



BAKWĀ, DAŠT-E

BAKWĀ, DAŠT-E, an extensive piedmont alluvial plain in the southwest of Afghanistan. Lying at about 700-750 m above sea level, it is drained by one of the Sīstān rivers, the Ƙospāsrūd, which may perhaps have taken over an old bed of the Ƙāšrūd (J. Pias, *Formations superficielles et sols d'Afghanistan*, Paris, 1976, pp. 118f.). On the north the Dašt-e Bakwā is bordered by mountains of the Sīāhband range; on the south it merges with the Dašt-e Mārgō, of which it forms, so to speak, the antechamber; on the west it is separated from the Farāh oasis by hills of the Ƙormāleq chain; on the east, beyond the Ƙāš river, it abuts on the higher platform of the Wāšēr piedmont. With a scanty but not insignificant annual average precipitation of about 100 mm, the Dašt-e Bakwā is a semi-desert dotted with clumps of tamarisk shrubs (*gaz*). In the 13th/19th century it sustained an abundant fauna of wild herbivores (antelopes, onagers) and birds (partridges, bustards), but since then they appear to have undergone severe decline due to human reoccupation.

For agriculture the Bakwā plain offers real potentialities. In past times it enjoyed a measure of prosperity based on *qanāt* irrigation. Remains of several hundred long-abandoned *qanāts* show what a large area was once in use. The fact that only some sixty *qanāts* are still in working order bears witness to an outright abandonment of cultivation, which cannot easily be dated but seems to have culminated in the 13th/19th century when the area was a frontier zone in dispute between the rival principalities of Herat and Qandahār. Reports from that time speak of chronic insecurity and constant pillage of oases and caravans by both the Paštūn Dorrānī nomads and the much-feared Baluchis,



who rode swift dromedaries and did not hesitate to raid the plain from their bases far to the south (“Itinerary from Yezd to Herat” [no author], *J(R)ASB* 13/2, 1844, p. 841, repr. in G. W. Forrest, ed., *Selections from the Travels and Journals Preserved in the Bombay Secretariat*, Bombay, 1906, p. 11. J. P. Ferrier, *Caravan Journeys and Wanderings in Persia, Afghanistan, Turkistan and Beloochistan*, London, 1857, repr. Westmead, 1971, pp. 274, 280, 282 n., 399ff.). The virtually deserted plain then became a vast winter camping ground in the control of the Paštūn Nūrzi nomads; it had a reputation for its wealth of herbage (C. E. Yate, *Khurasan and Sistan*, Edinburgh, 1900, repr. Nendeln, 1977, p. 11).

Despite the restoration of order, symbolized by the first establishment of a garrison in Amir Ḥabīb-Allāh’s reign (r. 1319-37/1901-19; L. W. Adamec, ed., *Historical and Political Gazetteer of Afghanistan II: Farah and Southwestern Afghanistan*, Graz, 1973, p. 30), the Dašt-e Bakwā remained thinly populated until the 1950s (M. H. Nāhež, ed., *Qāmūs-e joğrāfiā-ī-e Afgānestān* I, Kabul, 1335 Š./1956, pp. 246ff.). The authorities then resolved to promote its agricultural recolonization, for which the prerequisite was a new irrigation system. After an ambitious project to divert water from the Helmand river had been discarded as too costly (A. A. Michel, *The Kabul, Kunduz and Helmand Valleys and the National Economy of Afghanistan*, Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University, New York, 1959, p. 205), it was decided to have recourse to private capital. A policy of systematic sale of uncultivated state lands enabled bourgeois purchasers from Kabul and Qandahār to acquire ownership of vast tracts, which they began to bring under extensive cereal cultivation (winter wheat and barley). This required heavy investment in wells (which reach the water-table at depths of 15 to 20 m and show maximum yields of 45 liters per second each) and in motor-driven pumps, tractors, and related agricultural equipment. Loans provided by the Agricultural Development Bank gave a strong impetus to the spread of irrigated and mechanized cultivation from 1349 Š./1970 onward. In order to guide and coordinate this activity, the Ministry of Agriculture embarked in 1353 Š./1974 on a special program for the district comprising dissemination of knowledge, surveys of water and soil resources, and establishment of an experimental farm to test possibilities of making the agricultural system more intensive through introduction of summer crops such as maize, cotton, sunflower, and vegetables (*Prōža-ye ābyārī-e Dašt-e Bakwā*, Kabul, Ministry of Agriculture, 1354 Š./1975). In this context, typical of neo-capitalist agrarian development more or less aided and controlled by the state, the Bakwā plain became one of the most dynamic outposts of agricultural pioneering in Afghanistan. The sedentary population



of the administrative district (*woloswālī*) of Bakwā (2,078 km², part of the province of Farāh) more than doubled in a decade, rising from about 6,000 around 1350 Š./1971 (M. W. Jalmay, *Kandahār. Tārīk, joġrāfiā, koltūr*, Kabul, 1351 Š./1972) to 13,800 at the census of 1358 Š./1979. Concomitantly, the number of nomad families wintering in the district, mainly Nūrzi (Dorrāni but also some Eshāqzi (Dorrāni), Nāseri (*Ġelzi*), and Zūri (non-Paštūn), fell to fewer than 600 families against an estimated strength of 3,000 families in 1893 (Adamec, loc. cit.).

The town of Bakwā (population 1,500) lies in the middle of the plain and is surrounded by a small oasis irrigated from three *qanāts*. Also known as Solṭān Bakwā, it is renowned for its old and impressive Islamic cemetery (P. Zestovsky, “L’oasis de Sultan Bakva,” *Afghanistan* 6/3, 1950, pp. 41-51). In the 13th/19th century it was only a “small collection of huts and tents” (H. C. Marsh, *A Ride through Islam*, London, 1877, p. 160). Although its role as a caravan station on the old route from Qandahār to Herat via Farāh ceased when the modern concrete-paved highway was built on a line 30 km to the north, its *bāzār* escaped decline, thanks mainly to the presence of the district administrative offices. In 1357 Š./1978 the *bāzār* had some fifty shops and showed real animation as the mart of an area in course of transformation (cf. S. Radojicic, *Report on Possible Provision of Drinking Water for the Places of Gereshk, Qala-i-Kah, Anardar, Khake Safed, Fararod, Gulestan, Bakwa, Kohsan and Obe*, Kabul UNICEF, 1978, p. 9).

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