



The UCLA Archaeological Gazetteer of Iran: Excavations of Ancient Sites in a Digital Age

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The UCLA Archaeological Gazetteer of Iran is an open-access online encyclopedia of Iranian archaeological sites of all historical periods (Figure 1).³ The growing number of archaeological activities in the fields of surveying, excavation, restoration, conservation, and museum studies has made it increasingly difficult to provide and update the timely dissemination of results in the form of printed publications. The main function of the gazetteer is to fill such a lacuna with the creation of a web-based, interactive site dedicated to the consolidation, preservation, and dissemination of archaeological news, reports, multimedia files, and publications.

Archaeology in Iran has been confronted by several challenges that have only been compounding in the past few decades. The current inaccessibility of archaeological sites in Iran has led to the interruption of major field projects, a drastic reduction in the study of Iranian archaeology, and in some cases elimination of archaeology from university programs. The ongoing loss of archaeological architecture and artifacts due to both natural and human-made disasters poses an ever-growing threat to the conservation and study of Iranian cultural heritage. A global political climate that complicates international travel and research, and the resulting frequent loss of Iranian archaeology positions in Western academic institutions and universities, has negatively impacted the ability of scholars to communicate and collaborate effectively.

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The Gazetteer of Iran was created from the desire to preserve our archaeological knowledge of the region

While many regions around the world are affected by similar problems, the combined challenges facing Iranian archaeology warrant immediate attention. The UCLA Archaeological Gazetteer of Iran was created from the desire to preserve our archaeological knowledge of the region and to accelerate scholarly dialogue within this shrinking field. The idea was born three years ago during informal discussions with Rahim Shayegan, director of the Pourdavoud Center for the Study of the Iranian World at UCLA, within the framework of the research endeavors of the center. Work on the project began in 2018 in tandem with the Humanities Technology Department at UCLA and independent web designers.

Led by Ali Mousavi, an adjunct assistant professor of Iranian archaeology at UCLA and a Pourdavoud Research Scholar, the gazetteer is an interactive online platform featuring history, site reports, maps, and photographs of major archaeological sites in ancient Iran. The vision of the Pourdavoud Center is to expand this project into a major vehicle of archaeological research on ancient Iran.

