



BANDAR-E 'ABBAS I. THE CITY

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i. The City

Geographical situation and historical background. At the entrance to the Persian Gulf, Bandar-e 'Abbās extends about 2 km along the shallow Clarence (Kūrān) strait between Qešm island and the mainland; its lack of a natural harbor obliges vessels to use tenders to handle cargo, a hazardous operation in winter. The risks are mitigated somewhat by the extensive, sheltered anchorage in the waters between the nearby islands of Qešm, [Lārak](#), and Hormoz. The town has a great strategic and commercial importance as a link between the Gulf and the Irano-Afghan hinterland with easy passes, through the Zagros mountains, to Kermān, Yazd, and Shiraz. Bandar-e 'Abbās has little to offer its inhabitants: a semi-arid climate, very hot in summer with afternoon temperatures exceeding 40° C (104° F) and, nevertheless, oppressively humid. Cisterns are insufficient to supply drinking water, which has to be piped in from 'Esīn some 16 km to the northwest. Despite these repulsive elements, the location is extremely favorable to the maritime relations of Iran with the outside world.

Bandar-e 'Abbās is the successor to the emporium of old Hormoz, the seaport of Kermān and Sejestān, near present-day Mīnāb 80 km to the east (Le Strange, *Lands*, p. 318). Around 1300, old Hormoz was moved to the island of Jarūn which changed its name to accommodate the move. At that time, Bandar-e 'Abbās, which was known as Šahrū (Eṣṭakrī, p. 67) and Sūrū (Ebn Ḥawqal, p.



220; Sūrū is the name of a village located southeast of the present-day port, where tradesmen of the town, at the end of the 19th century, owned country houses; see Floyer, p. 139), was a fishing village and ferry terminal for Hormoz island. It was also known as Sīrū (Moqaddasī, p. 454) and Šahrūvā (*Hodūd al-ālam*, tr. Minorsky, p. 124). The form “Tūsar” given by Mostawfī, *Nozhat al-qolūb*, (trans. pp. 137-38) is certainly the result of misreadings.

When new Hormoz became an important trading center, Šahrū, some 20 km away, at the foot of the continental highlands, benefited in turn as a source of the island's provisions and as its principal outlet to the mainland. Shortly after they took Hormoz in 1507, the Portuguese built a fort at Šahrū, which then came to be known by a variety of names: Gomrū, Kombrū, Gombarū in Oriental sources; Cambarão and Comorão in Portuguese writings; Combru (P. Della Valle, *Les fameux voyages* III, Paris, 1663-65, pp. 576-80) and Gombroon, Gambron, Camoron, Comoran, etc., in other European sources. Lockhart (*ET*²) proposed a derivation from the old name of Jarūn (other forms: Zarūn, Garaon, etc.), transferred to the mainland after the island became Hormoz, but Gombroon is probably a corruption of *gomrok*, the common term for “customs house,” derived via Turkish from the modern Greek *komérki* (from Italian *commercio*; Le Strange, *Lands*, p. 319). Obviously it was there that goods from Hormoz landed on the continent.

The Safavid harbor. In 1615, the Portuguese fort passed into the hands of the Safavid [Shah 'Abbās I](#), who with the help of the British navy was also able to take Hormoz some seven years later. Shah 'Abbās then decided to bring the port to the mainland and renamed the site of Šahrū after himself. To reward his British allies, he exempted them from all duties, granted them half of the customs revenues of the new port, provided that they operate two vessels in the Gulf to protect their shipping. The town prospered quickly; in 1622, Della Valle characterized Combru as “more of an emporium than a town, where people from all nations disembark,” especially many Jews and Indians, but also noted that “the shops were poorly stocked.” In 1628 Thomas Herbert confirmed the lively, cosmopolitan nature of the new port, where he reports seeing English, Dutch, Danish, Portuguese, Armenian, Georgian, Muscovite, Turkish, Arab, Indian, and Jewish merchants (*Travels in Persia*, London, 1928, pp. 41-49). Numerous travelogues and sources such as the British East India Company's *Gombroon Diary* (India Office Library, *Persia and the Persian Gulf Records* I-VI) give a detailed picture of life in Bandar-e 'Abbās for the rest of the 17th century.



