



BEHŠAHR

BEHŠAHR, older Ašraf, a town situated at 36°41'55" north latitude and 53°32'30" east longitude in the eastern part of central Māzandarān, 35 miles east of Sārī and 43 miles west of Gorgān. It is located halfway between the foothills of the Alborz to the south and the Caspian Sea (Astarābād Bay/Ālij-e Gorgān) which is five miles to the north. It is the center of a traditionally rich farming country, in which sunflowers, cotton, wheat, rice, tobacco, and fruits are grown. Formerly dense forest land has, since Safavid times, been mostly turned into farmland.

Behšahr as a city is of comparatively recent age. At the site of a formerly unimportant settlement called Ārkūrān, the new town of Ašraf was established by Shah 'Abbās I in 1021/1612-13. Connected with the Iranian plateau by an elaborate paved highway (Shah 'Abbās causeway), Ašraf was planned as a summer retreat together with other residences along the Caspian Sea (cf. Faraḥābād). The royal palaces at Ašraf seem to have consisted of six units covering a wide area especially to the south of the present city (Kleiss). According to Fraser, who visited Ašraf in the early 19th century, five of the six gardens and their buildings (Bāḡ-e Šāhī, 'Emārat-e Šāḡeb-e Zamān, Ḥaram, Ālwat and Bāḡ-e Tappa) seem to have been surrounded by one wall. Outside the town, on the foothills of the Alborz and on old terraces of the Pleistocene Caspian Sea, engineering works such as dams, canals, and reservoirs for irrigation and for the fountains in the royal gardens were constructed. The Safavid observatory of Šafiābād, a few miles southwest of the city, served as a military station until the revolution of 1357 Š./1978-79.



With the fall of the Safavid dynasty Ašraf decayed. At the beginning of the 18th century, the city and its palace suffered from civil war. Permanent raids by Turkmen and plundering by both Afghan and Zand soldiers contributed to the economic stagnation of the settlement and the exodus of its population. During the time of Nāder Shah the “Great Ayyān” (Čehel Sotūn) was burnt down and replaced by minor constructions. The city and its hinterland remained almost uninhabited until Āgā Moḥammad Khan Qājār, who rebuilt Ašraf from 1193/1779-80 onwards. The town, however, grew only slowly (approximately 500 houses in 1826, more than 1,200 houses in 1874) and remained so until the early 20th century (Fraser; Rabino).

The development of modern Ašraf, the name of which was changed to Behšahr under Rezā Shah, started after 1930 with the construction of the Trans-Iranian Railway and the organized development of agriculture in the Caspian lowlands. In connection with the government-supported increase of cotton production Behšahr became, together with Šāhī (q.v.), one of the two industrial centers of Māzandarān with a huge textile factory at the northern end of the town laid out in modern rectangular grid pattern. Today Behšahr is one of the most important industrial centers in northern Iran, with a textile industry, seed- and sunflower-oil processing, flour mills, and similar industries. Besides, it has important service functions as an administrative and trading center. It has excellent road and railway connections with Tehran and Gorgān and so services interregional traffic with hotels, service stations, and auto repair shops. Its population was estimated at 45,000 in 1976.

A few miles west of Behšahr are the important prehistoric sites of Belt and Hotu Cave. The plains around Behšahr are dotted with numerous mounds pointing to the dense settlement of this area in pre- and early historic times.

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