



BATHHOUSES I. GENERAL

i. General

Pre-Islamic Iran. Bathhouses existed prior to the Islamic period in the Iranian cultural area. However, their number seems to have been limited due to the Zoroastrian religion's reverence for the holy element of water. This may explain why Yāqūt (I, p. 199; Spuler, p. 266), quoting the authority of an Arab physician, states that the Sasanians did not know the use of baths. Nevertheless, archeological finds in K̄vārazm, for example, show the existence of cellars under houses, which were cooled by water basins in which the inhabitants may have bathed, though these cellars could be simple *sardābs* (Spuler, p. 286; Le Strange, p. 337). Other sources also confirm the existence of baths in pre-Islamic Iran. For example, King Vologeses (484-88) incurred the wrath of the Zoroastrian priests by building public baths, for in this way people would pollute the holy element, water. Kavād (488-531), after having enjoyed a bath in Amida after his conquest of that city, ordered the construction of such baths throughout his empire (Mez, p. 365). Finally, Ferdowsī relates that K̄srow II Parvēz (d. 628), prior to his assassination, took a bath (Boyce, p. 143). This evidence indicates that Yāqūt was probably only partly right.

Islamic Iran, medieval period. With the conversion of the population of Iran to Islam, ritual purity (*ṭahārat*, q.v.), e.g., through washing one's body (*ḡosl* and *wozū*'), became a requirement of religious life. Thenceforth bathing became an integral part of life. Besides, baths were frequented not only for purity and hygienic reasons, but also for medical purposes. Physicians prescribed taking



the waters against a great variety of ailments (Spuler, p. 267).

We find therefore baths and hot springs mentioned frequently after the 3rd/9th century. Around 970 a local notable built a bathhouse in Eskejkat (Bukhara; Naršaḳī, p. 18). In the 10th century the use of hot springs is often mentioned for all kinds of physical ailments (Spuler, p. 266; Schwarz, VII, p. 869). A hot spring in Isfahan was believed to be only working during the month of Tīr (Schwarz, VII, p. 857). In Afrāsīāb near Samarkand the existence of a shower has been confirmed (*Bulletin of The Metropolitan Museum of Art* 37/4, 1942). Also baths are mentioned in Barḍa‘a, hot springs in Tiflis, a famous sulfur spring in Ḥolwān (the present Sar-e pol-e Ḍohāb), and numerous baths in Borūjerd and near Ardabīl and Qazvīn (see [ĀB-E GARM](#)). Dowraq was also famous for its sulfur springs; while Arrajān was known for its soap manufacturing (Le Strange, pp. 177, 181, 191, 199, 242, 268), Sīrāf, on the Persian Gulf coast, also boasted a public bath (Whitehouse, pp. 78-80). Baths are also mentioned in the 5th/11th century in the Kermān area (Spuler, pp. 442, 501). Also in Ani, in Christian Armenia, many bathhouses existed at that time (Minorsky, p. 105).

Ḍemmīs had to wear distinctive signs (a necklace or *ṭawq*) made of iron, copper, or clay to identify themselves in a bathhouse to avoid a situation of uncleanness for Muslims (Spuler, p. 294).

Number of baths. In the 3rd/9th century Baghdad boasted 5,000 baths, 100 years later 10,000, but it had only 2,000 baths in the 6th/12th century. However, these figures must be taken with a grain of salt (Mez, pp. 365-66). In the Safavid era cities like Isfahan boasted countless public bathhouses. Rich Persians and Europeans had, of course, their own private baths (Kaempfer, p. 155). Although some efforts have been made to list surviving historical monuments in various Iranian cities, in the absence of archeological research we have no data on the number of bathhouses in the most important urban centers in Iran prior to the 19th century. We are better served for the latter period, although the data base is not always very reliable.

In 1890 there were 72 bathhouses in Isfahan, which were of different quality and cleanliness; this is possibly an estimate, because only 31 public baths have been identified as remaining historical monuments (Taḥwīldār, p. 40; Mehrābādī, pp. 405-08). However, around 1920 there were some 85 bathhouse keepers (*ḥammāmīs*; Janāb, *Ketāb al-Eṣfahān*, p. 78). The author of the *Neṣf-e Jahān* records that there were four classes of bathhouses in Isfahan, in



