



AHVĀZ II. THE MODERN CITY

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Ahvāz was in the 19th century no more than a small borough inhabited by Ša'b Arabs and a few Sabeans (1,500 to 2,000 inhabitants according to Ainsworth in 1835; 700 according to Curzon in 1890). Some modest cultivation was carried on; all traces of sugarcane plantations had disappeared, although some ruins of medieval sugarcane mills could still be observed. From 1830 Europeans several times forced their way through the rapids, notably Lieutenant Selby in the steamer Assyria in 1842; but only in October, 1888 was the lower course of the river opened to international trade. This event immediately brought about the development of a new settlement, called Bandar-e Nāšerī in honor of the shah. It was about 2.5 km south of the ancient village, on a slight rise on the left bank dominating the point where vessels anchored below the rapids. Here the agency of the Lynch Company (Euphrates and Tigris Steam Navigation Company) and a small Persian administrative post became the nuclei of the new town. In 1889 The Persian Nāšerī Company created a service on the upper course. Soon (1890) followed the concession to the Lynch Company for the building of a road to Šūštar suitable for vehicles. Šūštar was the point of departure of a mule road to Isfahan, the activity of which tended to supplant that of the Būšeher-Šīrāz road.

The transshipping necessitated by the rapids was thus the primary source of the development of the settlement. A second impetus occurred with the



beginning of oil exploitation in 1908 at Masjed-e Solaymān. Ahvāz served as a base camp for exploration and as a station for the pipeline to Ābādān. A third major event was the construction of the Transiranian railroad, which reached the town in 1929, crossing the river by a mile-long iron bridge (whose foundations rest on those of the great Sasanian barrage). Data on the stages of the resulting expansion of the city is contradictory; the naval intelligence geographical handbook (*Persia*, Oxford, 1945, pp. 514-16) gives 7,000 inhabitants in 1930 and 30,000 in 1939, estimates which seem too low; Lockhart (*Persian Cities*, London, 1960, p. 163) has 15,000 inhabitants in 1900, 35,000 in 1910, and 50,000 in 1920, figures which are certainly greatly exaggerated. The government of the province was transferred there from Šūštar in 1926, and by the time of

the Second World War Ahvāz had become the principal built-up area of interior Kūzestān. The British in 1942 constructed two branch lines of the Transiranian, one to Korramšahr, the other to Tanūma (opposite Bašra in Iraq) which rejoined the main line at Ahvāz. Thus the city's function as crossroads of road, railway, and river transport lines covering all of Kūzestān was completed. The population was counted as over 100,000 inhabitants in 1950 (Djazani, *Wirtschaft*, p. 89), and was given by the 1956 census as 120,000; in the 1950s immigration was very active.

The source of this population was to be sought beyond Kūzestān proper, in the entire western Zagros region. In 1956 only a little more than half (54 percent) of the entire population of the town had been born within the limits of its *šahrestān*; and this number formed less than one-third of the population aged over twenty-five years (adult immigrants) but 77 percent of those younger, indicating a rate or recent urbanization much above the mean rate of Iranian towns of the time. The increase slightly slowed during the 1960s, bringing the population to 202,000 in 1966 and 329,000 in 1976. The mean increase of 4.8 percent a year between the two last censuses shows the city to be the most dynamic of Kūzestān, since Ābādān is relatively stagnating. Ethnic and professional segregation remains well marked between various groups still feebly integrated—Arabs and Persians, and sub-groupings of Persians. Several remarkable specializations have been noted. Natives of the Isfahan region hold an important place in retail trade as grocers, drapers, and haberdashers, owners of cafes and hotels, and as craftsmen (smiths, carpenters, and cabinetmakers). On the other hand clockmakers, keepers of baths, masons and pavers, and sellers and repairers of tires are natives of Kūzestān. Bakers are



from Šahr-e Kord. A small group of Sabeans (some one thousand) specialize in silversmithing, the Jews in pharmacy. Clan organization is very much alive among groups of Arabs and Baḳtīārīs.

The activities on which this rapid growth depended have, however, greatly changed with time. Until about 1940-50 commerce and port activity prevailed. But the Transiranian eliminated the need for transport with transshipment at the rapids and shifted trade to the ports of Korramšahr, Ābādān, and Bandar Šāpūr; at the same time decision making in such matters tended to shift from local trade centers to Tehran. Some industrial activities then came to Ahvāz—a weaving and spinning factory, refinery of beet sugar, and exploitation of the nearby oilfield from 1958. Administrative and other activity (especially agricultural training) also came to the city, and its subsequent function as a regional capital of Kūzestān in a broad sense explains the continuation of its expansion.

The city has a modern aspect—a grid plan more or less adapted to the bends of the river. Its initial and still principal heart is on the left bank of the Kārūn; a new quarter has been added on the right bank, where the railway station has been located since the construction of the Transiranian. Besides the railway bridge an imposing road bridge links the two river banks.

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