Despite its status as the chief Safavid port, Bandar-e 'Abbās's growth was modest. To Tavernier, who visited several times during the decade 1645-55, it was "good-sized" (*Les six voyages*, Utrecht, 1712, p. 768); however, Thévenot, who stopped in Bandar-e 'Abbās in 1667, judged it "very small," and not the equal of a good-sized village" (*Suite du voyage de Levant*, Paris, 1674, pp. 265-66). Chardin, who was a frequent visitor during the period 1667-77, estimated the number of houses between 1,400 and 1,500, a third of which belonged to Indians and fifty to Jews (*Voyages XVII*, Paris, 1830, pp. 123-29). The physician Engelbert Kaempfer, who lived in Bandar-e 'Abbās from 1685 to 1688, reckoned the Indians constituted the majority of the population (*Amoenitatum exoticarum* . . . V, Lengovia, 1712, pp. 716-17; English tr. *Journey into Persia and other Oriental Countries*, London, 1736), which is certainly explained by the fact that Europeans found the climate too unhealthy for long-term residence. In summer, most of the inhabitants would retire to the neighboring hills. Though Shah 'Abbās I had a large cistern (*āb-anbār*) built, only the lower classes made use of it; the wealthier residents drew their water from a nearby spring. Europeans sought refuge not only from the foul water but also from homesickness and the dangers of the climate in a large variety of alcoholic concoctions, especially in "punch," which owes its name to a combination of five (*panj*) basic ingredients: *araq*, lemon juice, sugar, nutmeg, and water. Johann van Mandelslo mentions "palepunzen," a corruption of "bowl of punch" (*De Gedenkwaardige Zee en Landt Reyse deur Parsien en Indien*, Amsterdam, 1658, p. 24) and his fellow countryman Jean Struys, who visited Bandar-e 'Abbās in 1672, warned of the dangers of overconsumption (*Les voyages . . . en Moscovie, en Tartarie, en Perse*, Amsterdam, 1681, pp. 329-32). In this desolate and semi-desert place, haunted by the howls of jackals (Herbert), food was generally imported from abroad; fruits and vegetables were supplied from Qešm. Local staples consisted of dates and fish, the heads and entrails of which were fed to the livestock, giving to milk and milk products a particularly disagreeable taste. From the middle of the century wells were dug around the town, which allowed some gardens and orchards to be grown (Tavernier).

Despite its inhospitable conditions and deadly climate, Bandar-e 'Abbās developed into a thriving commercial center. John Fryer (*A New Account of East India and Persia* . . . 1672-1681 II, London, 1909, pp. 158-64) lists British imports of fabric from England, cotton and cotton cloth from India, indigo, ores, and steel. Purchases included wool from Kermān, raw and woven silk, carpets, brocades, saffron, rhubarb, rosewater, dates, goats and horses for



India. The Dutch, whose trade Fryer estimates to be the most important, primarily sold spices (pepper, nutmeg, cloves), sugar, copper, and Indian cloth and bought silk, carpets, and velvets; they also took payment in silver and gold coin. There was, in addition, a lively trade in pearls from the Gulf.

The decay. The Omani period. Bandar-e 'Abbās was not immune to the decline of Iran that culminated in the Afghan invasion of 1722. In 1727, 4,000 Baluchi horsemen sacked all but the fortified British and Dutch factories (trading stations; A. Hamilton, *A New Account of the East Indies*, Edinburgh, 1727, pp. 108-09). Nor did Bandar-e 'Abbās benefit from the restoration of national order under Nāder Shah Afšār; in 1736, he commandeered all of the port's pack animals from an East India Company caravan loaded with Kermān wool (L. Lockhart, *Nadir Shah*, London, 1938, p. 113). Though in 1741 Bandar-e 'Abbās gained a cannon foundry out of Nāder Shah's overall strategic policy in the Persian Gulf, he put an end to the port's vitality by levying punitive taxes on commerce and by designating [Būšeher](#), much closer to Shiraz and Isfahan, as his principal outpost on the Gulf. The consequences of his policies were quick to follow; in 1750, Bartholomew Plaisted recorded that only one out of every ten of the port's houses was occupied (*Journal from Calcutta*, London, 1758, p. 11), but in 1758, the British physician E. Ives noted that the Dutch and English factories were still in operation (*A Voyage from England to India*, London, 1773, pp. 197-202). However, in 1759, a French squadron burned the British factory, and in 1762 first the British and then the Dutch abandoned Bandar-e 'Abbās for Būšeher.

Not surprisingly Iranian government indifference to the fate of the town went hand in hand with the economic decline. Control of the region passed into the hands of Arab tribal chiefs whose allegiance to Persian authority was more nominal than real. A Persian firman of 1793 recognized the Sultan of Muscat's influence over a coastal strip extending 150 km between Mīnāb in the east and Kāmīr in the west as well as the islands of Qešm and Hormoz. Five years later, the Sultan signed a treaty that allowed the British East India Company to enter Bandar-e 'Abbās once again. According to James Morier, in 1811 the Sultan maintained a garrison of 120 Nubians and eighty Arabs to protect the port against pirates (*A Second Journey through Persia*, London, 1818, app. B). The Qajar government at times tried to reestablish its hold over Bandar-e 'Abbās, but it was not until 1855 that it reached an accord with the Omanis that limited the term of their lease to twenty years in exchange for an annual payment of 16,000 tomans. Taking advantage of trouble in Muscat, the Qajars



gained final control of the port in 1868.

