



AMLĀK

AMLĀK (plural of *melk*), privately owned agricultural estates; the term (of Arabic origin) designates a form of rural land tenure pattern that existed simultaneously in Iran with various other types of land holdings over several centuries. From as early as the Safavid dynasty three primary kinds of *amlāk* can be identified: the private estates of large landlords, referred to simply as *amlāk*; the private estates of the reigning shah considered separately from the estates owned by the crown and called *amlāk-e kāṣṣa* or *amlāk-e kāleša*; and private estates set aside in special trusts by owners for the permanent benefit of heirs and descendants in accordance with Shi'ite legal principles and known as *waqf-e kāṣṣ*.

From the earliest times the rural population of Iran has been concentrated in villages (see A. K. S. Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia*, London, 1953, pp. 1-9); land holdings were typically measured in terms of the number of whole or partial villages owned, rather than the areal extent of the land. *Amlāk* could consist of several villages in relatively close proximity or include scores of villages dispersed in several different regions of the country. The smallest *amlāk* estates comprised as few as two or three villages; owners of this scale were commonly referred to as petty landlords (*ḵorda mālek*) and generally lacked the influence associated with the ownership of tens or scores of villages; the largest *amlāk* estates actually comprised several hundred villages.

Fragmentary evidence indicates that large landed estates existed in Iran at least as early as the Achaemenid empire (see W. Geiger, *Civilization of the*



Eastern Iranians in Ancient Times, London, 1885, p. 247). The landlords possessing extensive *amlāk* formed one of the most important classes of the political elite of this and subsequent pre-Islamic dynasties (Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, pp. 14-17). The conquest of Iran by Muslim armies in the 7th century A.D. did not significantly alter the prevailing land tenure patterns nor the power of the landowning class. While there were changes in the composition of this class, its position and privileges were effectively confirmed by the early Islamic jurists, who provided legal sanction for the private ownership of land (Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant*, pp. 16-17).

From the time of the Achaemenid dynasty right up to the 20th century, tax revenues from agricultural land constituted the primary source of income for rulers, most of whom maintained large courts and bureaucracies; consequently, a persistent objective of Iranian rulers was to ensure that owners of *amlāk* provided regular payments and other stipulated obligations in return for the state's recognition of the right of private land ownership. There was a close relationship between political power and land ownership; rulers were themselves among the largest holders of *amlāk*. The Sasanian shahs, for example, had possessed extensive land holdings (Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, pp. 98-99); when their dynasty fell, its estates were inherited by the Islamic rulers, who held them, at least in theory, on behalf of the Muslim community (Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant*, p. 238).

Generally *amlāk* were secure during periods of political stability and subject to confiscation during times of political disorder. The Saljuq and Mongol periods (ca. 4th/10th to 9th/15th centuries) in particular were characterized by varying degrees of turmoil which adversely affected private estates (cf. C. E. Bosworth, *Camb. Hist. Iran V*, pp. 1-202). Military expenditures constituted a heavy burden on court treasuries, and consequently rulers sought to increase revenues through various expedients (Lambton, *Camb. Hist. Iran V*, pp. 254-56). The confiscation of *amlāk* upon such pretexts as nonpayment of taxes, rebellion of landowners, or unlawful ownership provided rulers with land which could then be assigned to supporters and retainers either in return for the remission to the court of specified taxes, or as payment for services (Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant*, pp. 63-65). The status of *amlāk* was even less secure under the Mongols; during the invasions of the 7th/13th century, villages were depopulated, irrigation networks destroyed, whole agricultural regions laid waste, and the landowning class decimated (*ibid.*, p. 77). While the situation under the Mongol Il-khans was considerably less severe, it was not



until the beginning of the Safavid dynasty in the early 10th/16th century that a period of relative political stability was reestablished.

