

## Book Reviews

### Iranian Cities: Formation and Development

*Masoud Kheirabadi, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000, 89 pp.*

During the last three decades, there has been a growing interest among scholars of Iranian studies in examining the process of urbanization in Iran in its historical context as well as in light of contemporary developments. Usually, such works deal primarily with the history of major Iranian cities and their significance from the point of view of culture, religion, and politics, and in the broader context, of the model of Islamic City. Some scholars also have studied architectural, geographic, sociological, and economic aspects of certain cities in Iran. While most early work deal only with one particular Iranian city or another, in light of its role and function, or in response to the needs and requirements of Islam, this book attempts to rectify this deficiency by demonstrating that the formation and development of cities in Iran, as elsewhere, were the result of interactions between numerous interrelated physical, geographic, economic, historical, and cultural factors.

Traditional Iranian City structure was a response to many factors, such as topography, climate, geography, religion, culture, defense, and political needs. Taking all these into consideration, Kheirabadi studies the processes of the formation and development of Iranian cities in relation to three sets of factors: the physical; the commercial and economic; and the religious and sociopolitical. Thus, the five factors are each given a chapter. The book is arranged in accordance with the priority and importance of factors that contributed to the emergence of Iranian cities. Numerous plates, pictures, aerial photos, and three useful appendices on Iran's irrigation system, structural elements of the bazaar and the mosque are also attached.

Kheirabadi examines the spatial patterns and physical morphology of the Iranian cities, and analyzes the process of their development throughout Iran's history. Factors that played important roles in the emergence and development of Iranian urban centers ranged from physical environment of the Iranian plateau to trade, historical events, and the religious, social, and political structure of the country. The overall objective of the book, however, is to demonstrate the forms of the city as they relate to both the Iranian-Islamic structure and culture and the physical environment of the country.

The concept of the Islamic City contains both physical and spiritual elements. But many Iranian scholars, including Kheirabadi, reject it entirely. They argue that studies of Muslim cities are based primarily on the model of Damascus and, to a lesser, extent Baghdad. Although Iranian cities have many common features with cities like Damascus or Baghdad, nonetheless, they are products of regional and local culture, history, geography, and other factors peculiarly Iranian and predate Islam.

When first published in 1991, this book was among those works on the subject that challenged the Islamic City model and searched for newer approaches for understanding Iranian cities. This objective is dealt with in Chapter 1 of the book where Kheirabadi demonstrates various factors that have played significant parts in the formation and development of traditional Iranian cities, seeking "the rationale behind their spatial and physical morphologies" (pp. 4–5). He examines the impact of cultural and environmental factors native to Iran, without underestimating the part that Islam played in the formation and development her cities.

Chapter 2 examines the physical and environmental aspects of Iranian cities, and the importance of water resources in their emergence and growth. This chapter also deals with the physical structure of the city and the impact of climate, topography, and water availability. The traditional Iranian cities were compact, concentrated, and homogeneous. As such, they had the potential to reduce climatic stress considerably. Compact size and concentration also facilitated the defense of the city, reduced the waste of water and exposure to direct sunlight. In addition, the compact structure had many other advantages in terms of human relations. It was instrumental in creating close relationships between its inhabitants in day-to-day life. This in turn resulted in creating social cohesion and a strong sense of identification and solidarity among inhabitants of any given city in relation to the outsiders. The compact size of the city structure also reduced the city's infrastructure network, such as irrigation system, and facilitated easy access and communication. Moreover, streets and alleys were planned and constructed in a style that adjusted the city's climate and functioned as channels for movement of cool air in summer and heat in winter.

Like many other traditional cities, major Iranian cities were born as small market places and gradually grew into centers of trade. Some of the most important cities of Iran, such as Damghan, Hamadan, Naishabur, Ray, Tabriz, and Qazwin were located on the Royal Road constructed by the Achaemenid dynasty long before the advent of Islam. Routes that connected Iran to India, China, and the cities of Transoxania and Khurasan in eastern Persia, also connected Iran to Anatolia and the Mediterranean ports. Thus Iranian cities became part of the famous Silk Road. These and other related issues are dis-

cussed in Chapter 3, in addition to the part played by politics and political leaders in the formation and development of traditional cities in Iran. Of particular interest in this chapter is a discussion of the structure, function, and role of the bazaar as the heart of the traditional Iranian city (pp. 49–61).

