The priority program

The DFG thematic priority program “The Iranian highlands: resiliencies and integration in pre-modern societies” (SPP 2176) was set up in March 2018 by the senate of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) for a period of six years, starting in 2019. Scholars are invited to submit applications for an initial period of three years.

Coordinator:

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Summary

The Iranian highlands play a central role in many periods of cultural development in the wider region. Highland societies were in close contact with the surrounding regions with which political and economic relationships were repeatedly constructed.

Relationships to Mesopotamia, Caucasia or Central Asia intensified periodically, via trade, immigration or political inclusion. The societies of the Iranian highlands were themselves ready to integrate these relationships into their own networks, to transform them or sometimes to resist the accompanying changes. Thus, the highlands and its occupants took a decisive role in their extended region and in the developing political, economic and social impacts. Highland landscapes, their resources and specific conditions of life contributed to these developments, but the cultural, social and economic processes have not been examined in detail for many periods because they have been for most of the time overshadowed by a “non-local” – especially Mesopotamian – perspective.

The SPP 2176 understands the Iranian highlands sensu lato as the central Iranian plateau with its mountain ranges, the Kopet Dag in the northeast, the Elburz in the north, the Zagros in the
west, southwest and south, and Urmia Lake and the south Caucasus in the northwest. In the east, the Kerman region with the Lut desert and Iranian Baluchistan are also included.

Since 2000, Iran has become increasingly open to research by foreign scholars. Through the SPP, it is expected that European/German and Iranian scientific relationships will be re-established. German-language scientific research with regard to Iran can thereby acquire a new impetus, in Germany as well as beyond.

The promotion of young scholars and the inclusion of and networking with Iranian colleagues are explicit objectives of the program. Scholars from Iran should also take the opportunity to participate in projects in cooperation with German universities and research institutes, in order to extend research beyond existing frontiers.

General questions and objectives

Research on the Iranian highlands and the societies that lived there is an emerging field for sociocultural, archaeological and linguistic research in Western Asia. From a long-term perspective, the heterogeneous life-worlds of the Iranian highlands repeatedly resulted in cultural hybridizations, which worked in a transformative manner and showed a significant durability as well as flexibility. The thesis of SPP 2176 is that the interaction between starkly changing external conditions and deeply anchored cultural mechanisms for coping with crises resulted in multiple highland life-worlds, allowing linkages among very different ways of life (for example, mobile pastoralists and nomads, rural village and urban societies).

In contrast to the traditional conception of acculturation, the SPP does not take sociocultural adaptations as a basis but begins from the notion that new formations developed continuously on different scales in the highlands of Iran. The resiliency of the segmentally structured societies revealed in their astonishing flexibility and dynamics ever new social and cultural configurations. The SPP views them as a specific contribution of highland societies. It does so in conscious contrast to hydraulic societies such as Mesopotamia, which until now have been primary foci of research and defined as historic “role models”.

The different “highlandscapes” are the focus of SPP 2176; they will be examined with the help of an interdisciplinary and diachronic basis that includes archaeology, geologically-based archaeometry, archaeobiology, Iranian studies, ancient history and ancient oriental studies. Research projects should identify diverse life-worlds, with a focus on the question of how the social resiliency observable in the Iranian highlands developed in terms of economic, linguistic and social patterns and the strength of political-social integration specific to different time periods. These include the examination of transfers and exchange of knowledge and memory cultures in language, religion, and material culture. The SPP aims to document systematically different economic, social and cultural processes under the rubric of three thematic fields:

- Raw material regimes and their networks;
- Institutionalized relationships, ranging from formal-public institutions to family structures;
- Mobility patterns and their natural and cultural relations to the environment.
Research objectives of the SPP

Central concepts

Social resiliency and "Highlandscapes":

The Iranian highlands have numerous landscapes and ecologic niches leaving a special mark on human societies and being formed by man in very special manner. These life-worlds, characterized by extreme aridity, montane living spaces, river valleys, basins and passage regions, do not offer a stable frame. Correspondingly, the span of political organisation forms range from decentralized structures, in modular manner bound to each other, to centralized, supra-regional organisational forms. Mobile forms of life with their typical permeability are structured in different manner. In the wickerwork of institutions formed by that, economic and other daily practices are included providing (among others) the often trouble-free and nevertheless flexible reproduction of structures. Those daily practices are used, in extension of the cultural-anthropologic discourse (for example in the sense of Tim Ingolds), to interpret acquisition processes of single natural resources, but offer an appropriate frame for questions of mobility factors, too. Projects shall approach the questions concerning the context of structures and daily practice in life-worlds of these “Highlandscapes” in order to better understand the bases of the resistance, which is characteristic of highland societies.

The problem of scales:

The precise distinction of scales is considered as basically important to be able to assess the range of the insights developed on the base of archaeologic, historic and linguistic sources and to bring them together in reasonable manner. Therefore, the exchange of raw materials is linked to the range of production and consumption practices and dependent on factors like the connection to roads that are effective in further surroundings, for example according to the transfer of local knowledge. Without the definition of spatial and social scales, mobility and exchange cannot be assessed. In the field of far-reaching political or economic institutions, scales have that eminent historic significance because mostly, the existence of institutions is related to forms of action on the micro-level, either to rituals establishing political organisations by formalization, or to work routines that become a tradition, securing a regular inflow of subsistence and other goods.