Under the Saljuq and Mongol rulers the amount of land held as *amlāk* had declined in comparison to land held by the state. The latter was called *kāleša* and was considered to be the property of the crown as an institution, rather than the personal possession of any one ruler. In practice *kāleša* became alienated from control of the crown over time, tending to revert to private property. The conversion of *kāleša* into *amlāk* was facilitated by the system of assigning crown lands to persons who were expected to administer the property on behalf of the ruler. Typically, assignees were required to send a percent of revenues and/or a levy of soldiers to the court. Such land assignments, known as *eqtā*'s during the Saljuq period and as *toyūls* under the Mongols and subsequent dynasties, were usually granted for the lifetime of the holder and were revocable at the pleasure of the ruler. The tendency, however, was for assignees to regard their land grants as personal possessions and to pass them on to heirs (I. Petrushevsky, *Camb. Hist. Iran V*, pp. 517-22). Generally, as long as taxes were paid regularly, rulers did not challenge this practice systematically, and as a result numerous estates originally assigned on a conditional basis were inherited through several generations, eventually to be bought and sold as *amlāk*.

The categories of *amlāk-e kāleša* and *waqf-e kāšš* emerged during the Saljuq and Mongol periods. The former were the personal estates of the ruler as distinct from the estates of the court. From pre-Islamic times up to the Mongol invasions *kāleša* estates were extensive, and systematic efforts to distinguish the ruler's private property from that of the state were not undertaken. As *kāleša* became removed from the court's direct control through land assignments, rulers tended more and more to separate personal property from that belonging to the state. The revenue of the extensive *amlāk-e kāleša* under the Mongol Il-khans were used to finance the personal households of the rulers (ibid., p. 517). The Safavid and later shahs also retained considerable private estates. One of the largest owners of *amlāk-e kāleša* was the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, Reżā Shah; by the time of his abdication in 1320 Š./1941, he had acquired more than 2,000 villages as personal possessions. These properties became known as the *amlāk-e pahlāvī*, and were the subject of controversy during World War II, since former owners claimed that the shah had unlawfully deprived them of their *amlāk* in order to create the *amlāk-e pahlāvī*. Reżā Shah's son and successor, Moḥammad-Reżā Shah (r.1320-57



Š./1941-79), eventually ceded the *amlāk-e pahlāvī* to the state, which established special courts to investigate the claims to the properties (Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant*, pp. 256-57).

Waqf-e kāṣṣ can also be traced back as early as the 8th/14th century. A *waqf-e kāṣṣ* was a personal *waqf* which differed from the more common charitable *waqf* in that its income was not endowed for a charitable purpose but reserved in perpetuity for the benefit of the heirs and descendants of its founder. The administration of a *waqf-e kāṣṣ* was invested in the founder and whomever he stipulated as his successor, usually the eldest male descendant. Like charitable *waqfs*, property constituted as *waqf-e kāṣṣ* was immobilized with respect to sale or subdivision. Landlords who hoped to keep their *amlāk* intact after their deaths established *waqf-e kāṣṣ* as a means of avoiding Islamic inheritance laws, which encouraged the division of property among heirs. *Waqf-e kāṣṣ* was also perceived as a way of safeguarding *amlāk* from governmental confiscation (ibid., p. 236).

While there were various categories of *amlāk*, the actual administration of large landed estates followed consistent patterns, characterized by three outstanding features over several centuries: absentee ownership, domination of cultivation by sharecropping arrangements, and unequal relationship between the landlords and the peasants. Since *amlāk* consisted of several villages, it was inevitable that the landowners would be absentees; thus landlord who owned fifteen villages may have resided in one of them and used it as a base for supervising his other properties. Other landlords preferred to reside most or all of the time in towns and entrusted the management of their estates to salaried agents or rented out their properties (E. Hooglund, *Land and Revolution in Iran*, Austin, 1982, pp. 10-14). Regardless of whether landlords took an active or inactive role vis-à-vis their estates, they were forced by the extent of their property to rely upon loyal retainers to help manage it. Their principal superintendent was the bailiff or *mobāšer*. Since *mobāšers* were responsible for maximizing the landlord's profits from his estates, a primary qualification for this position was expertise in agricultural affairs (J. Šafīnezād, *Monogrāfi-e deh-e Ṭālebābād*, Tehran, 1345 Š./1966, p. 115). The *mobāšers* made sure that crops were planted on schedule, irrigation networks properly maintained, herds adequately pastured, and harvests protected from thefts until marketed. *Mobāšers* generally appointed a variety of persons such as field guards, shepherds, and day laborers to help the production system function smoothly. In addition, they had to work with the



peasant leaders in charge of the various teams of share-croppers. In those villages in which landlords did not live, *mobāšers* acted in their place, exercising complete authority over the lives of the villagers.

