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Introduction: Contextualizing Iranian Archaeology

In this short paper, the author, an Iranian archaeologist, approaches activism from a perspective of a Western Asian. I try to discuss the characteristics and challenges of activism in Iranian archaeology. Can archaeology have an emancipating role in a Southwest Asian context, where authoritarianism, conflict and political tensions still challenge academic freedom?

The critical discourses in archaeology have challenged the oversimplified notion that archaeology can benefit humanity without active engagement and awareness of the consequences of archaeological practice to the contemporary world (Christensen 2010: 21). There would be numerous versions of activism in archaeology. But the core question of all these versions would be, archaeology for whom? (Panameno and Nalda 1978; Atalay et al. 2014: 7). Hence, the main issue in terms of activism is the audience. Therefore, from the very beginning archaeology should be considered a discipline which is practised in and has consequences for contemporary society. However, in many parts of the world, including Southwest Asia, archaeologists fail or are reluctant to recognize that “our practice is inherently political from our choice of sites to how and to whom we present our research findings” (Christensen 2010: 21).

In Southwest Asia, archaeology has a complicated background. Over the course of the 19th century, archaeology was introduced in the Ottoman territories and Qajar Iran together with colonial and imperial functions (Özdogan 1998: 114; Papoli Yazdi and Garazhian 2012: 25).

> “In its 120-year history in Iran, archaeology has played an administrative role rather than one of academic knowledge production. Under such conditions, it could not be represented in an indigenous version, and in general, it has remained theoretically within the limits of the conditions of traditional archaeology and, at most, cultural-historical archaeology” (Papoli Yazdi and Garazhian 2012: 25–26).

Archaeology is still widely practised as a governmental discipline; namely archaeologists, also in academia, are completely dependent on the government in terms of budgeting and fieldwork permission. Archaeological knowledge in Iran, of course not an exception, is produced and consumed by the state, which usually ignores the diversity of the Iranian population and their socio-cultural expectations. On the other hand, the diversity in archaeological approaches, methodologies and the independency of agents are still challenging issues. Consequently, archaeology lacks the power and proper tools to resist the top-down approach and to claims the rights of its agents and communities.

Generally speaking, archaeology has always been the subject of socio-political tensions, misused by political parties and governments while it has sometimes provoked cultural conflicts and its agents have paved the way for destructive social and environmental policies in Iran. The best example is the rescue archaeology projects in support of destructive dam projects under the name of development, which resulted in the flooding of hundreds of villages and archaeological sites and serious damage to the environment.

Archaeology as Activism in Iran: Characteristics and Challenges

In the following, I will discuss the strategies of a small group of Iranian archaeologists toward a more engaged version of archaeology. This is a personal, and of course political, narrative of shifting from conservative Near Eastern archaeology to an engaged archaeology of the contemporary past. Shortly after starting my education in the Department of Archaeology at the University of Tehran, I discovered that the courses did not meet my expectations. I could not see any tie between the syllabi that discussed the glory of Persian empires and my life and the life of people around me. I just wanted to do something useful, to be active. However, as a young student, I did not have a clear image of activism at that time.

My personal and professional life changed trying to establish an engaged version of archaeology in my homeland. For me, the idea of doing something relevant and useful came from the disaster ethnoarchaeology project in Bam in 2003 when a devastating earthquake exposed the sufferings of people. Our team visited Bam and realized the limitations of conservative archaeology in such situations. Feeling the responsibility to speak and write about the painful experiences of people, our small team was struggling to find a scientific, methodological and yet ethical version of archaeology that could respond to this situation. The project transformed into a contemporary archaeology project in 2008.

What we wanted was to develop an independent version of archaeology which can communicate with society actively without too much governmental intervention. For our small group, GAP END, who wanted to act independently and consider contemporary society as the context of production and consumption of archaeological knowledge, the archaeology of the contemporary past was emancipating. It provided us with a scientific and ethical approach to investigate the challenges and crucial issues of Iran from an archaeological perspective. One of our main activities to establish an engaged version of archaeology was to launch scientific programs for the public, where we could actively communicate with people, be informed about their expectations and learn about the impacts of archaeology on society. This was a brilliant experience leading us to revisit our methodologies and approaches.

After the coup of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009 and the rise of the extreme right, we encountered difficulties. Leila Papoli-Yazdi and Omran Garazhian, the main members of GAP END, had been exiled to a small college in Neyshabour, northeastern Iran, and I was sent to the University of Birjand, a small university near the Afghan border. Our colleagues sent reports against us to the security authorities of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, accusing us of being anti-regime and scientifically and morally unqualified. Nevertheless, we stayed in touch and organized our independent activities under GAP END. However, in the absence of financial support and fieldwork permission, it was not easy.

In 2012 the Center for the Investigation of Unknown Martyrs approached us. This Center is a military organization under the supervision of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, an extreme right army, Sepah, and is responsible for the recovery of the bodies of Iran-Iraq war martyrs. Evidently, they knew that we were the only group of native archaeologists in the region who do the archaeology of the contemporary past. They called Leila and tried to convince the group to cooperate with them. They had access to financial support, well-equipped laboratories, and a group of experts, including anthropologists who worked as military officers. We were told that we could join any prominent university that we wish and have access to all facilities, equipment and finance of the Center.

After several hours of discussion in Leila and Omran's house, the headquarters of GAP END, we decided to refuse the offer. We realized that working with an extreme right governmental organization would have consequences that we could not anticipate. One of our main concerns was the destiny of our research. We were quite aware that the Center would reserve and hold all the rights in terms of our data and results.