Main topics and research fields

The SPP 2176 is subdivided into three main topics to which the research fields stated in the following are related in diagonal and connecting manner. Projects shall be anchored in at least one of these main topics and contribute to the central research fields.

ST 1. Landscapes and raw material regimes:

The significance of the diversely structured raw material region for the life conditions of the populations of the Iranian highlands is evident. However, for the first time, this basic constant of the “Highlandscapes” in the Iranian highlands shall be examined in diachronic manner and in its diversity and shall be analyzed according to its effects on economic and social practices.
Which highland-specific resource regimes could develop in the pre-historic until pre-modern highland societies and which effects did they have on the social institutions and networks?

**ST 2. Daily life and institution:**

A main interest is the question to what extent the increasing differentiation (“specialization”) of institutions and their consolidation correspond to a (pre-) historic reality. Which highland-specific configurations could evolve in the social development? Did they develop from a temporary existence to firm components of the highland societies, and if they did, under which conditions? Was there a development of highland-specific practices and institutions resulting in further material and cultural manifestations in the cultural and geographic surroundings? What were their effects on the daily practices and vice versa?

**ST 3. Mobility and networks:**

How intensive was social mobility in the highland societies, which forms did it take and how permeable, adaptable and resilient were those life forms? How is the interregional “connectivity”, resulting from mobility, to be assessed? Altogether we shall ask to which extent certain landscapes of the Iranian highlands held exactly those ecologic niches and networks for pastoral institutions (for example cattle markets and feasts at the summer willows) which enabled other, more distant communities to immigrate with success and to establish in those regions. Especially with regard to Parthians, Seljuks and Mongols – often defined as a whole and in one-sided manner as “foreign cultures” – the necessary basic research is missing.

The three subject areas can be subdivided into different research fields. We recommend that the projects specifically contribute to them:

**Research field (FF) 1: Raw material networks and strategies of acquiring resources**

Regional productions, their embedding in rural social and economic structures and the (inter-)regional consumption of the raw materials shall be examined with regard to the demanding character (affordances) of the resource and the related social innovations.

**FF2: Population dynamics and settlement systems**

Settlement dynamics and diachronic changes in settlement areas are in the focus of examinations where (pre-)historic population sizes for individual settlement areas shall play a role, too.

**FF3: Strategies of subsistence**

By analyzing farming and grazing systems, typical subsistence strategies of the highland shall be evolved in archaeological manner (archaeo-botanic, zoo-archaeologic, isotopic) and by analyzing irrigation systems.

**FF4: Strategies of coping with distances – ways and shaping of ways**

Main roads, routes and stations (for example caravansaries) open access to the space conceptions (such as mental maps) of the highland populations but also to institutional and extra-institutional states resulting from the use of routes. They can play a primary role
concerning the emergence of supra-regional networks or support them as stabilizing factors (“connectivity”).

**FF5: Mobility patterns**

The internal circulation of persons and things in the Iranian highlands reveals, like the question of integration of immigrating groups, the complex population structure of the highlands. Means of analyzing those phenomena include language diffusion and spatial distribution of exotica and grave forms, among others. That is why forms of nomadism, political and individual mobility shall also be examined by help of textual, archaeological and archaeo-biological sources.

**FF6: Political systems/political economy**

Daily practices and religious and political institutions of the highlands resulted in cultural cores and identities with strongly variable range. These structures reflect in (supra-)regional systems of power and the political economies of more or less decentral organized highland societies, or the political and/or religious architecture, too.

**FF7: Intra- and transcultural networks of knowledge transfer and cultural experience**

Daily practice, language, material culture and technical achievements shall be examined to evolve traditional cores as a middle until long-term reproduced set of institutions and routines. Here, the geographic and cultural range of these traditions shall be analyzed in the sense of religious, economic or social units.

**FF8: Dynamics of cultural cores**

Cultural techniques like language and its dialects, practices like trade and building forms and ritual systems shall be examined with regard to fragmentations, hybridizations and standardizations of cultural traditions (material and ideal) and result in a reassessment of dominant meta-narratives of “peoples and tribes”.
Projects should be planned in a way that they can be linked to each other along the fields of the SPP. Cooperations between individual partners are expressly desired and should be indicated by name in the application.

Please submit your application by the 31st October 2018 at the latest, via the elan-Portal of the DFG – this portal is at your disposal for entering the application data and the secure transfer of documents. Choose “SPP 2176” in the list of priority programs. When preparing your application, please take into consideration the explanatory leaflet 54.01 concerning research grants including a guide for the application as well as the suggestions in the explanatory leaflet 50.05, part B – Allgemeine Informationen zur Antragstellung / General application information (especially with regard to eligibility to apply and to the financial means that may be requested).

If this application is your first one within the DFG, please take into account that you must register in the elan-Portal at least two weeks before you submit your application. Normally the confirmation of registration will be sent by the following working day. Without a prior registration, an application is not possible.

The application is to be submitted in English. Please send a copy of the application in electronic form to the coordinator of the program, Prof. Dr. Thomas Stöllner (thomas.stoellner@rub.de).

**Further information**

Further information on the priority program is available under: [www.iranhighlands.com](http://www.iranhighlands.com)

For questions, the coordinator of the priority program is at your disposal:

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