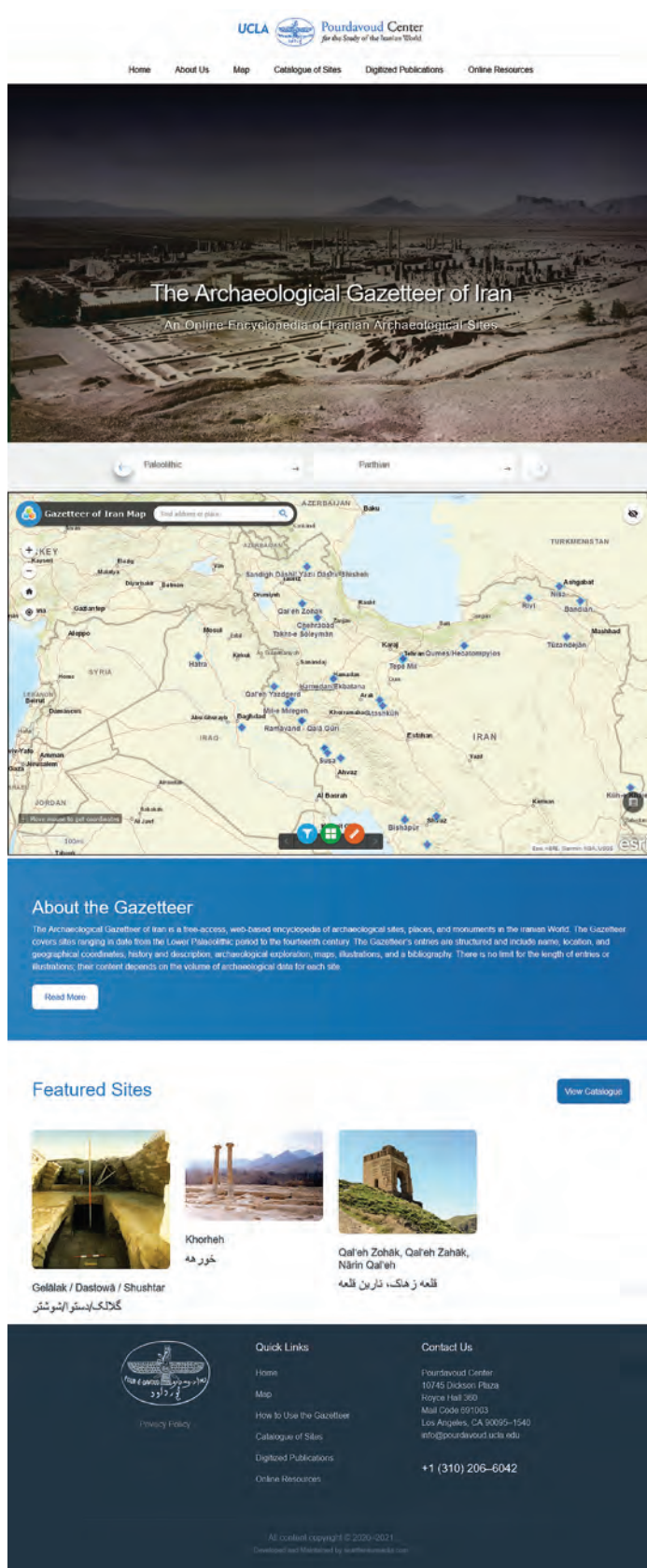


Figure 1. The UCLA Archaeological Gazetteer of Iran home page, featuring an interactive ArcGIS map and project information.



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Figure 2. The ArcGIS map of the gazetteer, which allows for layered filtering and site sorting by feature, time period, and custom tags.

The Gazetteer is intended to cover all sites of ancient Iran

The gazetteer is a research tool that provides essential, up-to-date information on archaeological sites in a digital format. It consists of three main components: a map on which archaeological sites are plotted, with the option of zooming and filtering according to historical periods; a catalog of sites arranged alphabetically and chronologically; and a section for digitized publications and online sources relating to ancient Iranian studies. The gazetteer is intended to cover all archaeological sites of ancient Iran regardless of the present-day political borders of the country (Figure 2), thus including adjacent regions (Anatolia, Arabia, Asia Minor, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Transoxiana).

Gazetteer entries include names of sites, locations and geographical coordinates, history and descriptions, full records of archaeological exploration, maps, illustrations, and bibliographies (one for each site) (Figure 3). There is no limit on the length of entries or number of illustrations; content depends on the volume of archaeological data for each site. It is the hope that all material in the gazetteer will be queried and organized not only by site but also by type of find, architectural features, equivalencies in dating, and other criteria and that all filters will be accessible to users of the website for research purposes.

The map feature of the gazetteer is supported by ESRI ArcGIS software, which allows users to export data provided by the gazetteer and integrate it into their own research projects. Multiple users can collaborate on updating the searchable map, which can then be filtered for more specific site locations, site features, and time periods. Because this map and all associated site entries can be updated in real time, the newest archaeological announcements, publications, and site reports can be featured prominently within the encyclopedic entries.

