



VANDEN BERGHE, LOUIS

VANDEN BERGHE, Louis (b. Oostnieuwkerke, West Flanders, 24 December 1923; d. Ghent, 17 September 1993), Belgian archeologist (with Flemish as his mother-tongue) who devoted almost all his research to Iran's history ([FIGURE 1](#)). After his classical studies at Roeselare College in West Flanders, he went on to study history of art and archaeology at the Hoger Instituut voor Kunstgeschiedenis en Oudheidkunde, sectie Oudheid at Ghent University (1944-48), where he obtained his *licentie* (equivalent to the M.A.). While studying at Ghent, he also took courses at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, where after two years of study he obtained the degree of "candidate" in Oriental Philology and History. In 1949 and 1950, he studied Akkadian, Arabic, and Oriental archaeology at the Universities of Amsterdam and Leiden in the Netherlands. In 1950, he obtained his doctorate from Ghent University, receiving the highest distinction and felicitations of the jury for his dissertation on "Painted pottery in Mesopotamia, Iran, and Pakistan from its origins to ca. 2000 B.C.E.," written in Flemish (878 pp., with more than 8,000 drawings and photographs). Subsequently, part of this work was published, with a French summary, in three issues of the *Gentse Bijdragen tot de Kunstgeschiedenis* (14-16, 1953-56), the former journal of the Higher Institute for History of Art and Archaeology at Ghent University.

In 1951 he was appointed as research fellow at the Belgian National Science Foundation, and in the same year he also became the assistant of Professor Louis Speleers, who taught Egyptian and Near Eastern Art and Archaeology at Ghent. In 1953, on Speleers' retirement, Vanden Berghe was appointed as "full



time chargé de cours”; in 1957 he was nominated Professor, and in 1965 he obtained the highest grade as “Ordinarius” of the Chair for Near Eastern Art and Archaeology. He had quite a heavy teaching load, particularly from 1958 onwards, when the Institute for Oriental Philology and History was established at Ghent. He was co-founder of that institute and was also its first secretary. Later, between 1960 and 1963, he was its director. In 1971, he created a separate unit, “Archaeology and History of the Near East,” within the Institute for History of Art and Archaeology. Besides his appointments as Professor at Ghent and Brussels, he was also appointed curator in 1966 of the Iran Section at the Royal Museums for Art and History in Brussels.

During his whole career of 36 years, until he had to retire at the age of 65 on 1 October 1989, in keeping with the university regulations, he taught courses on Near Eastern and Egyptian art and archaeology, Islamic art, history and culture of ancient Oriental civilizations, and introduction to Persian. Although he taught a general course on Near Eastern Archaeology for undergraduates, he concentrated his teaching in the two “license” years exclusively on Iran. During his career, students wrote some 90 M.A. theses and 5 Ph.D. dissertations under his supervision, mainly on Iranian topics. As well as his main appointment at Ghent University, from 1958 he also taught on a part-time basis at the Institut de philologie et d’histoire orientales at the Université libre de Bruxelles, where he took care of the courses on the history of ancient Iran and the history of art and archaeology of ancient Iran.

After obtaining his doctorate in 1950, he immediately went to Iran, where he spent the academic year 1950-51. He was the first Belgian student to be granted a research scholarship by the Iranian Government. This trip was his first contact with the Near East, and at the same time it gave a determining direction to his research. From then onwards he concentrated almost all his research on Iran.

During Vanden Berghe’s stay in Iran, [André Godard](#), then director general of the Iranian Archaeological Department, asked him to undertake an archeological survey of the Persepolis plain. In summer 1951, for one and a half months he traveled alone through the southern part of the Marv Dašt plain and undertook small soundings at Tall-e Jāri, Tall-e Moški, and Tall-e Čogā. In the summer of 1952 he returned to Fārs and surveyed the northern parts (second survey). Some soundings were done at Tall-e Qal’a, Tall-e Kamin, and several other sites. These two surveys allowed him to sketch a chronological chart of prehistoric development in Fārs province. The



difficulties of his task were considerable, since he was alone with almost no resources or technical help, and he usually had to travel by bicycle or mule. However, the pottery sequence he established still largely holds. At the same time he not only located unknown prehistoric cultures, but also discovered several other monuments such as ossuaries or short inscriptions in Pahlavi.

Since he was appointed at Ghent in 1953 and necessarily had to prepare his courses, he only returned to Iran in the winter of 1954, where he undertook some excavations from 26 November to 5 December at Kōrvin, approximately 80 km northwest of Tehran. Due to bad weather and snow, he only excavated 14 tombs of the Early Iron Age.

