

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of *Nomadism in Iran: From Antiquity to the Modern Era* by Daniel T. Potts

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Nomadism in Iran: From Antiquity to the Modern Era,

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There has been much debate about the role of nomadic populations in the development of the earliest societies in Iran, with positions being polarised between those arguing that nomads influenced the development of complexity in fundamental ways and those that disagree with both the arguments and methods used to reach those conclusions. D.T. Potts's substantial and imposing *Nomadism in Iran: From Antiquity to the Modern Era* presents a clear case for the latter - delivering a wide-ranging, critical and often vexed analysis of the origins and actions of nomads on the Iranian Plateau and its adjacent piedmont zones. It is a comprehensive work of erudite scholarship that is rich in detail and analysis, and critically assesses a range of complex arguments and evidence, but is presented in a readable style. In contrast to other attempts to discuss nomads in Iran, Potts takes the reader from the Neolithic, Chalcolithic and Bronze Age periods (Chapter 1), through the Iron Age (Chapter 2) and Late Antiquity (Chapter 3), before providing a tour de force assessment of the history of nomads from the Islamic period right up into the twentieth century (Chapters 5 to 9).

As noted in the acknowledgements, I worked with the author in Iran as part of the Mamasani Archaeological Project between 2002 and 2009. During that time, I was a party to energetic discussions on the merits and mistakes

of the arguments put forward in numerous papers advocating the origins of nomadism in Iran during the Neolithic period, and the growth of nomadic economic and political power throughout prehistory. In keeping with the tenor of these discussions, Potts's book sets out to demonstrate "the spurious nature of the evidence underpinning the claim that Iranian nomadism was a phenomenon of great antiquity" and to challenge the assumption that there was "behavioural continuity between groups observed in the twentieth century and those of antiquity", which would validate the extrapolation of modern observations into that deep past (Potts 2014: 419).

The volume is comprised of ten fulsome chapters, with the text being accompanied by information-rich footnotes. The eight chapters that outline an archaeological and historical assessment of nomads from the mid-first millennium BC up to the present (Chapters 2 to 8) are bookended by chapters that provide a theoretical overview and critique of arguments about nomads in prehistory (Chapter 1), and an assessment of nomads in Iran in the *longue durée* (Chapter 10).

The chapters that comprise the main bulk of the volume (Chapters 2 to 8) systematically introduce and review the evidence of the range of nomadic groups known to have influenced Iran. One thing that these chapters make clear is that the Iranian Plateau was visited and impacted by nomadic populations from the surrounding regions at various points throughout its recorded history, and in the second millennium AD in

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particular, a number of different Turkic groups migrated into Iran and engaged in conflict with local populations and between themselves as they became assimilated into the Iranian socio-political fabric. Through critical reviews of the impact of nomadic groups such as the Qezelbash that assess the political machinations used to exploit, control, deport and ultimately disempower them, Potts is able to demonstrate that it is indefensible to argue that there were continuities in the practices used by individual groups over any extended period, and certainly not across millennia.

Of all of the chapters in the volume, Chapter 1 is the one most likely to polarise opinion amongst prehistoric archaeologists of Iran and elsewhere. It frames the entire narrative by presenting a critique of the perceived successes and failings of the analysis of the archaeological evidence that has been used to suggest that nomadic groups first appeared in the Neolithic and went on to be a fundamental economic and political force throughout the rest of Iranian prehistory and into the periods in which distinctive nomadic populations are recorded in the historical record. I can only agree that many of the arguments that have previously been put forward about the origins of nomadism in Iran are weakened by the fact that they are based on indirect evidence such as settlement distribution data and the identification of what are interpreted as camp sites in marginal areas, and that this methodological problem has been exacerbated by the theoretical weakness that comes from an overreliance on modern analogy.

Potts rightly reiterates that it is inherently difficult to use archaeological evidence to identify nomads [as Weeks et al. (2010) have noted, a number of sites that appear to be camp-sites on the surface have proven to be something else entirely - in some cases being manufacturing sites with kilns]. There are, however, settlements that appear to have a pastoral component, and these must be explained. While I largely agree with Potts's view that there is scant unequivocal evidence for the existence of truly nomadic behaviour before the mid-first millennium BC, I do feel that in discarding the interconnected "house of cards" arguments about the origins and importance of nomadism, his volume does not go far enough to frame a cogent and encapsulated counter argument beyond asserting that throughout prehistory, Iran was occupied by sedentary communities. Potts critiques the dichotomised view that there was a distinction/opposition between sedentary populations and nomadic groups engaging in pastoralism, but the relationships between sedentary and pastoralist populations, and the degree to which pastoralists were attached to sedentary communities is left relatively underexplored.

The Iranian plateau is large and environmentally diverse, and mobility was a key process in human occupation and interaction across this landscape. As Potts

notes, beyond arguments for nomads and nomadisation throughout prehistory, the modes of interaction between populations occupying different parts of the Iranian Plateau and its piedmonts are not commonly discussed. However, this volume does not fully resolve this issue, and I feel that it is important for future research to more overtly consider *how* prehistoric populations moved across this complex landscape, and therein be clearer about why nomadism need not be *the* explanation.

None of this detracts from what is without doubt a major work, and I firmly believe that this is a piece of rigorous scholarship that should force archaeologists and historians in Iran to consider the nature of evidence at their disposal and how it is used. A sign of the success of Potts's volume lies in the fact that since its publication, it has prompted the re-evaluation of the role of nomads in prehistory in other adjacent areas (e.g. Turkey; Hammer and Arbuckle 2017), and the use of archaeological science approaches such as stable isotope analysis of animal bones and teeth to actually demonstrate the limited range of mobility evident in animal populations (Arbuckle and Hammer *in press*; Lawler 2017). Significantly, these reassessments and analyses demonstrate that pastoralists in earlier periods appear to have kept their herds relatively close to home, and this observation has major implications for our understanding of the role of pastoralists in processes of mobility, interaction and trade.

Authors' contributions

The author has read the book concerned and wrote the review.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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