A second important functionary in *amlāk* villages was the *kadkodā*. The *kadkodā* also was appointed by the landlord, although during the 20th century the Pahlavi dynasty made the position of village *kadkodā* an official governmental one appointed by the state (Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant*, pp. 190-91). The *kadkodā*, often a farming peasant, was the head of the village and responsible for maintaining public order, resolving local disputes, collecting taxes, and serving generally as an intermediary between the villagers and landlord. Typically, the *kadkodās* were subordinate to *mobāšers*, but historically there tended to be rivalry between them, except in those villages where landlords appointed a single man to serve both functions (M. Azkīā, *Monogrāft-e Hājīābād*, Tehran, 1346 Š./1967, p. 84).

Share-cropping was the historic method of managing agricultural production on *amlāk* estates. The division of the harvest between landlords and peasants was based upon their relative contribution of five factors of production, recognized at least from the early Islamic period: land, water, seed, draught animals, and labor. Ideally, the contributor of each factor received one-fifth of the harvest (Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant*, p. 306). Thus, landlords could automatically claim twenty percent of the harvest on account of having provided the land for cultivation, but typically they acquired a significantly larger amount of most commercial crops. They were able to claim up to three-fourths of harvests by providing some or all of the seed and the work animals and/or by constructing and maintaining irrigation networks.

The peasants who were sharecroppers in *amlāk* villages acquired cultivation rights, or *nasaqs*. Holding a *nasaq* was a privilege and was maintained by fulfilling a variety of formal and informal obligations to the landlord. One important obligation was to provide the landlord with a fixed number of free labor (*bīgārī*) days annually (Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant*, pp. 330-32). There were also dues, differing from region to region and through historical periods, including the presentation to landlords of appropriate measures of dairy products, eggs, wild plants and herbs, firewood, wool and/or lambs, and samples of local agricultural specialties. Peasants who refused to pay the expected dues risked incurring the wrath of landlords and losing their *nasaqs*; obedient peasants could normally expect to retain their *nasaq* rights for their lifetimes and pass them on to their sons.



The relationship between landlords and peasants was based upon inequality; the peasants' inferior status is highlighted by the insecurity of their cultivation rights, the various dues levied upon them, the necessity to provide free labor, and their relatively small share of the harvest. Throughout much of Iranian history landlords exercised absolute control over the villages constituting their *amlāk*; peasants were severely punished for any real or imagined transgressions against the rights of landlords. While the sources indicate that there have been instances of peasant rebellions, the dominant feature of Iranian society for at least two millennia was the success of large landowners in keeping the peasantry under its control and perpetuating the system of *amlāk*.

The first systematic challenge to *amlāk* came during the 20th century, when approximately thirty percent of Iran's villages and fifty-five percent of cultivated land were included in *amlāk* properties (K. Qosravī, *Jāme'a-šenāsī-e rūstā'ī-e Īrān*, Tehran, 1351 Š./1972, pp. 1-30). The influence of the landlords on politics and the conditions of the peasants on their estates increasingly became the subject of intellectual and political controversy during the first part of the century. Eventually members of the political elite, including the shah, came to accept the idea of implementing a reform of land tenure as part of an effort to encourage rural economic development. By 1962 a land reform law was enacted. This law, which was implemented in stages over a decade, effectively abolished *amlāk* by making it unlawful for a single landowner to possess agricultural property in excess of one village. Landlords were required to sell all surplus villages to the government, which in turn arranged for their resale to the peasants who held cultivating rights. A by-product of this program was the virtual disappearance of all the traditional dues and servitudes the peasants had rendered to landlords. As a consequence of the land reform program, *amlāk*, which had been a characteristic feature of Iranian land tenure patterns for more than two thousand years, virtually ceased to exist.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Given in the text.

(E. Hooglund)