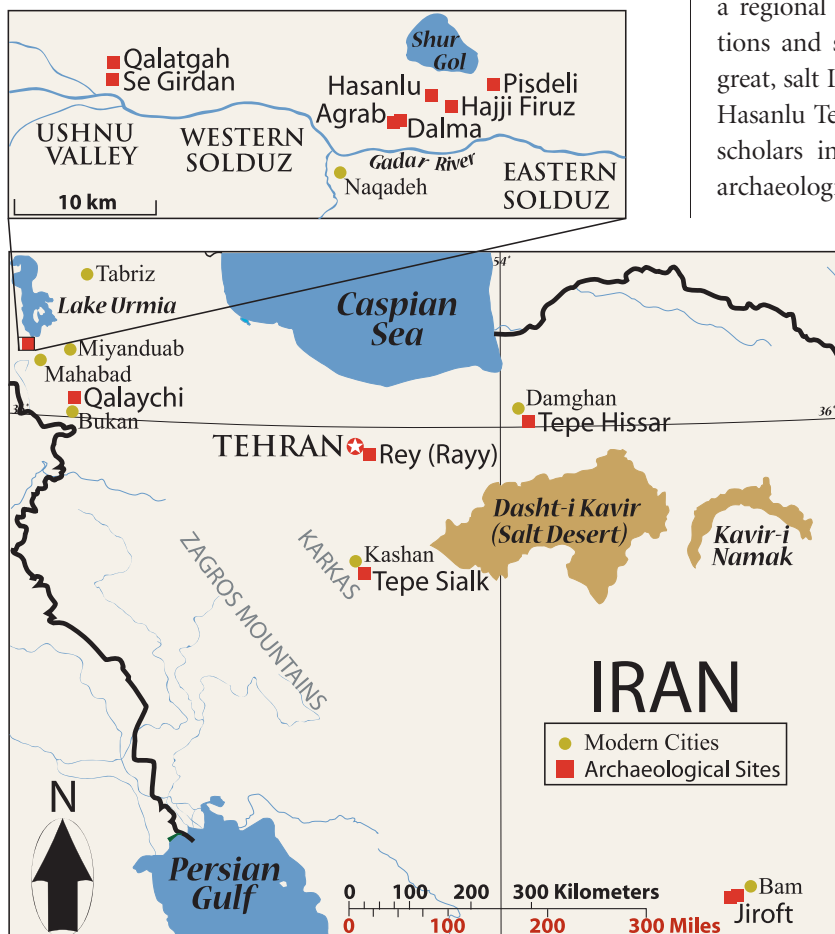
**T**HE PENN MUSEUM has had a long and auspicious history of involvement in the archaeology of Iran. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, however, American fieldwork in Iran has come to a standstill. This situation is gradually changing thanks especially to the efforts of Holly Pittman of Penn's

History of Art Department and the Museum's Near East Section. Recently, she has begun to work with Yousef Madjidzadeh, the Iranian Director of Excavations at the site of Jiroft. Penn will soon have an institutional agreement with the Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization (ICHTO) for future cooperative research in Iran.

In the early 20th century, the Museum carried out excavations under the direction of Erich Schmidt at the famous sites of Tepe Hissar (1931–32) and Rayy (1934–36). From 1956 to 1977, Robert H. Dyson, Jr.—the Museum's Director from 1981 to 1994—conducted one of the first excavations in archaeologically rich northwest Iran. The Hasanlu Project was a regional research effort combining archaeological excavations and survey in the Ushnu-Solduz valleys south of the great, salt Lake Urmia. The main focus was the excavation of Hasanlu Tepe, a large mound that first drew the attention of scholars in 1936 when the intrepid English explorer and archaeologist, Sir Aurel Stein, excavated the site for 12 days.

