



# BAM I. HISTORY AND MODERN TOWN

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## i. History and Modern Town

Bam is a large oasis that owes its existence to the runoff from the Jabal Bārez mountains; during the wet season rivers such as the Tahrūd, which traverses the town, provide enough flow to run the mills. However, since the dry season lasts most of the year, particularly important to the town's survival is its system of twenty-five *qanāts*. Though Bam, at 1,100 m altitude, is generally considered *garmsīr* (hot region), it is known for a variety of *sardsīr* (cold region) produce.

The town may owe its name to the term “vahma” (prayer, glorification; W. Tomaschek, “Zur historischen Topographie von Persien II,” *Sb. Kaiserl. Akad. Wiss., Phil.-hist. Kl.* 108, 1885, p. 585). Whatever the case, Bam, which appears for the first time in 9th/10th-century Arab geographies, was founded by the Sasanians during their settlement of Kermān and southeastern Iran. It seems to have been a walled stronghold in a region plagued by repeated incursions and banditry; Eṣṭakrī (p. 166) characterizes the citadel as impregnable. Aside from date farming, Bam's economy was chiefly based on cotton, which sustained a prosperous artisan class. Durable and prized cotton fabric, embroidered veils, cloaks, kerchiefs, and fine turbans were produced in Bam and exported to Khorasan, Mesopotamia, and even as far as Egypt (Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 223; cf. *Ḥodūd al-ālam*, tr. Minorsky, p. 125). In addition to its



citadel, Bam also boasted three Friday mosques, two of which served the orthodox community, the other the small but well-off Kharijites. Moqaddasī (p. 465) mentions Bam's foul-tasting water and notes that *qanāts* provided the principal supply. The accounts of Arab geographers are repeated more or less by subsequent authors (cf. *Nozhat al-qolūb*, ed. Le Strange, p. 72; tr. p. 139), and it is not until 1810, when Lieutenant Henry Pottinger (1789-1856) visited the town, that an original description of Bam appeared. During the entire intervening period, the town was a strategically important projection of Iranian power, serving first as an Il-khanid and later a Safavid outpost in Baluchistan.

In the 18th century, Bam's role as a frontier fortress became paramount. After being occupied by Afghans twice in 1719 and during the period 1721-30, Bam emerged as the forward Iranian position vis-à-vis the Ġelzay tribe, which probably with Nāder Shah Afšār's authorization had established itself in neighboring Narmāšīr. The Shi'ite Ġelzays seemed to have been on friendly terms with the Zands, for Loṭf-'Alī Khan Zand fled in their direction after the fall of Kermān (1794). In 1795, the governor of Bam captured Loṭf 'Alī Khan and turned him over to the founder of the Qajar dynasty, Āqā Moḥammad Khan, who, to commemorate his victory over the last of his Zand rivals, erected a pyramid of their skulls (still visible to Pottinger some nineteen years later, *Travels in Beloochistan and Sinde*, London, 1816, p. 202). The Ġelzays were driven out from Narmāšīr in 1801 and replaced by Baluchi tribes, but the town was strongly fortified in 1810 and remained so during the first half of the 19th century due to the insecurity of the region.

Bam was occupied once again by Āqā Khan Maḥallātī (q.v.) during his 1840-41 insurrection and remained in an unsettled state until around 1855 (A. Gasteiger, *Von Teheran nach Beludschistan*, Innsbruck, 1881, p. 77). The restoration of peace allowed the town to grow beyond its walls, and a new settlement was founded along the river in enclosed gardens and date groves 1,000 m to the southwest.

Unfettered by walls and fear of invasion, Bam expanded rapidly at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. In 1881, though Bam lost its status as Baluchistan's governor's seat, the governor, who normally resided in Bampūr, preferred the milder summers there. Population estimates vary from E. Smith's eight to nine thousand (F. Goldsmid, *Eastern Persia: An Account of the Journey of the Persian Boundary Commission of 1870-72*, London, 1876, p. 244) to O. B. St John's two thousand families (*ibid.*, p. 86) to Gasteiger's six



thousand in 1881 (*Von Teheran*, p. 78). In 1895, P. M. Sykes estimated the population to be thirteen thousand (*Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*, London, 1902, p. 217), and the same figure was cited by A. Gabriel in 1928 (*Im weltfernen Orient*, Munich, 1929, p. 195). Commercial activity also grew apace during this period; Bam's *bāzār*, considered "small and poor" by O. B. St John (Goldsmid, *Eastern Persia*, p. 85), "miserably small and insignificant" by E. Smith in 1872 (*ibid.*, p. 196), and "little" by E. Sykes in 1895 (*Through Persia on a Sidesaddle*, 2nd ed., London, 1901, p. 195), seemed bustling to A. Gabriel in 1928 (*Im weltfernen Orient*, p. 195). The covered *bāzār* consisted of two distinct parts and of a separate Zoroastrian section occupied by some fifty Parsi merchants (according to the 1966 census, Bam had 156 Zoroastrian inhabitants). The site of felt hat (*kolāh*) and sandal (*mal(e)kī*) manufacturing, the *bāzār* also served as a central distribution point for the region's agricultural products and handicrafts. Henna, indigo, rice, and dates were exported to Kermān, and from Bam objects made by artisans in Yazd and Kermān reached the rest of Iranian Baluchistan.

Today Bam remains an important commercial hub and has an enhanced administrative role as the seat of its own *šahrestān*. As of 1973, the *bāzār* contained 576 commercial establishments, 105 itinerant merchants, and several small-scale building-material factories and produce-processing plants (primarily dates and citrus fruits). The overall population has grown from 15,737 in 1956, to 21,761 a decade later, and in 1976 reached 30,422, most of whom were engaged in agriculture. In contrast to Narmāšīr with its highly diversified agriculture, over the last quarter century Bam agriculture has come to be virtually dominated by date and citrus farming, the produce of which is marketed mainly in Tehran. In recent years, however, certain grains and alfalfa have been cultivated among the fruit trees, providing many yearly harvests of winter feed necessary for livestock (principally sheep and goats).

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