The third Fārs survey was conducted in the winter of 1955-56, with excavations at Tall-e Teymurān, Tall-e Kamin, and Tall-e Qal'a. During the fourth Fārs survey (18 May-19 June 1957), Vanden Berghe visited the rock carving at Guyum, which had been discovered by [Ernst Herzfeld](#) in 1926. Undoubtedly, the most impressive result of this survey was the discovery of the fire temple of Tang-e Čak Čak, between Rostāq and Furg. Between 23 December 1959 and 24 February 1960, a fifth field trip was undertaken in southern Iran. Again, several Sasanian monuments were discovered. By following the ancient road between [Firuzābād](#) and Sirāf, the present-day Bandar-e Tāheri on the Persian Gulf coast, he discovered the impressive fire temple complex at Kunār Siāh, with well-preserved architecture ([FIGURE 2](#)). A sixth Fārs expedition (18 November 1960-17 January 1961) led to the discovery of four fire temples. However, the most sensational discovery of that season was the freestanding house-like tomb at Buzpar, which resembles the tomb of [Cyrus II](#) at [Pasargadae](#), but is smaller in size. (This monument appeared on a Belgian postage stamp in 1971 on the occasion of the 2500-year Celebrations in Iran.) The seventh survey took Vanden Berghe back to Fārs and into eastern Kuzestān (29 July-1 October 1962). Again, important monuments and inscriptions were discovered. His stay at Malāmīr proved particularly fruitful; he was the first to photograph the Elamite (see [ELAM](#)) and Elymaean rock carvings (particularly Hang-e Nowruzi) in that region. During the eighth campaign (14 May-30 August 1964) he traveled on mule through ancient [Elymais](#), in the Bakhtiāri mountains. He visited and recorded all major rock carvings, and discovered two additional ones at Kuh-e Tinā and Kuh-e Tārāz. In sum, the eight surveys that he undertook, mainly in Fārs and eastern Kuzestān, produced major discoveries of early pottery assemblages, as well as monuments of later date. His publications of this research appeared in various



journals (see Bibliography).

The Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels own a major collection of [Bronzes of Luristan](#), which were acquired from 1928 onwards. The scholarly debate over the objects, and the difficulties in establishing a clear chronology of developments in the area of Luristan (Lorestān), undoubtedly prompted Vanden Berghe to embark on a determined search to obtain reliable data on “Luristan Culture.” The only way to do so was to mount an expedition to locate burial grounds and undertake large-scale excavations. The Belgian Ministry of Education provided the necessary funding, but it was only in 1965 that he was able to set out on his first excavations. He had previously made a trip to the Ḥolailān plain in 1959 (with Mme. Yolande Maleki, art collector and Belgian wife of the radiologist at the shah’s court), and witnessed clandestine excavations at Časma Māhi; he had concluded that the whole of Luristan province was no longer worth excavating, and that no intact sites remained for exploration due to the massive plundering. Therefore, he decided to turn his attention to neighboring [Pošt-e Kuh](#), Ilām province, which he considered as less touched by the devastating activities. No fewer than fifteen expeditions set out under the auspices of Ghent University and the Royal Museums for Art and History at Brussels. The teams he took to the field were limited in number, but generally comprised of one or two assistants, a photographer, and an architect. The difficulty of access to the region at that time obliged the teams to spend two to three months in the field, lacking conveniences and having little contact with the outside world. Transport on roads and tracks was by a gendarme with a four-wheel drive army vehicle allocated by the Iranian Government. Where no vehicle could pass, local mules and drivers were hired. The hired labor sometimes had to walk long distances to reach the excavation sites, and the excavation equipment was limited to the very basics. Although the circumstances were far from ideal, these excavations and soundings undoubtedly provided a wealth of information. Not only was a secure chronology established, but it also became clear that the vast region of the Pošt-e Kuh is far more complex than anticipated. It is evident, particularly by working over the excavation files, that certain areas remain underrepresented. Particularly the southern region of Ābdānān, and the more eastern and northern parts of Badr remain unknown for certain periods. Indeed, most of the excavation work was done in the areas of Aivān, Ilām, and western Badr. Vanden Berghe regularly published preliminary results and some overview articles, particularly in the journal, *Iranica Antiqua*, and in the more general French monthly, *Archeologia*. His premature death in 1993



prevented him from producing final reports. However, his successor at Ghent University, Ernie Haerinck, and his former student, Bruno Overlaet, are in the process of producing the final excavation results. By 2004, five volumes had been published (see Bibliography: final reports), and another four to five volumes are needed to complete the work.

