

City and Village
in Iran: SETTLEMENT
AND ECONOMY IN THE
KIRMAN BASIN

PAUL WARD ENGLISH



THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN PRESS
Madison, Milwaukee, and London 1966

68.4520

Published by

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN PRESS

Madison, Milwaukee, and London

U.S.A.: Box 1379, Madison, Wisconsin 53701

U.K.: 26-28 Hallam Street, London, W. 1

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Printed in the United States of America by

North Central Publishing Co., St. Paul, Minnesota

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 66-22856

To Pat and Paul II, who made
this task worthwhile, and to
Elisabeth Ann, who might have
read it.

Village Composition

There are few specialized economic facilities in the alluvial fan towns and villages; most of these settlements are simply collections of household compounds strung out along their watercourses. With the exception of a few shops and gristmills, all nondomestic structures are either religious buildings such as mosques, shrines, and baths or outposts of urban administration. Because the feudal overlord system drains economic surpluses from these settlements through a system of contracts in agriculture, weaving, and herding, any power of internal growth is stifled. One does not find specialized facilities for grain storage, animal protection, or crop processing. Indeed, at present land is so fragmented, animals are owned in such small numbers by so many people, and crop surpluses are so small that these facilities are not needed. Local grain, dairy products, vegetables, and fruits are eaten by the producer or are bartered in the shops of Kirman for salt, sugar, tea, and cloth; all large concentrations of land, crops, herds, and carpets are owned by urban residents.

In contrast with this paucity of economic facilities, the settlements on the slopes of the Kuhi Jupar have been the scene of great religious activity. Religious structures are numerous, probably more so than in other parts of rural Iran, though the strength of religion as a focal point in Iranian peasant life is undisputed.³⁴ The Shah Ni'matullah Vali Shrine in the town of Mahan, founded in the fifteenth century, is one of the major centers of mysticism in Iran (Plate 2B).³⁵ The Sufi hospice associated with this shrine was a meeting place for *darvish* mendicants from Iraq, India, and other parts of South and Southwest Asia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Mir 'Alamdar Shrine in Jupar is a place of miracles, similar to more important shrines at Qumm and Mashhad. In 1962 the medically documented cure of a woman suffering from gangrene brought several thousand pilgrims to Jupar from as far away as Tehran and Tabriz. Langar, a village of two thousand residents located between Mahan and Jupar, is a center of the Shaykhi sect, the brutal nineteenth-century persecutors of the Bab, Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad of Shiraz, and his religion.³⁶ This town is still owned by the descendants of Sarkar Aqa, leader of the Shaykhi sect. The ruined village of 'Abdullahabad near Muhiabad is a *qailagah*, a place where the passion play mourning the martyrdom of Husayn, the grandson of Muhammad, is acted out each year. The little mountain hamlet of Bibigrami is a spa for sufferers of skin diseases. Its pools are green in color from local copper deposits;

this being the sacred color of Islam, the pools are believed by the unlettered to be the "footprints of 'Ali."

As with Christian churches in Europe, these shrines and mosques and their environs are often focal points of social and economic power in their respective settlements. All important meetings are held in them, even when, as in the case of Sehkunj, they lie some distance from the original center of the town. In Mahan the offices of the district governor (*bakhshdar*), the village headman (*kadkhuda*),³⁷ and other important local officials are in the courtyard of the Shah Ni'matullah Vali Shrine. The shrine of Mir 'Alamdar dominates the central square of Jupar and all township (*dihistan*) offices are located there. No important official enters or leaves either of these towns without first visiting the shrine.

In or near each important shrine or mosque is a cemetery. The larger towns have a special building (*ghasalkhaneh*) near the cemetery where the dead are bathed. The cemeteries of especially sacred shrines such as Shah Ni'matullah Vali, Mir 'Alamdar, and Shaykh 'Ali Baba (Sehkunj) are important facilities for the town and surrounding villages as well, because people believe that the dead gain intercession from the saint of the shrine by burial nearby. In the villages, therefore, only innocent children who do not need special intercession are buried locally; adults are carried to Mahan or Jupar.³⁸

Communal baths are also situated near the mosques and shrines. All of the larger settlements in this area have baths, to which peasants from surrounding villages travel regularly to perform religious ablutions and cleanse themselves.³⁹ A full-scale public bath is owned or rented by a bathkeeper and is used on alternate days by men and women. The bathkeeper employs several workers who wash and massage the patrons, cut hair and nails, and in the past performed circumcisions as well. These workers have a very low social position in Muslim society.⁴⁰ The bath itself is usually completely underground; only the roof appears on the surface, a lobed stucco structure resembling a hornet's nest. The interior is a dark, humid lounging room with a tiled pool of warm water at the center. The bath's location in a village is marked by piles of wood and brush to heat the bath water and lines of red-striped toweling drying nearby.

Except for the few structures mentioned above, all buildings in the alluvial fan towns and villages are walled household compounds. The houses are similar to those of Kirman City; one-room dwellings are common, peristyle plans are restricted to the upper class. Even the humblest

free. Government of Iran, *Census District Statistics of the First National Census of Iran, Aban 1335 (November 1956)*, Vol. 17, Part 1 (1960), p. 51.

20 According to Vreeland, “2,500,000 families in the rural areas live in single-room houses.” Herbert H. Vreeland, ed., *Iran* (1957), p. 230.