The bazaar is not only the main center of economic activity and trade, it is also an important political and religious center. The division of the bazaar into subsections, called *rasteh*, according to the type of craft or trade, gave members of each profession a distinct identity. This division made levying and collecting taxes easier for the government, but also created a sense of solidarity among members of each profession, and prevented unethical and anti-Islamic practices, such as creation of monopoly and price control. Kheirabadi briefly points out this role of the bazaar and discusses the connection between the *bazaaris* and other social groups, especially the *ulama* (pp. 60–61). A discussion of the most important institution in the social structure and economic life of the bazaar, namely the institution of *futuwwah* (Persian *futuwwat*), however, is absent. The institution of *futuwwah*, which was organized and led by the Sufi brotherhoods, regulated the relationship of members of each profession (*sinf*: guild) with each other and with other guilds. A discussion of the *futuwwah* organizations in the life of the Iranian bazaar is particularly significant because of their links to other institutions in the bazaar and in the society at large. Traditional gymnasiums (*zurkhanah*: house of strength), Sufi prayer centers (*futuwwat khanah*, *khaniqah*, *dargah*), and mosques (assigned to the *fatyan* of a particular guild; e.g., *masjid-i qassabha* [butchers' mosque], *kaf-fashha* [shoemakers' mosque], and *ahangaran* [metal workers' mosque]) were extremely important as economic and social institutions, and were also important factors that shaped the physical appearance of the bazaars.

While many factors helped shape the physical and social structure of these cities, undoubtedly the single most important factor was Islam, and more specifically, Shi'a Islam. The requirements of Islam and Shi'ism after 1500, and the way in which they transformed Iranian cities from Persian-Zoroastrian cities into Muslim-Shi'i-Iranian cities are discussed in Chapter 4. The impact of Islam on the form and spatial patterns of Iranian cities is too obvious to discuss here; however, what clearly differentiates Iranian cities from other Islamic cities is the imprint of Shi'ism. Not only has Shi'ism given many special features to Iranian cities such as the *imamzadah*, the *husayniyyah*, and the *takiyyah*, it has also been instrumental in the emergence and growth of important cities such as Ray, Mashhad, and Qum (the tombs of the eighth Shi'a Imam and his sister, respectively). It is important to mention here that a very important Shi'a landmark that existed nearly in every quarter (*mahallah*) of every traditional Iranian city until the advent of modern time, namely, the *saqqa*

*khanah*, was not mentioned in the book. A *saqqa khanah* was a water fountain built by neighborhood dignitaries, and decorated with verses from the Holy Qur'an, some Shi'a prayers, and scenes or poems depicting the tragedy of Karbala (occurring in 61/680 and resulting in the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet [Peace be upon him]). The presence of the *saqqa khanah* had an important impact upon the conscience of the Shi'as, as it was a constant reminder of the events of Karbala.

Since 1991, when the first edition of this book was published, many new studies have come out in Persian as well as in European languages that deal with different aspects of cities in Iran. Although their findings may not drastically alter Kheirabadi's observations and conclusions, it would have been appropriate for him to consult those sources and perhaps expand some sections and complement his book, especially in chapters dealing with the sociology of Iranian cities and the role of Shi'ism. Regrettably, there is no change in the text of the book in the second edition, and the author does not claim so in this edition.

During the last two decades, Iran's population has almost doubled. Existing cities have expanded considerably in response to population growth. Many new urban centers (*shahrak*) have been built. Examining the spatial patterns and socioreligious aspects of new and existing Iranian cities in light of the Islamic government to demonstrate continuity and/or change from what is recorded in this book would yield interesting results. The Islamic Republic has declared its intention to revive characteristics of traditional Iranian cities. Such a study could show whether the government is actually fulfilling its promise.

There were minor and insignificant errors in the first edition of the book that should have been corrected in the second edition. For example, the author's conclusion that "traditional Iranian cities did not have municipal government" (p. 77) is based on old literature in the field and is no longer valid. While Iranian cities did not have a municipal government similar to pre-industrial European cities, recent scholarship has demonstrated that traditional Iranian cities did indeed have an administration appointed by the King or elected by local notables. The presence of such officials as chief of police (*darughah*), governor (*kalantar*), tax collector (*nazir, zabit*), accounts administrator (*mostawfi*), and water distributor (*mirab*) all indicate the existence of a municipal government. The term *imamzadah* is used to denote the tombs of descendants of Shi'a Imams who died and were buried in Iran. In contrast to the author's statement, however, (pp. 69, 71) Mashhad is not called an *imamzadah*. Although in reality Imam Riza was himself an *imamzadah* (descendent of an Imam) nonetheless, since he was also an Imam, the complex that encompasses his tomb in Mashhad is not called an *imamzadah* but an *astan* (sacred

precinct) and the actual place of his tomb is known as a *haram* (sacred sanctuary). The Iran's area is 1,648,000 sq. km., which is equal to 1,000,000.00 sq. miles, and not 628000 (p. 11). *Husayniyyah-yi bazzazha* is wrongly translated as a cloth-makers' *husayniyyah*, rather than a fabric sellers *husayniyyah* (p. 74).

These minor errors notwithstanding, Kheirabadi's book is a useful source for those interested in urban planning in the Muslim world in general, and Iran in particular, and must be a required reading for courses dealing with Middle Eastern history, geography, social history, and urbanization.

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