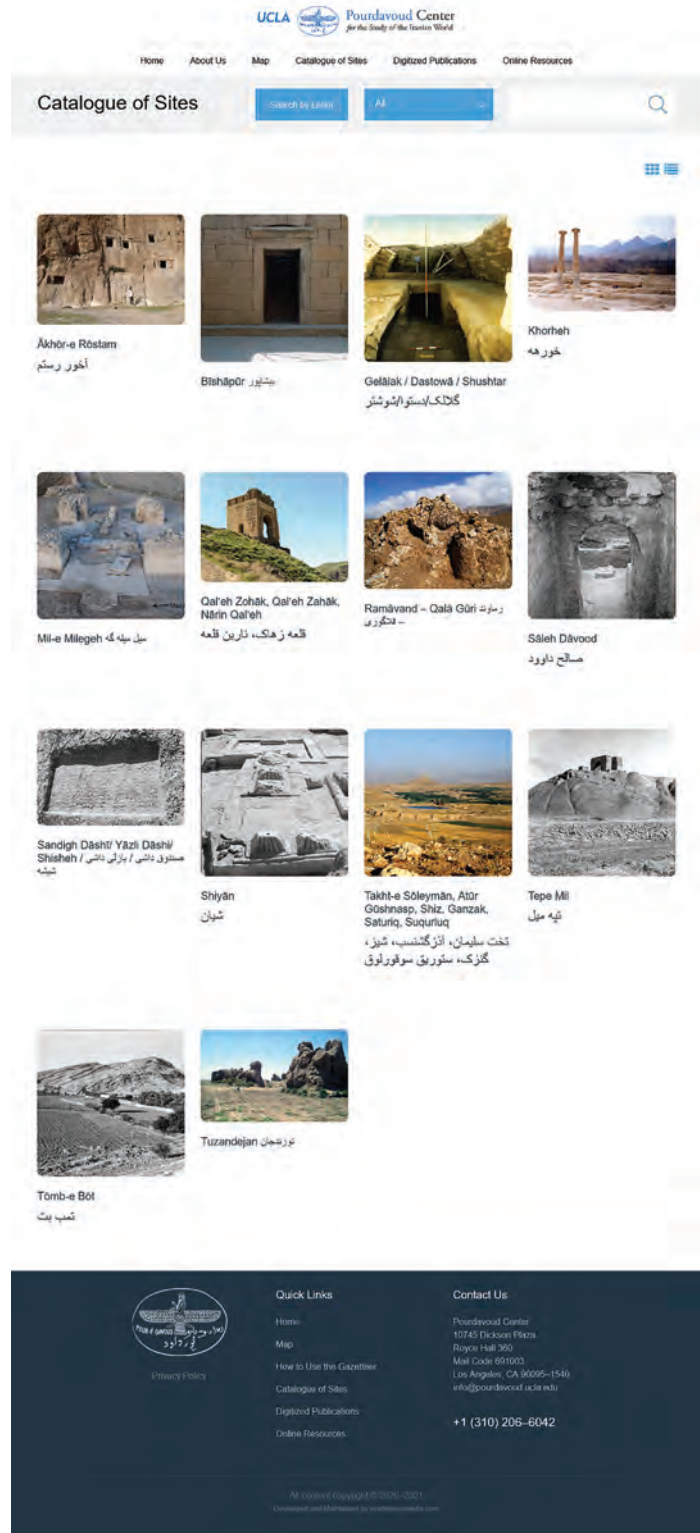


Figure 3. The catalog of sites page of the gazetteer, which allows for searching and sorting.

The number of archaeological publications in Iran has remarkably increased in the past twenty years, but these publications are not as available for scholarly use as they should be. While some resources include abstracts in English, most published reports are in Persian. The distribution of Iranian archaeological publications is often very limited, and these materials soon go out of print. Institutional libraries in North America and Europe infrequently receive some publications, but most Iranian archaeological reports remain inaccessible or unknown to the wider community of scholars. The creation of a web-based, interactive gazetteer dedicated to the consolidation, preservation, and dissemination of archaeological news, reports, multimedia files, and publications will remedy the current vacuum. The initiative will collect and digitize important works and publications and present them in English translation to specialized and interested audiences through a dedicated website, thereby contributing to the visibility of current research and developments in Iranian archaeology. Also, a variety of sites and solitary monuments, often noticed or recorded in passing, have never been published. As their records are not sufficient to form a separate report or publication, they can be neglected and forgotten. However, such data are valuable, and the gazetteer is perhaps the best place for making them known and accessible. Several archaeologists have already expressed their desire to contribute their unpublished reports and/or private archival documents. The only way to assess and organize such an impressive quantity of data is through a digital platform. The scope of the gazetteer is all-encompassing and comprehensive; it will allow us to capture and convert these important scattered threads of data into an organized, open-access research tool, allowing researchers to arrange and study archaeological sites and artifacts based on historical period or geographical location.

This initiative will digitize publications and present them in English

The aim of the project is twofold: the publication of excavation reports not previously disseminated, and the creation of a gazetteer of archaeological sites and their related published reports. In addition, the website will be used as an instructional tool for undergraduate courses, such as Iranian Civilizations (ANE M110A-C), Archaeology of Iran (ANE CM163), and Ancient Cities of Iran (ANE 187). It will also be useful for a wide range of courses on ancient art and archaeology, as well as courses in the digital humanities. The gazetteer consists of two efforts: a quantitative approach to describing all archaeological sites and fieldwork pertaining to Iranian archaeology, regardless of the present political borders of Iran, and the creation of data layers and analytics, including relevant published and unpublished materials in multiple languages. The website is accessible through the Pourdavoud Center for the Study of the Iranian World.⁴

In short, the goals of the project are as follows:

1. To create a digital gazetteer of sites to preserve and curate past archaeological research.
2. To facilitate continued and future research by providing access to this digital curation of past research and excavation history.
3. To maintain a living database, where new research can be contributed to online scholarly dialogue in an immediate fashion.
4. To preserve all aspects of Iranian archaeological history for the benefit of global patrimony, especially in a time when sites face both natural and human-made threats.
5. To offer this website as an instructional tool for undergraduate classroom use, whereby students can study the history of ancient Iran, past and current archaeological methods, and data-recording strategies for the digital age.

4. <https://pourdavoud.ucla.edu>.