descending order of quality and beauty (pp. 79f.). In Kermān there were 32 public baths (Goldsmid, *Eastern Persia* I, p. 191), but 51 bathhouses according to Wazīrī (p. 31) around 1870. The difference may be explained by the fact that Goldsmid only enumerated the most important ones, while Wazīrī counted them all. In Qazvīn there were 35 bathhouses in 1299/1880 (Golrīz, p. 404). Forṣat (pp. 504-06) enumerates at least 40 public baths in Shiraz around 1880, while Rabino reports of Kermānšāh in 1903 that “there are about 30 public baths, of which 5 or 6 are of a higher standard, but they are not made great use of by the working classes, who, not being of the Shiah persuasion, do not attach so great importance to bathing” (M 590, p. 6). In 1916 in Solṭānābād there were 30 public baths, two of which were new and had showers. One of the latter was reserved for Europeans (Wakīlī, p. 415). In Tehran the number of public baths (*ḥammām-e ‘omūmī*) grew from 146 in 1269/1852 to 182 in 1320/1902. Allowing for the growth of the city proper this meant that the number of baths per house grew from 1 per 148 houses to 1 per 89 houses between 1852 and 1902 (Etteḥādīya, pp. 204, 208). In 1925 there were not more than 151 public baths (*Second Yearbook*, p. 74), a situation that has worsened considerably in the present time in those parts of the city that do not have piped water and shower facilities (B. D. Clark and V. Costello, “The Urban System and Social Pattern in Iranian Cities,” *Transactions of British Geographers* 59, 1973, p. 117).

Bathhouse staff. Personnel connected with bathhouses, referred to as *jamā‘at-e salmānīān* (the barbers’ guild) in a firman by Shah ‘Abbās I (1038/1628) included the following: bathhouse keepers (*ḥammamīān*); barbers (*salmānīān*); shavers (*dallākān*, also called *ḥallāq*), bath stokers (*tūntābān*), dyers of beards (*rangbandān*); wardrobe keepers (*jāmadārān*, also called *fūtadār*, Goḷčīn-e Ma‘ānī, p. 158), and bloodletters (*faṣṣādān*; Kākī, p. 48; Jazā‘erī, p. 107). Bath attendants who shaved heads (*sartarāšān*), masseurs (*āsījānān*), cuppers (*ḥajjāmān*), in addition to *ḥammāmīs* and *dallāks*, are mentioned in Timurid times (Roemer, p. 90). This shows no great change from the 10th century, when the following staff was mentioned: *ḥammāmī*, *qayyem* (robe keeper), *zabbāl* (dung man), *waqqād* (stoker), and *saqqā* (water carrier; Mez, p. 366). These occupations were considered to be of a low status.

Nevertheless, the barber (*salmānī*) was one of the “blessed guildsmen” (*asnāfīān-e moqaddas*) among the *ḥotowwa* orders (Floor, p. 110). At the Safavid court, where the shah had his own private baths, there was a *kāṣṣatarāšbāšī* (chief of the court barbers), a *ḥammāmībāšī* (chief of the bath keepers; Āṣaf, p.



105). Kaempfer mentions the *salmānīkāna* (barbers' department) among the *boyūtāt* (p. 125).

Social role of bathhouses. Bathhouses played an important role in social life. The bath was frequented for religious, hygienic, and medical reasons and for socializing and relaxation. It was also often a place for passing information and spreading rumors. Such was its place in society that the author of the *Qābūs-nāma* devoted one chapter of his book to the subject of good advice on proper behavior in a bath, as well as on its proper use (chap. 16). Similar sentiments are echoed in medical books such as the *Qānūnčā* by Moḥammad Čaġmīnī (pp. 75-77). A great many tales, proverbs, popular beliefs, and superstitions exist about the *ḥammām*, in which often the supernatural, especially *jenns*, play an important role (Šahrī, pp. 274f.; Taḥwīldār, pp. 20-21). Their use was universal and frequent, according to most observers. "The great amusement of the Persian women of every rank is the bath. Generally three or four hours in the week are passed by the very poorest in the hammam. The middle classes make parties to go to the hammam, and assist each other in the various processes of shampooing, washing with the keesa or rough glove, and washing the hair with pipe clay of Shiraz. As for the wealthier they have baths in their own houses, and use them almost daily. The public baths are open free of charge and without distinction to rich and poor. A few coppers are given to the delaks, or bath attendants, male or female. These pay for fuel, draw water, etc." (Wills, p. 334; see also Šahrī, pp. 274f. for social activities in the *ḥammām*). However, it would seem that the poor did not frequent the baths as regularly as Wills would have us believe. Apart from Rabino's observation, there is also the fact that they were unable to afford this expense on a daily basis.