During his excavations in Pošt-e Kuh, sites of the Chalcolithic, Bronze, and Iron Ages were researched, and 5,000 objects were registered and processed. Only a limited number of typical Luristan Bronzes were discovered in context, a fact which makes it likely that Pošt-e Kuh was situated on the southern edge of the distribution and production areas of these bronzes. However, bronze spiked axes, standards of ramping animals or of the “master of animals” type (FIGURE 3), whetstone handles, maces, and decorated vessels are among the recovered items which are rarely found during controlled excavations. Also the discovery of the Assyrian rock carving at Šekāft-e Golgol was a major result of the continuing efforts. In 1979, the Belgian Luristan Mission came to an end due to the political situation in Iran and the subsequent Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). In any case, deteriorating eyesight would have prevented Vanden Berghe from going on for much longer. Since then, fieldwork has not yet resumed. However, the results of the explorations in Pošt-e Kuh were presented to the larger public in an exhibition in Ghent in 1982, which later traveled to Munich and St. Petersburg.

Vanden Berghe published numerous articles and books on topics dealing with ancient Iran. His fundamental book, *L'Archéologie de l'Iran ancien* (Leiden, 1959, 2nd ed. 1966), has for years been the basic publication on pre-Islamic art and archaeology, for students and scholars alike, as well as for a more general public. Published when Vanden Berghe was young, this book brought him esteem and recognition. Of course, the numerous excavations and other researches in the 1960s and 1970s necessitated a full revision of this monumental publication, and it has to be judged against the background of its time, when only limited research had been done. Vanden Berghe fully realized that it would be impossible to write a new book dealing with all the new information and a steadily rising number of publications. To deal with this problem, he published a *Bibliographie analytique de l'archéologie de l'Iran Ancien* (Leiden, 1979), followed in 1981 and 1987 by *Supplément 1: 1978-1980* and *Supplément 2: 1981-1985*. This work is continued by E. Haerinck and K. G. Stevens: *Supplément 3: 1986-1995*, and *Supplément 4: 1996-2003* (see Bibliography).



At a time when Iranian archaeology was limited to fieldwork by only a few teams, he initiated, together with [Roman Ghirshman](#), the international journal, *Iranica Antiqua*, in 1961. This leading journal on mainly pre-Islamic Iranian art, archaeology and culture in general is still published today.

Additionally, Louis Vanden Berghe published numerous articles on fire temples (an inventory of these monuments was published in *Iranica Antiqua* 19 in 1984), and on rock carvings, several of which he had discovered himself. In 1975, Vanden Berghe, Erik Smekens, photographer at Ghent University, and the author spent some four months in Iran, visiting and recording all rock carvings known at that time. This exploration, which brought us to remote places such as Shimbar (Šembār) or Tang-e Sarvāk, resulted in a 1983 exhibition in Brussels titled “Reliefs rupestres de l’Iran ancien”; it also traveled to Munich and Graz. In 1985, also as a result of our 1975 visit, he and Klaus Schippmann published the monograph *Les reliefs rupestres d’Elymaïde (Iran) de l’époque parthe*. A short time before his death he took the initiative for the international exhibition “Splendeur des Sassanides. L’empire perse entre Rome et la Chine,” on display in 1993 in Brussels.

His work and dedication to Iran’s past brought Louis Vanden Berghe many honors. On 14 November 1959, he received the Sepās distinction by the Ministry of Education in Iran, and on 12 May 1960 he was made Officer of the Iranian Order of Homāyun. The University of Tehran awarded him an honorary doctorate on 12 September 1964. In 1963 he was elected a corresponding member of the Belgian Royal Academy of Sciences, Literature and Fine Arts, becoming a full member in 1968, and its president in 1973. He was also an associated member of the Belgian Royal Academy of Overseas Sciences from 1978 onwards. In addition, he was foreign member of the Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften from 1985, corresponding member of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Cracow, full member of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut from 1962, Fellow of the Explorers Club (New York) from 1980, Honorary Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London from 1980, and from 1986 he was a corresponding member of the Istituto Italiano per il medio ed Estremo Oriente (Ismeo). In 1987 he received the Prix Ghirshman of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, Paris, for his life’s work on Iranian archaeology. He was also a member or on the board of several other learned societies such as the Foundation assyriologique Georges Dossin, Societas Iranologica Europaea, La Fondation égyptologique belge Reine Elizabeth, as well as a grantee of the Ancient Persia Fund (in memory of



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