21 See diagram in Jamshid Surushian, *Farhangi Behdīnān [Dictionary of the Good People]* (1956), facing p. 142.

22 These details of Zoroastrian life in the desert cities of Kirman and Yazd were noted by many 19th-century travelers. See Edward G. Browne, *A Year amongst the Persians* (1950), pp. 370–71; Sykes (1902), pp. 67, 193, 198; A. V. Williams Jackson, *Persia Past and Present* (1906), pp. 366, 375; Laurence Lockhart, *The Fall of the Ṣafavī Dynasty and the Afghan Occupation of Persia* (1958), pp. 72–73. Concerning the similar but less extreme conditions of the Jews see Walter J. Fischel, “Secret Jews of Persia,” *Commentary*, 7 (1949): 28–33; C. L. Lang, “Les Minorités arménienne et juive d’Iran,” *Politique étrangère*, 26 (1961): 460–71.

23 Nor is there any record that umbrellas were ever used as parasols. See E. Crawshay Williams, *Across Persia* (1907), p. 202.

24 The records of their council (“Anjumani Zartushtiani Kirman”) are still available in Kirman. They are written in Persian script, but the words used are those of the Zoroastrian dialect, “*dari*,” which can only be read by the older men of the community.

25 Similar ground plan changes in Mashhad, Shiraz, Abadan, and Tehran are reported in K. Scharlau, “Moderne Umgestaltungen in Grundriss iranischer Städte,” *Erdkunde*, 15 (1961): 180–91; John I. Clarke, *The Iranian City of Shiraz* (1963); Xavier de Planhol, “Abadan: morphologie et fonction du tissu urbain,” *Revue géographique de l’Est*, 4 (1964): 338–85; idem, *Recherches sur la géographie humaine de l’Iran septentrional* (1964), pp. 59–76.

26 There is a vague feeling of suspicion about this section of the city—that it is an unhappy place inhabited by spirits. Many of the magicians, sorcerers, and pseudoreligious healers practice their trades in these ruins.

27 For a discussion of the declining role of the church in Iran see R. K. Ramazani, “‘Church’ and State in Modernizing Society: The Case of Iran,” *American Behavioral Scientist*, 7 (1964): 26–28.

28 Riza Shah favored the Zoroastrians and looked beyond the Arab Conquest back to the ancient glories of Achaemenian and Sassanian Iran. During his rule Zoroastrians from Yazd and Kirman migrated to Tehran. After his abdication (1941), limitations on the Zoroastrians were reimposed in Kirman and Yazd, which intensified emigration to the more cosmopolitan atmosphere of Tehran. In 1956 there were 4,627 Zoroastrians in Tehran. There are now more than 7,000.

29 Each household compound has the right to water its courtyard garden and to utilize the water for domestic purposes.

30 Islamic water law utilizes time shares rather than absolute volume measures to equalize seasonal and diurnal variations in flow.

31 George B. Cressey notes that this is generally true wherever qanats are used for irrigation. This may imply that similar social gradients would also be found elsewhere. Cressey (1958), p. 29.

32 Only water-powered gristmills are located above these homes, usually at the break in slope.

33 In small villages with a single qanat, there is usually only one line of household compounds. In larger places such as Mahan, which has five qanats, rows of houses are aligned along each of the distinct water-courses.

34 See B. J. Spooner, “The Function of Religion in Persian Society,” *Iran: Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies*, 1 (1963): 83–93.

35 A recent description of the Shah Ni‘matullah Vali Shrine is presented in Roger Stevens, *The Land of the Great Sophy* (1962), pp. 209–11. For the origin and history of the shrine, see Javad Nurbakhsh Kirmani, *Zindigī va Āṣar Quṭbi Ālmūhādīn Shāh Ni‘matullāh Valī Kirmāni [The Life and Writings of Shah Ni‘matullah Vali of Kirman]* (1958–59).

36 The Shaykhis are discussed at length in Browne (1950), pp. 509–20, 587–89.

37 The *kadkhuda* of Mahan is the overseer for all villages in the Mahan district (*bakhsh*).

38 On a larger scale, this belief led to the establishment of a local Iranian airline from Isfahan to Karbala in Iraq for the sole purpose of transporting dead bodies to the shrine where Husayn, the grandson of Muhammad, was killed in 680 A.D.

39 The public bathhouse is a central institution in Islamic countries; it was borrowed from the *thermae* of the Mediterranean civilizations by the Sassanians and later by the Muslims. See Xavier de Planhol, *The World of Islam* (1959), pp. 9–10, 23.

40 In Kirman City, the *dalaks* traded on the obnoxiousness (in the eyes of their countrymen) of their profession and demanded double wages. They received the increase since no replacements could be found.

41 The association between walled courtyards and the Muslim religion is clear. Wherever Islam has spread, it has brought this structure with it. In Turkish Croatia, for example, Muslim houses are distinguished from all others by the high wooden fences which enclose their courtyards. See G. Marçais, “Salle-antisalle: recherches sur l’évolution d’un thème de l’architecture domestique en pays l’Islam,” *Annales de l’Institut d’Études Orientales*, 10 (1952): 274–301; Phanhol (1959), pp. 23–28.

42 V. Sackville-West, “Persian Gardens,” in *The Legacy of Persia* (1953), ed. by A. J. Arberry, pp. 259–91.

43 Sykes called this garden Baghi Farman Farma‘ian. A photograph of it at the turn of the 20th century, before it fell into ruins, is included in his book. Sykes (1902), pp. 148–50.