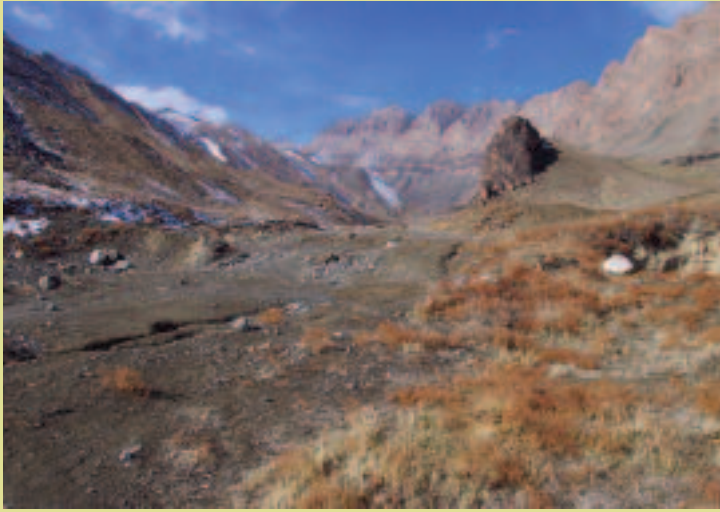
The Museum's Hasanlu Project was a joint venture with the Iranian Antiquities Authority and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In ten seasons of excavation it brought to light a virtually unknown early Iron Age kingdom that rivaled the great contemporary centers of Assyria and Urartu. This Iron Age II settlement was destroyed when an unknown invader sacked and burned it around 800 BC, creating a veritable Pompeii for the Iron Age in this region. The excavations also provided the basis for the archaeological chronology of a large portion of northwest Iran, spanning at least the late Chalcolithic (late 4th millennium BC) to the Medieval period (13th century AD). This sequence was extended back to the pottery Neolithic (6th millennium BC), the time when farming and village life were introduced to the region, through the excavation of some of the

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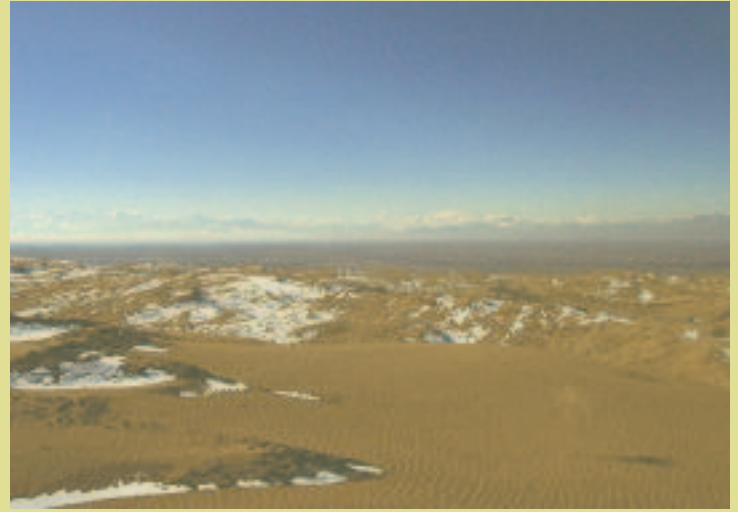




Iron Age (800 BC) architectural remains on the High Mound of Hasanlu Tepe after recent restoration work.



One of the many valleys in the Karkas Mountains that lie within our archaeological survey area.



Looking west back toward Kashan, the high sand dunes at the edge of the Dasht-i Kavir desert, partly covered in a rare snowfall, mark the eastern edge of our archaeological survey. The western border of the survey area lies well beyond the snow-capped Karkas Mountains visible on the horizon.

## the sialk reconsideration project

The Sialk Reconsideration Project is a long-term effort to restudy this famous site—the cornerstone for the Neolithic and Chalcolithic ceramic sequences in its region. In January 2005 I began a landscape study and archaeological survey in a 30 km radius around Tepe Sialk, modern Kashan. The survey area includes a number of distinct ecological zones. To the west, the lofty peaks of the Karkas Mountains and their eastern piedmont is a rugged terrain that has never been systematically explored by archaeologists, though it contains abundant evidence of ancient settlement, mining, and herding. To the east are the western fringes of the dune-covered salt and clay flats of the vast Dasht-i Kavir Desert. We have explored a number of different sites, including ancient mounds (*tepe*), mines, and caves in the Karkas Mountains, subterranean irrigation systems called *qanats*, and standing ruins from the Islamic era (mid-7th century AD to the modern era). The preliminary results of this first season have exceeded all expectations and future seasons promise to provide an incredible database for understanding Tepe Sialk and its successor, Kashan. The second season of this regional project will begin later this year.



The interior of a subterranean irrigation channel (*qanat*) at Sefid Ab used to distribute water collected near the Karkas Mountains to the arid plain around Kashan.