Architecture and design. With few exceptions, there is neither any study of old existing public baths, nor archeological studies. Even the architectural aspect of the baths is missing from the readily available graphic descriptions of the baths by European travelers. Therefore, it is not yet possible to compare public baths in different parts of Iran or to analyze their technical and architectural development through the ages. We have a detailed study of a public bath (built before 441/1050) excavated in Sīrāf. However, it may be questioned whether its design, a rectangular building with maximum dimensions of 17 x 11.5 m, followed the classical example, as the archeological team seems to imply. One entered the Sīrāf bath through a rectangular room, probably the apodyterium. The bath also had a room with drains and a latrine in addition to an unheated frigidarium. On each side of the latter there are two rooms with a hypocaust



under most of the floor, showing they were tepidaria. Finally, the bath had a caldarium, with a complete hypocaust heated by a furnace. Outside the building there was the stoking area and a small fuel store. Water for the *ḥammām* was drawn from an outside well or conduit. There does not exist any case study of later *ḥammāms*. There exist only some brief notes by Schroeder in Pope (p. 998) on a pre-Saljuq *ḥammām* in Negār (south of Kermān); further on a bath in Kāšān, of which Coste (plate 45) published a plan; and finally a plan of Ḥammām-e Šāh in Isfahan, dating from the time of Shah ‘Abbās I (r. 996-1038/1588-1629), in Gaube and Wirth (p. 158, fig. 52). [See also ii, below.] The following description of the physical outlay of a public bath, therefore, is based on graphic descriptions rather than on architectural or archeological data. Iconographic material, as represented by miniatures, also is rare. An example by an artist of the school of Behzād has been published by Gray (p. 117).

Layout of bathhouses and contemporary bathing practices. The bathhouse itself was below ground level in order to retain heat in winter or cold in summer. Its roof was even with the ground level. In Qara Qoyunlū Tabrīzī an Italian traveler noted that each palace had its own bath, which was paneled with tiles in minute and beautiful designs (Contarini, p. 167; see also *Tārīk-eYazd*, p. 40). Ebn Baṭṭūṭa gives a detailed description of *ḥammāms* in Baghdad, but he does not mention any decorations. He comments favorably, however, on the service given, for “I have never seen such an elaboration as all this in any city other than Baghdad” (*The Travels of Ebn Battutta*, tr. H. Gibb, [Cambridge 1962], pp. 329-30). The entrance of a bathhouse was often decorated, in the 13th/19th century frequently with scenes from the *Šāh-nāma*. This custom is probably of pre-Islamic origin, either Hellenistic (Mez, p. 366) or Iranian. It was a pre-Islamic Iranian custom to decorate the inside of houses and buildings (e.g., Naršakī, tr. Frye, pp. 27, 49; Ghirshman, p. 274).

A bathhouse consists, in general of at least three sections enclosed on all sides, lighted by small rectangles in the roof and/or by oil lamps. The atmosphere in the bath becomes progressively hotter and more humid as one proceeds toward the steam room (*garm-ḳāna*), where people experience intense perspiration. The first, or undressing, room, which is reached by a corridor (*rāhrow*), is called *sar(-e) ḥammām*, *raḳtkān*, *jāma-ḳāna*, or *sar-e bīna*. It generally is a large vaulted room (covered with tiles showing flowers, birds and other figures) with wooden benches, or benches of stone all around, which are covered with mats and carpets. It has a fountain in the middle while



the walls are embellished with pictorial art, sometimes scenes from the *Šāhnāma*. A client undresses in this room and puts on a loincloth (*long*) covering him from the waist to the knees; he takes tea, smokes, talks, and hears the news of the day. Each person takes his own linen and toilet articles. Well-to-do people take 2-3 servants to help them, as well as to guard their clothes, for sometimes clothes or shoes are stolen. Before entering the next room one is supposed to go to the toilet (*mostarāḥ*, *lawleʾn-kāna*), if need be. Hair of the genitals and anus are also removed so that unclean substances will not cling to them. To that end a depilatory (*nūra*, *zarnīk*, or *wājebī*), a mixture of quicklime and orpiment, is used; it is a dangerous mixture, for “if you do not wash it away as the hair begins to fall, you are often burned in a most dreadful manner” (Waring, pp. 45f.). This procedure, called *kīsakašī*, is followed by soaping (*šābūnzānī*), after which the client takes a shower; in older times he took a plunge in the pool in the steam room.

