



## BESTĀM (3)

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**BESTĀM**, or Bastām (sometimes written Bustam or Bostam), a small town in the medieval Iranian province of Qūmes (also Kūmeš) and modern Ostān-e Semnān. It is located in a large valley on the southern foothills of the Alborz (lat 36°28' N, long 55° 00' E).

*History.* Although the foundation of Bestām has been attributed to Bestām, the maternal uncle of Ƙosrow II Parvēz (Markwart, *Ērānšahr*, p. 71; see **BESTĀM O BENDŌY**; Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, p. 96 n. 3, pp. 478-87; Justi, *Namenbuch*, pp. 371-72; for “Bostam Mirza” and his “tomb” see Fraser, p. 336, and below), no trace of the Sasanians has so far been discovered in the town itself. Abū Dolaf, who visited it in about 331/943 (p. 59, fol. 194a; Yāqūt, *Boldān* I, p. 623, quoting Abū Dolaf), noted the existence of a Sasanian fortress constructed by Šāpūr II (given the epithet *Du'l-Aktāf* in the Islamic period) on a hill beside or facing Bestām, but it is no longer identifiable. It may have been located on an elevation southeast of the town or on an almost flat plain a few hundred meters east of the ramparts of Bestām. However, sherds and bricks found accidentally by peasants in the latter location date from the 4th-8th/10th-14th centuries. It is unlikely that the Muslim authors had in mind the low hills of Tepe Sang-e Čakmāq, located about a kilometer north of town. There are no ruins visible there, but recent excavations have revealed very important remains of the 8th and 6th-4th millennia b.c. (Massuda). Some Partho-Sasanian pots and sherds have surfaced a kilometer or two north of Tepe Sang-e Čakmāq in the Pošt-e Bestām district, all of them chance finds by peasants or children and still unpublished.



At any rate, Bestām was already in existence when the province of Qūmes (in Greek sources Comisene, q.v.) was invaded by the Arabs in about 22/643, for Ṭabarī (I, pp. 2657-58) reported that it served as a point of departure for the troops of Sowayd b. Moqarren during the subjugation of Gorgān. On 18 Šaʿbān 242/22 December 856 an extremely violent earthquake, which shook the entire province of Qūmes, destroyed a third of the buildings at Bestām (Ambraseys and Melville, p. 37). According to Abū Dolaf (loc. cit.), when he visited it the settlement was comparable to a large village, even a district center. Eṣṭakrī (p. 211), a contemporary of Abū Dolaf, considered Bestām the third most important town of Qūmes, after Dāmḡān, the capital, and Semnān. This ranking was confirmed by Ebn Ḥawqal (ca. 378/988; p. 380). Beside the tomb of [Bāyazīd Bestāmī](#), already mentioned by Abū Dolaf, Moqaddasī (Maqdesī; ca. 375/985) described the congregational mosque, which stood like a fortified castle amid the *bāzārs* (p. 356). He noted that the population of the town was not very large but that agriculture prospered. Bestām continued to grow in importance; Yāqūt (d. 626/1229) described it, perhaps with some exaggeration, as a “large town” (*Boldān* I, pp. 623-24), with *bāzārs* and buildings of moderate size, not like those of the rich. A century later, in about 740/1340, Mostawfī (*Nozhat at-qolūb*, ed. Le Strange, p. 161) described Bestām as a small town once again, but Clavijo (tr. Le Strange, p. 176), who arrived there on 10 January 1406 [11 Rajab 808], once again characterized it as a large town.

In the early Islamic period Bestām does not seem to have been a main stop on the Ray-Khorasan road, except for travelers branching off to Gorgān (Ṭabarī, I, pp. 2657-58; Eṣṭakrī, p. 217). In the 7th/14th century, several decades before Clavijo’s visit, the name of Šāhrūd appears for the first time in sources (Adle, 1971, p. 80 n. 55). This town was conveniently situated on the road and thus gradually undermined the position of Bestām. Because of its good pastures (*čaman/olang*), however, the latter did retain a certain importance as a stop for travelers and especially for cavalry units following the “summer route” to Khorasan (Adle, 1971, p. 80; Aubin, pp. 116-23).

In 1822, according to J. B. Fraser (p. 336), Bestām had only 300-400 inhabitants (probably an underestimate), living in an almost ruined town dotted with small open fields. Thirty-six years later, in 1856, N. de Khanikoff put the number at 8,000-10,000 (pp. 314-16), certainly an error for 800-1,000, as observed by G. C. Napier in 1874 (800 inhabitants, p. 73). In spite of Šāhrūd’s ascendancy Bestām remained the seat of government until the beginning of this century, though coins were only rarely minted there (Zambaur, p. 73). It



has maintained its agricultural importance until the present, and some light industry has grown up in it.