Mahal-e Sefid Ab, an Islamic estate on the outskirts of old Kashan. Ceramics and local informants indicate it has been occupied since at least the 13th century AD.

Michael D. Danti



Our preliminary archaeological survey has located many cave sites in the Karkas Mountains.



Mazra-e Mal, a fortified Islamic structure in the eastern piedmont of the Karkas Mountains. Such sites usually have earlier historic and prehistoric remains.

smaller mounds that dot the Ushnu-Solduz plain, especially Hajji Firuz Tepe.

The Hasanlu Project is now in its final publication stage. My involvement in Iranian archaeology began in 1998, when I started working for Dyson to prepare these publications. In 2004, we completed the first volume in the series, *The Ilkhanid Heartland: Hasanlu Tepe (Iran) Period I*. This volume focuses on the latest, medieval period settlement at Hasanlu and provides one of the few published accounts of an Ilkhanid settlement and hill fort. The Ilkhanid dynasty was established in southwest Asia in the 13th century AD following the Mongol conquest of the region. These new overlords eventually chose northwest Iran as the seat of the capital of their western empire.

As an archaeologist who has never been to Hasanlu, it was somewhat intimidating at times to work on the final publication of such a complex site. Fortunately, in June 2004, an international conference in the city of Urmia on the Archaeology of Northwestern Iran provided a chance to travel there. Sponsored by the ICHTO, headed by Director General Seyed Mohammad Beheshti, this conference was part of a larger, ongoing effort to increase contact between Iranian scholars and the international community and provide a forum for sharing research results. It was an unqualified success.

After the conference several of us remained in Urmia and visited archaeological sites south of the lake. I finally had the chance to spend a few hours at Hasanlu. The site is well protected. Although time and the elements had taken their toll on these impressive mudbrick ruins since the end of excavations in 1977, H. Khatib Shahidi of the Iranian Center for Archaeological Research (ICAR) has recently preserved and restored the standing monumental Iron Age structures to their former glory. We also visited many other sites excavated by the Hasanlu Project, including Hajji Firuz, Dalma, Pisdeli, Agrab, and Se Girdan, as well as the Urartian hill fortress of Qalatgah. All these sites were in an excellent state of preservation.

From the Ushnu-Solduz plain, we proceeded south to Mahabad, Miyanduab, and to Bukan. There we were given a tour of the important Iron Age site of Qalaychi, excavated by Bahman Karqar. Based on an inscribed stone slab found there, it is believed to be ancient Izirtu, the capital of the Mannaeen kingdom. In the mid-1980s, attention focused on this site when glazed tiles in the Assyrian style began to appear on the antiquities market. Presumably obtained from looters, the ICHTO is working hard to stop such clandestine digging.

Thanks to the Urmia Symposium, many international scholars were able to re-connect with Iranian colleagues. A direct result of this was an invitation to the author to join the Sialk Reconsideration Project, directed by Sadegh Malek Shahmirzadi (a 1977 Penn Ph.D.). Tepe Sialk, located on the Central Iranian Plateau on the outskirts of modern Kashan, was first excavated by Roman Ghirshman in the 1930s.

Recently, we have also received word from the Iranian Center for Archaeological Research of the ICHTO (directed by Massoud Azarnoush), that the Museum may also be granted permission to return to northwest Iran. Pending approval of a research proposal, a joint Iranian-University of Pennsylvania Museum project will begin with an archaeological survey in the near future. We look forward to the chance to renew the Museum's involvement in the archaeology of northwest Iran. 🏠

MICHAEL D. DANTI received his Ph.D. in Anthropology from Penn in 2000 and is currently a visiting Assistant Professor in

Boston University's Department of Archaeology. In addition to his work on Kashan and Hasanlu Tepe in Iran, he is also a Research Associate in the Museum's Near East Section and the Director of Excavations for the Tell es-Sweyhat Project in Syria.



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#### Acknowledgments

I extend my thanks to the ICHTO and the organizers of the Urmia Symposium for providing such a wonderful opportunity to see Iran for the first time. Thanks also to Sadegh Malek Shahmirzadi for involving me in his research project at Tepe Sialk.

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#### For Further Reading

Danti, Michael D. *The Ilkhanid Heartland: Hasanlu Tepe (Iran) Period I*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2004.



William B. Hafford (above), Michael D. Danti (below)

The south mound of Tepe Sialk, from the north mound, with the Karkas Mountains in the distance.