

Urban Planning of Isfahan in the Seventeenth Century

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INTRODUCTION

An ancient and picturesque city, rich in history, Isfahan has long been known for its splendid historical buildings and sites. Among the Iranian cities, the city holds an extremely distinguished place, originating in its emergence during the Sasanid period before the birth of Islam. The city development, to the south of old city, was the most important planned city in Iran and is still considered an outstanding example of urban planning. During the Shah Abbas period, the new square of the city, a wide straight thoroughfare, the new quarters, and the complicated networks of bazaars are the four strongest points for evolution of Isfahan which is described briefly in the paper.

OLD AND NEW CITY CENTRES

Isfahan is situated in a fertile and well-watered area, with a river, the Zayandeh-Roud flowing through it. Under the name 'Jay' Isfahan appears as a garrison town of the Sasanid period, and in early Islamic times it consisted of two big settlements: Yahudiyeh and Shahrestan (Jay or Gaba), the site of which is marked today by a small village two miles downstream of the city. According to historian, Balazari it seems that Yahudiyeh and Jey were two important settlements in central Iran in 637.

With increasing populations approximately 16 towns and villages including Jey and Yahudiyeh formed a unified city called Isfahan. A noteworthy city in Sasanid times, Isfahan passed to the Islamic dynasty in the mid-seventh century and served as a capital for the province named Gabal or Al-Jibal. According to Ibn-e-Rosteh the province included 2300 cities, towns, and villages irrigated with the river Zayande-Roud. His text discusses an extraordinary system as well as a good management plan regarding the allocating of water resources for the province cities.

In the eighth century, Isfahan was witness to the establishment of a new mosque in the town of Yavan. Gradually, the residential centres of the city were formed around the mosque. Naser Khosrow, poet and the famous Iranian travel writer, described the city when he arrived in Isfahan on 25th June 1052: 'The city has a strong and tall rampart including many gates and fortifications. There are many rivers as well as the nice and tall buildings including a magnificent Friday Mosque which was built in the city centre. According to the records, the total length of the city wall is three and half Farsangs [about 14 miles]. I saw many bazaars including one bazaar which 200 moneychangers were working there as well as an alley named Kutaraz consist of fifty caravanserais.' Naser Khosro described Isfahan as Persia's most fertile, perfect and beautiful city.

About twenty years later in 1072, Malik Shah was crowned as the Seljuk sultan and moved the capital of the Seljuk Empire from Ray (in the south of modern Tehran) to Isfahan. The Seljuk Empire now stretched from the shores of the Mediterranean up to the Central Asian Mountains, and Isfahan was the capital of this great territory.

The city's most splendid time began in 1598 when Shah Abbas the Great (1587-1629) decided to make it his capital and rebuilt it into one of the largest cities of the world. It seems that he has had a strong personal liking for Isfahan, and he may have felt that to move to his favourite city would give him his best opportunity for building his ideal capital. Gradually, royal urban planners under Shah Abbas created the new heart of the city to the south of the old city centre, an open space called Naghsh-e-Jahan square between the older Seljuk city and the river Zayande-Roud. The considerable size of the square is about 1500 feet in length and 400 feet in width.

Rather, the royal planners sketched out a plan that would run from the new city centre to the old square including the complicated networks of bazaars, porticoes and many caravanserais which were built during the reign of Shah Abbas. Around the new square, Shah Abbas created the noted six-storey palace named Ali-Qapu which dominates the south eastern side of the new square. On the east of the square was built the Sheikh Lotfollah mosque and in the north of the square was the entrance to the Royal bazaar, the Qaysariyah. It meanders north via a convoluted route to the old mosque of Isfahan where it splits into a number of smaller bazaars such as Nezamiyeh and Harouniyeh, on its way up to the old quarters of the city including the Golbahar and Dardasht. Also, the new Friday Mosque was created in the south of the square, one of the masterpieces of world architecture. The new square was used for holding festivals, markets and games of polo. Today, the original goal posts are still in place. The square was completely surrounded by more than two hundred handicrafts shops on the ground floor and the second floor had been allocated for travellers and periodic ceremonial uses. One of the main entrances to the square was in the north and to the south east lay the bazaar while to the south west the road led to the south gate of the city.

TOWARDS THE SOUTH

Gradually, under Shah Abbas, the city was embellished with many fine gardens, bridges, buildings, and roads notably the avenue named Chahar-Bagh which means literally "Four Gardens". In 1602, the planners proposed the avenue between the river and the royal gate (Darvazeh-Dowlat) which was extended up towards the south of the city in 1620s.

Besides these splendid constructions four urban quarters were created under Shah Abbas named Royal, New Julfa, Abbas-Abad, and Gabrian. Gradually, Isfahan became a thriving economic hub. This aspect of its life was vigorously encouraged by Shah Abbas, especially through his benign policy of population transfers. Of particular importance was the removal of 3000 industrious Armenian families from the city of Julfa in the north west of the empire to New Julfa in Isfahan. New Julfa, where the Vank cathedral is located, is situated on the southern bank of the river Zayande-Roud and was founded by the Shah for the relocation of Armenians who were forced to flee their home in Julfa in Armenia because of Ottoman attacks. The beneficial economic considerations were also a factor. The quarter of Gabrian was allocated to Zoroastrians and Abbas-Abad, as its name in Persian language shows, was changed to a fertile and beautiful land under Shah-Abbas including many gardens and magnificent mansions. At its zenith, under Shah Abbas the Great Isfahan had a population of about 600,000 making it one of the world's largest cities of the time.

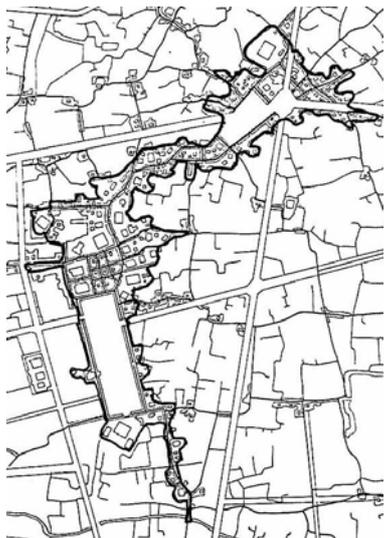


Fig. 1: The old and new city centres

CONCLUSION

As a matter of fact because of some economic, religious, and political considerations, during the rule of Shah Abbas I the city centre of Isfahan experienced a gradual transformation toward the south. It may be concluded that this transformation of the city centre had three main points for the evolution of Isfahan. Firstly, the city centre smoothly developed to the south under Shah Abbas by respecting many historical buildings and the urban fabric which were created in previous eras by former adversaries. Secondly, this transformation occurred gradually and therefore did not disrupt many aspects of the cultural, political and social norms of the city. And lastly, the city development policy was concerned for the welfare of the people and sensitively considered the balance between people's day to day necessities and the potential of the existing natural resources.

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