On entering the second section one greets those present. This steam room (*garm-kāna*) is usually square or octagonal; the one Chardin visited was 6-8 feet in diameter. The floor is of marble or tiles and is steam-heated by means of covered flues. Traditionally there was a large water-filled basin (*kaẓīna*) resting on a large metal-topped stove (*tūn*) under which a fire slowly burned. (In the last few decades, due to official sanction against their use in public baths, *kaẓīnas* have been replaced by showers [*dūš*].) The fuel used was brushwood mixed primarily with dung cakes and some leaves. In the 17th century, according to Chardin, it was forbidden to use firewood due to scarcity of wood in Iran. But the main reason that it was not used was its high price. Moreover, with dung cakes the temperature could be kept more even. For the total ablution (*gosl*) it sufficed to immerse oneself a few times in this basin. This room is often pillared, the walls showing famous heroes from the *Šāhnāma*.

Here a *dallāk* throws water on the hot tiles to wash the floor and to make steam. He then places a loincloth or towel on the floor, on which the client lies down, and makes a pillow with another towel on which he can put his head. First the client receives a massage (*moštmāl-e dākelī*). Then the *dallāk* dyes the hair of head and beard, after having washed it first. The hair is colored with *ḥennā* and left for one hour. After that the hair is washed with lukewarm water. Often the palms, soles, and nails are hennaed, while with pumice (*sang-e pā*) the soles and palms are smoothed. During the drying period head and beard are shaved (*sar-o riš-tarāšī*); if desired nails are clipped. Women keep



their hair; men after about 1850 kept two locks on both sides of their ears and one on top of their head (Polak, I, p. 359). Wearers of turbans shaved their heads entirely.

In the 11th/17th century, “soap [was] made of grease or tallow instead of oyl, and that [made] it to have a bad scent, and with the least sweating to breed lice in their linen” according to Thevenot (II, p. 88). Chardin confirms this (IV, p. 149), adding that the soap, made of fat and ashes, is soft, does not bleach well, and is expensive. “Therefore soap is imported from Turkey, especially from Aleppo, which has the best soap in the Orient, may be in the world.”

The third section is the bath proper, called *qolletayn* in the 11th/17th century (Chardin, V, p. 197). About 10 persons could enter the *kazīna* at the same time and wash themselves at ease. In general, there were two baths, one hot bath and one cold bath (Francklin, pp. 70-72). Sometimes there was a third, lukewarm bath, which was especially favored by children. But if one is late, Chardin observes, “the water is covered with a thick fat cover of soap foam. It is disgusting but Iranians are accustomed to it. They just put it aside when they want to go under. It is easy to contract a contagious disease this way.” The water for the *ḥammāms* was generally supplied by wells or conduits; in Isfahan all *ḥammāms* were supplied by wells (Eṣfahānī, p. 80). The water in the baths was not always regularly refreshed, often not more than once or twice a year, because according to religious law water does not become unclean (*najes*) this way. Rose-scented earth (*gel-e gol*) was therefore commonly used in the baths to accommodate the customers (*Overseas Consultants* 2, p. 13). Public baths were therefore unclean and disease-ridden (Mostawfī, I, p. 168; Polak, I, p. 361). A local Tehrani wit is reported to have quipped that the water was daily refreshed by urine (Šahrī, p. 243). The very poor seized the opportunity to wash their rags in the public bath at the same time they bathed (Wills, p. 334). Of course, non-Muslims were not permitted to use the baths.

At least once, sometimes twice a year, Persians had themselves cupped (*garterāšī*, *rag-zanī*, or *hejāmat*; see BLOODLETING) in the bathhouses, because it was generally believed that this was healthy (Šahrī, pp. 257-59). As a number of persons are in the bath at one time, part of the time is passed in talking and smoking and sometimes sleeping. On coming out the client gets a white towel and returns to the first room, where his body is massaged (*moštmāl-e bīrūnī*) during some 15 minutes, which is different from the first massage. After drying and some relaxation the client takes his clothes and leaves. Outside the *ḥammām* there are all kinds of fruit and juice sellers to cater to the needs of



the refreshed customers.

