

## Could the Sivand dam project be a blessing in disguise?

Contributed by Akbar Nemati

Between Pasargadae, the first capital of the Persian empire, and Persepolis, a road leads through a narrow gorge through a little valley called Bolaghi. A dam is under construction, scheduled to be finished this year, which will flood 20 square kilometres of the valley, raising the water level in the river that flows through it by several metres. The waters will rise to within six kilometres of the tomb of Cyrus, which is not itself at risk, nor are the palaces in the vicinity. At the request of the Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organisation (ICHTO), archaeologists carried out emergency surveys of this area.

Between Pasargadae, the first capital of the Persian empire, and Persepolis, a road leads through a narrow gorge through a little valley called Bolaghi. A dam is under construction, scheduled to be finished this year, which will flood 20 square kilometres of the valley, raising the water level in the river that flows through it by several metres. The waters will rise to within six kilometres of the tomb of Cyrus, which is not itself at risk, nor are the palaces in the vicinity. At the request of the Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organisation (ICHTO), archaeologists carried out emergency surveys of this area. They mapped more than 100 sites of human activity, including two impressive 10-kilometre-long canals built in stone or carved out of rock. They found evidence of dwellings and shards from many different eras. Very few finds were prehistoric, most were Achaemenid or later, including up to the Modern Era. The caves, some of which may have been occupied in the prehistoric era, are high up and therefore not directly threatened by the rising waters. Because of the valley's modest dimensions and the relatively small size of its sites, its importance cannot be compared to other sites that have prompted salvage operations by international teams in Turkey, Syria and Iraq all along the Euphrates River. However, the Bolaghi/Sivand region does merit archaeologists' attention. It has occupied a strategic position through many different historical eras, and, if we do not act now, we may never know what archeological evidence it contains. Archaeologists, and all those who take an interest in the past, must now confront the question of how to reconcile economic imperatives with the protection of cultural heritage. It is not a question of outlawing all modernisation in historical areas. If this were to happen, town centres, roads that correspond to ancient routes, and many other sites would remain frozen in time forever. What historians and lovers of heritage demand is a knowledge of the past in all its forms, not the conservation at any cost of all historical remains. All traces of our history deserve to be studied, but few are worth conserving. Consultation, time, legislation, and finance, this is what the archaeologists need. They already know how to adapt to economic constraints. In Iran, the great excavations of the last 20 years show that Iranian archaeologists know how to respond effectively to the demands of modernisation: for example, in the centre of Hamadan which is the site of the ancient city of Ecbatana, in the west of Iran; or at Nishapur, the famous medieval town to the west of Meshed. The Sivand dam project began in 1992, a difficult time for Iran, and there was probably not enough concern in the country about the consequences of the new project, but it is also the responsibility of archaeologists to inform contractors about the possible dangers of the necessary modernisation of the regions. It is also true that surveillance is extremely difficult in remote, inaccessible areas. The archeological authorities should have the necessary political weight, backed up by Iran's legislation on the protection of cultural heritage, to stand up to the big ministries (energy, communication, housing, etc.), a confrontation that will be familiar to archaeologists all over the world. There are numerous sites and rock bas-reliefs in the Zagros chain, south-west of Iran, the ancient Elam of the Bible (second to first millennium BC) and Elymaïde from the beginning of the Christian era. In this region, the construction of a series of hydro-electric dams on the river Karun, the biggest such project in Iran, was begun in the 60s and recently started up again. It seems that from the start of this project, archaeologists were never able to make their voices sufficiently heard, and this has been going on for years. It is such a shame; the delays could have been used to carry out salvage excavations by Iranian or international teams. In the Bolaghi valley, the construction of the Sivand dam has been slow, but now there is talk that it will start to be filled later this year. The reaction in Iran, and abroad, has undoubtedly helped to bring about a prise de conscience and a dialogue about the potential threat; there have even been suggestions that the authorities may postpone the flooding of the valley until 2006. Fortunately, the waters will rise very slowly, giving some time to investigate sites, many of which are several metres above the current height of the river. The dam, which is designed above all for irrigation, must not divert all the water from the Pulvar river, which is already used to irrigate hundreds of hectares of wheat and maize in the Sivand plain all the way to Persepolis. The Iranian heritage authorities (ICHTO) called for international co-operation last autumn to survey, explore and excavate several sites. It is not a question of excavating every square metre where artefacts have been found, or even of excavating a site in its entirety. The objective is to survey the different types of remains (villages, camps, farms, workshops, cemeteries, roads, etc.) and understand their chronology, in order to reconstruct the life of the human communities, undoubtedly very few in number, that once occupied this valley. There is evidence of human life as far back as 2,000 years, and, according to the initial observations, possibly even Neolithic. Time is running out, but much is still possible. ICHTO has devised a strategy to survey the entire area, giving priority to the areas most at risk of flooding. Several Iranian and international teams have responded to the appeal for help. The Bolaghi valley could one day prove to be an exception in Iran: a well-studied micro-region in the province of Fars, where, until now, only the most famous monuments, such as Persepolis, have been studied.