Bandar-e ‘Abbās’s Omani period was marked by profound physical change. With the exception of the Dutch factory, refurbished to house the Omani governor, the port’s older homes had been largely abandoned, and a new settlement composed of flimsily built huts established. But, owing to the insecurity of the waters around Būshehr, commerce did not stop entirely in Bandar-e ‘Abbās. In 1830, J. R. Wellsted estimated the population to be between 4,000 and 5,000 (*Travels to the City of the Caliphs* I, London, 1840, p. 75). At the end of the Omani period, Pelly estimated it at between 8,000 and 9,000, the difference probably to be explained by the fact that most of the population left town for the summer.

Persian recovery. The stagnation (1868-1964). The end of the Omani period brought a modest renewal of activity. In 1871, Evan Smith noted that though the town, having just been decimated by cholera and famine, was in a sorry state, cotton, opium, asafetida, and henna from Yazd and Kermān were being exported from Bandar-e ‘Abbās; the customs duties leased to a British agent were estimated at 25,000 tomans (“The Persian-Afghan Mission, 1871,” *Eastern Persia* I, ed. F. J. Goldsmid, London, 1876, pp. 296-98). There were four Europeans and a number of Indian merchants. By 1889, a wide range of products was being transshipped through Bandar-e ‘Abbās; exports included opium, cotton, dates, salt, wool, pistachios, almonds; imported were cotton fabric, thread, copper, iron, tin, spices, indigo, sugar, tea, glassware, and porcelain (G. N. Curzon *Persia and the Persian Question* II, London, 1892, p. 426). Nine-tenths of the imports were from Great Britain and India, one half of the exports to India. The British reopened their consulate in 1900.

Though one found merchants from as far away as Kabul in Bandar-e ‘Abbās and tea and indigo from India went to Bukhara this way, the port had for Iran, at that time, only a regional function restricted to eastern and southeastern parts of the country. The roads and railways that were constructed during the first half of the twentieth century in other parts of the country bypassed Bandar-e ‘Abbās. In 1928, Alfons Gabriel characterized port trade as mediocre; exports: wool, carpets, nuts, pistachios, and dry fruit; imports: fabrics, thread, rice, sugar, and wood (*Im weltfernen Orient*, Munich, 1929, pp. 66-71). As late as 1961, Bandar-e ‘Abbās only handled 42,000 tons of cargo (two-thirds exports, some local oil transport). The only notable economic developments during this period were the spinning mill and a fish-canning plant (tuna and sardines) built under Reżā Shah. The latter, built in 1947 with a total capacity of 4



million cans per year, remained dormant for fifteen years, but during the period 1957-63 produced an average of 400,000 cans yearly and in 1968 600,000.

Bandar-e 'Abbās's stagnation kept population growth at a stable level; in 1928, it was estimated at 10,000 (Gabriel, op. cit., p. 66); in 1937, 15,000 by the Great Britain Naval Intelligence (Geographical Handbook Series, *Persia*, Oxford, 1945, p. 500) but 11,400 by L. Lockhart (*Persian Cities*, London, 1960, p. 175); and in 1956, still only 17,710 (*Saršomārī-e 'omūmī*, 1335 Š.). After 1928 the population became almost exclusively Persian, including the fishermen, which is unusual in the Gulf and explains later difficulties in supplying the cannery. There were also a few Arab and Baluch; some thirty families of K̄vājas from Hyderabad; Jats, whose women were employed as water carriers; and some Portuguese-Indians from Goa. The last non-Muslim Indians returned to India during World War II. Shi'ites constituted the majority of the population, but a Sunnite minority resided in the western part of the town. Although as part of Reżā Shah's modernization broad thoroughfares and open squares were cut into the city, Bandar-e 'Abbās retained its traditional character: a small *bāzār*, mud-brick houses sometimes built on coral foundations, and a forest of both simple and ornate *bādgīrs*, the *bādgīr-e 'arab*, open toward the sea, and the *bādgīr-e lūla*, open on all four sides.

The rebirth of Bandar-e 'Abbās. With the decision in 1964 to build a new deep-water port in a well-sheltered area some 8 km southwest of the center of town, Bandar-e 'Abbās changed markedly. Opened in 1967, the port can accommodate vessels with 10-m displacements and has an annual capacity of 1.5 million tons of cargo. It is primarily (90 percent) devoted to exports of chromite ore mined in a region 160 km to the northeast; other from Hormoz is also shipped from the new port. In 1968, 220,000 tons of cargo, 165,000 of which were imports, passed through the harbor, and by 1972-73, total tonnage reached 300,000. At the same time the fishing fleet was revitalized, and canning output hit 2.5 million (60 percent of capacity). The renascence of the port was further enhanced when Iranian naval headquarters in the Persian Gulf was transferred there from Kōrramšahr in 1973, and when a Bandar-e 'Abbās-Kermān highway was constructed to end the port's isolation from the country's hinterland.

The recent, rapid economic development of Bandar-e 'Abbās has led to a corresponding increase in population; censuses taken in 1966 and 1976 put the population at 34,627 and 89,103 respectively, making the region second only to



the Tehran metropolitan area in growth. Bandar-e 'Abbās's population has quite recently swelled with refugees from the Iran-Iraq war; in summer 1984, the municipality estimated that 185,850 people resided in the city (private communication).

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