Classification of bathhouses. There were private and public baths. The former served the owners' needs and were in general inside the owners' houses. Public baths were often built for or by pious foundations (*awqāf*). In Šamsābād, Arslān Khan (1063-72) "built an imperial bath. Another bath, which had no equal, was at the gate of the court, and was given as endowment to the local *madrasa*" (Naršakī, pp. 40-41, tr, p. 30). Many *emānzādas* and other *waqf* property derived part of their income from the revenues of bathhouses they owned and operated. This income paid for part of the upkeep of the buildings, salaries of the staff, and other expenditures (Kaempfer, pp. 107, 116). Many *ḥammāms* were found next to *bāzārs*, caravansaries, or *madrāsas* (Ja'farī, pp. 33, 36, 45, 88; Mehrābādī, pp. 405f.; Ešfahānī, pp. 79f.). There were also male and female public bathhouses; usually situated next to each other, but there also existed baths that were used by both sexes at different times of the day. Before daybreak a shell (*ḥalazūn*; Šahrī, p. 264) or long horn (*būq-e jawāz*) is blown to announce that the bath is ready. Men come to the baths from daybreak until 4 o'clock in the afternoon, then women until sunset. In the latter case the staff is female. If the 1925 statistics for Tehran are reliable, men were better served than women. The 107 male public baths had a total staff of 102 bath keepers (*ostād*), 423 attendants (*kārgar*) and 58 assistants (*pādo*), or an average staff of 5.4 per *ḥammān*. The data for the 41 female *ḥammāms* were 11 keepers, 11 attendants, and 24 assistants, or 1 per bath. This figure seems too low to run all 41 baths.

According to Waring, five days were allotted to men and only two to women; according to Polak, only the mornings were for women. To announce that the bathhouse was open for men, two old loincloths were hung flanking the entrance door or the entrance from the street. The sign for women was a thick curtain hung in front of the door. The entrance for male baths was in the street itself, while for women it was at the end of a lane.

Cost of a bath. According to Šahrī the cost for a bath was as follows, depending on the elaborateness of the bath, at the turn of the 14th/20th century: major ablutions (*ḡosl + taṭhīr + čālahawāz*) only 6 *šāhīs*; depilation 2 *šāhīs*; soaping 5 *šāhīs*; trimming hair and beard 4 *šāhīs*; cupping 8 *šāhīs*; massage 5 *šāhīs*. In general for 20 *šāhīs* (1 *qerān*) a customer could get a bath. The bathhouse keeper did not ask for the specific amount and left it to the customer to pay the exact amount or throw in a tip (Šahrī, p. 263). Mostawfī (II, p. 169) gives slightly lower figures, but they are in agreement with Šahrī's data. An *ostād*



who rented a *ḥammām* and invested 200 *tomans* in furniture, loincloths, fuel, etc., earned an average of 7-8 *qerāns* a day on his investment. The price for a normal bath was 100 *dīnārs*; with a shave it came to 5 *šāhīs*, and the services of the *jāmadār* and *dallāk-e ābgīr* raised the cost to 10 *šāhīs*. Well-to-do customers paid 1 *qerān*, of which 3/4 was a tip. Fuel was obtained from neighboring caravansaries and stables. For a sack of 15 *mans* (90 kg) the bathhouse keeper paid at least 10 *šāhīs* toward the end of the 13th/19th century (Mostawfī, I, p. 169). The rich had their private baths at home. It was expensive to keep a bath, for the fire had to be kept going; therefore the less rich rented a bath and supplied fuel from their own gardens and stables (Chardin, pp. 193-97; Waring, pp. 445-46; Polak, I, pp. 355-61). “The whole bath can always be hired for a few kerans” (Wills, p. 334). There were also the so-called *ḥammāmī-e andarūnī*, who were hired to fire up a few private bathhouses. Their monthly income came to 2-7 *tomans*, depending on the size of the bathhouses (Mostawfī, I, p. 169).

Village bathhouses. In the rural areas only big villages appear to have had bathhouses. According to Planck, peasants washed themselves three times per month during summer time in the irrigation ditches. During the winter they went to the *ḥammām* of nearby villages and/or heated water in their huts and washed themselves on the spot (Planck, p. 50; Petrosian, pp. 21, 31, 43, 103; Petrosian’s book is also important for information on the general hygienic conditions in villages). In the 1960s bathhouses became more common, as well as showers. The water was regularly refreshed from nearby water sources, and sometimes small snakes got into the *ḳazīna* (Āl-e Aḥmad, p. 37, with a drawing of the layout of a village *ḥammām*; Şafīnežād, p. 61; Bazin, p. 84; Sahami, p. 39). If it was a big *ḥammām* there were two *ḳazīnas*, one with cold and one with warm water. The *ḥammāmī*, who was appointed by the *kaḍkoda* (village headman) or the *arbāb* (landowner), was paid in kind by the villagers. Rates were different for married men, bachelors, women, and children (Ṭāhbāz, p. 31; Porkārān, p. 26). When the *arbāb* wanted to use the bathhouse it was declared out of bounds (*qoroq*) to the general public (Ṭāhbāz, p. 30). The *ḥammāmī* and his wife not only had to take care of the bathhouse but also its fuel (Porkārān, p. 26).



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