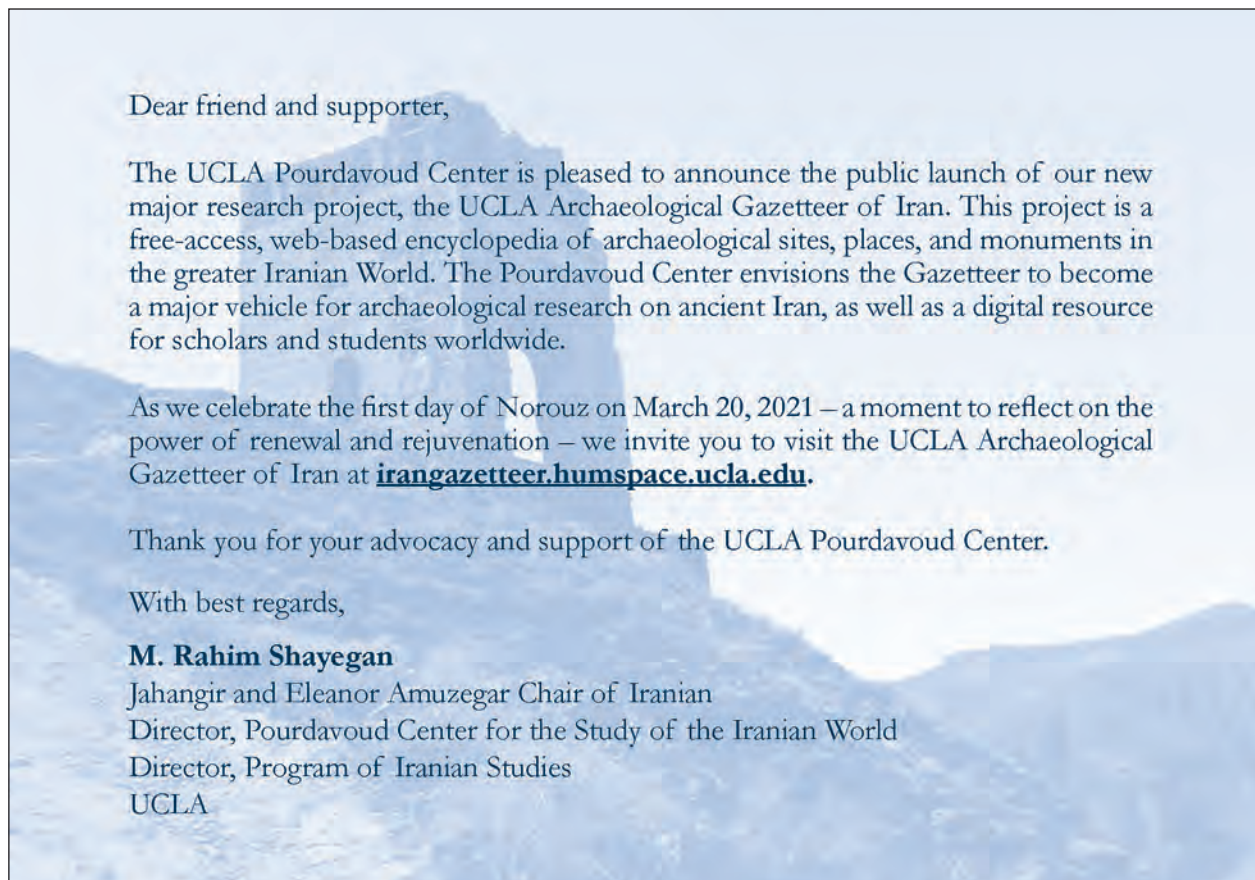


Figure 4. The invitation to the public launch of the gazetteer, which took place remotely on March 20, 2021.

The gazetteer is a collective endeavor. A group of international scholars from North America, Europe, and Asia will communicate through the gazetteer and make contributions. The web environment of the gazetteer allows scholars to read, respond to, and discuss contributions, which will be approved by the members of the advisory board. The section for digitized publications is expanding. These include excavation reports, proceedings of archaeological conferences, conference papers, and even some seasonal exhibitions. The section will also include a database for hosting unpublished illustrations and photographic documents of old archaeological excavations, as well as research works in progress.

The Pourdavoud Center celebrated the public launch of the gazetteer on March 20, 2021 (Figure 4). It is our hope that in the coming years, the UCLA Archaeological Gazetteer of Iran will expand in size to meet the full scope of the project. The gazetteer gives researchers a chance to present their knowledge in a collaborative digital environment. It is a continually expanding teaching tool to train the next generation of scholars of ancient Iran.