In countries under dictatorial regimes, cooperation with the state can have consequences beyond the field of study. So, one of the main characteristics of activist archaeology in countries under dictatorship is to avoid collaboration with governmental organizations. As an independent group in Iranian archaeology, saying no has been sometimes our most effective resistance. In the absence of freedom of speech and independent academia in Iran that could guarantee independent research, doing nothing is pure engagement. It does not necessarily mean passivity and inactivity but rather responsibility about the outcomes of decisions. In this regard, Hannah Arendt's (2003: 48)

words about personal responsibility are notable: "Hence, the question addressed to those who participated and obeyed orders should never be, 'Why did you obey?' but 'Why did you support?'" According to Arendt, better to suffer than collaborate.

Noteworthy are the fruitful discussions by archaeologists to avoid cooperation with military organizations, particularly in critical situations such as war and conflict (see Meskell 2002; Bernbeck 2008; Hamilakis 2009). However, there is an attitude that archaeology in peaceful countries would not be so dangerous. This should be reinvestigated, as in the absence of engagement, archaeological practice can lead to disastrous outcomes.

Activism Can Transform Archaeology and Archaeologists

Activism can change archaeology, its subjects, concerns, methodologies and audience. Activism can lead to the revision of fundamental concepts and definitions. In an interesting case, Max Liboiron's (2021: 5) engaged research on plastic has introduced a novel understanding of colonialism. They consider plastics' global distribution as part of colonial land relations and discuss that access to indigenous lands is a colonial strategy for sending pollution abroad. Such critical reflections are crucial if archaeology is determined to contribute to the research on current global challenges.

Scholars have correctly emphasized that we as agents should transform the discipline, not just create an activist niche in archaeology (Silverman and Ruggles 2007; Stottman 2010; Atalay et al. 2014: 8). Zimmerman has subtly discussed that being an activist is a decision. "Archaeologists can provide useful perspectives on contemporary social problems if they are willing to engage in politics and translate their findings into information useful for developing social policy" (Zimmerman 2010: 443). Yannis Hamilakis (2009) has rightly emphasized the multiple identities of "archaeologists such as that of the concerned citizen, the national subject of an invading country, or the public intellectual" and asked archaeologists to express their political, ethical, as well as professional opposition in public to issues such as military invasions and imperialist encroachments.

One might ask if activism can be incorporated with the scientific claims of archaeology. Indeed, challenges such as conflict, climate change, pollution and hyper-consumerism that affect the life of human beings globally stimulate us to deconstruct the dichotomy of activism and scientific claims and consider activism as a necessity for archaeological practice. I cannot see any contradiction between applying scientific methods and activism. Activism is not about the ignorance of scientific methods but rather about a lack of awareness of the socio-political dimension of scientific practice. On the other hand, considering the scientific aspect of archaeology does not mean refusing to engage in critical discussions about ethics and politically-informed decisions. Our work "might be valuable beyond just the human interest to be derived from providing perspectives on cultural adaptations over time" (Zimmerman 2010: 444).

Moreover, one of the most distinguishing aspects of activism in archaeology is to think globally. This scale distinguishes engaged archaeologies from traditional ones. While traditional and conservative archaeologies embedded in local and regional claims are usually at the service of nationalist agendas, activism can situate archaeological practice on a more global scale. As an archaeologist from an unsettled region, I have learnt that global challenges have local consequences, such as the destruction of the environment, subsistence and poverty. I am aware of the painful experiences and bitter stories of ordinary people and communities and the environmental catastrophes when archaeology is conducted in the absence of ethical and professional considerations.

It is worth noting that transformative and engaged archaeologies are also context and agent dependent, and there is no single universal version of activist archaeology that can be applied everywhere.

Concluding Words: Is Activism a Priority in Archaeology?

Anibal Quijano, the Latin American thinker, has applied the term coloniality to demonstrate that issues with "a colonial origin and character can be more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix they were established" (Quijano 2000: 533). Quijano's contribution demonstrates new perceptions of colonialism and transcends the orthodox understanding of this term. The colonial function of archaeology in its early days has remained in Iranian archaeology. Archaeology is still almost useless and has failed to establish a proper connection to Iranian society. As a state-sponsored discipline, it is involved in power relations and sometimes has an oppressive role.

To a considerable extent, archaeology is about change and continuities. In a permanently changing world we are not only in need of constant re-evaluation of our methods, like any other discipline, but also of our concerns and questions. With that said, transformations of archaeological practice that call for more engaged versions of archaeology are a necessity in Iranian archaeology. One of the most important goals of archaeology in Iran in the 21st century should be to revise its basic concepts and restructure its relationship with the contemporary world. According to Anne Pyburn (2007: 178) communication with the living context "will force the archaeologist to take the political context of their efforts into account. Gone are the days when the expatriate researcher could ignore local impacts because 'they will never know'."

This has benefits for both sides: On the one hand, it can guarantee the survival of archaeology through its transformation into a politically and socially engaged discipline, which can resist and refuse to be part of the oppression machine. On the other hand, it brings in the active participation of communities and stakeholders whose voices should be heard. As Pyburn (2007: 179) has stated: "Archaeologists have an agenda worth promoting; the problem is making sure our voices speak to the political present and ensuring that the informed voices of other constituencies are also heard and understood".

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