There is no doubt that the economic base for Bestām has always been agriculture, rather than trade, industry, or a key location on the road (Eṣṭakrī, p. 211; Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 380; Moqaddasī, p. 356; Yāqūt, I, p. 623; *Nozhat al-qolūb*, ed. Le Strange, p. 161; *Maṭlaʿ al-šams* I, p. 68). The town also became a significant pilgrimage center, especially after the conversion of the Il-khanids to Islam in the 8th/14th century and their subsequent active patronage of the shrines there.

*Configuration and monuments.* The city wall of Bestām was mentioned by Fraser in 1822 (p. 336). In the 13th/19th century it was considered to be a Qajar work, but Eʿtemād-al-Salṭana, who reported this view (*Maṭlaʿ al-šams* I, pp. 67-68), remarked that the wall was probably older but had apparently been repaired under the Qajars. According to him, the wall was about 12 cubits (*ḍarʿ*) tall at the highest point of the rampart and about 3.5 cubits thick at the base. It was fortified with forty-two towers spaced about 50 cubits apart. The citadel, which was adjacent to the northern city wall, was fortified by embankments and a surrounding wall with six additional towers. Of the imposing Masjed-e Jāmeʿ, mentioned as early as 375/985 by Moqaddasī (see above), nothing remains, except perhaps four pier bases discovered by M. Daneshvar under the existing surface of the mosque courtyard in 1355 Š./1976. The most interesting parts of the structure as it stands today (see [Figure 17](#)) date from the Il-khanid period: the decoration of the southern wing of the mosque ([Figure 17.2](#)), which was completed in 706/1306-07, and the Kāšāna funerary tower ([Figure 17.1](#)), begun before 700/1301-02 and completed in 708/1308-09 (cf. Hillenbrand; Blair; Adle, 1984, pp. 271-83). These monuments attest the newly converted Il-khanids' interest in the city where the great mystic Bāyazīd (most acceptable dates: b. 161/777-78, d. 234/848-49) had been born and where his remains were preserved ([Figure 18.1](#)). The architectural complex built around his tomb (75 m north of the Masjed-e Jāmeʿ) is one of the most important of its kind in the Islamic world. The tomb is mentioned for the first time in about 331/943 (Abū Dolaf, loc. cit.). Although radiocarbon-14 analyses (not yet published) suggest an earlier date, though later than the end of the 1st/7th century for the oldest tombs in the complex, they cannot predate Bāyazīd's burial in 234/848-49, which initiated use of this site as a cemetery. This part of the town was founded by Arab settlers, but Iranians who had been converted to Islam also lived there. Bāyazīd, whose grandfather Sorūšān was



the first in his family to become a Muslim, had left his father's house in the quarter of the Magi, his ancestors, to live with his new coreligionists. There the great mystic frequented, not the imposing Masjed-e Jāme', but a very modest mosque (Figure 18.2). Soon, however, the latter proved too small. God then supposedly inspired Wāfed, an Arab settler, to add his adjacent straw barn to the mosque (Figure 18.3). Bāyazīd built a cell (*ṣawma'a*), with an anteroom, for his meditations (Figure 18.4). These cells became his permanent retreat until his death in 234/848-49. In 300/912-13 extensive restorations were undertaken. The remains of this work have been recently brought to light under the floor of the Bāyazīd Mosque (Figure 18.5), which replaced the first two small mosques in 514/1120-21, though respecting their precise outlines. Bāyazīd, known as "Prince of the Mystics" and "Falcon," appears on the frieze of its minaret as a stylized spread eagle between two trees of life. This image symbolizes his *me'rāj* (ascension). His fame attracted followers: In about 612/1215 the last Ghurid prince, 'Alā'-al-Dīn Moḥammad, had a mausoleum built for himself (Figure 18.6) near Bāyazīd's burial place (Figure 18.1). The remains of this mausoleum were uncovered, identified, and restored in 1365 Š./1986. After the conversion of Ġāzān Khan in 694/1295 and again in about 700/1300, when Oljāytū (Öljeitü; 703-17/1304-17) donned a dervish frock in the shrine, extensive construction was undertaken. The director of most of these works was the architect-engineer, master mason, and stucco carver Ḥosayn b. Abī Ṭāleb Dāmḡānī, assisted by his son Moḥammad. An inscription 18.22 meters long, discovered in 1363 Š./1984, reveals that the domed chamber of the Bāyazīd Mosque was entirely redecorated by Ḥosayn in 699/1299-1300 (cf. Adle, 1986, pp. 175-78). Ḥosayn and his son did similar work in 702/1302-03 in the *ṣawma'a* of Bāyazīd and, at the same time, in the Masjed-e Jāme'. In the mid-7th/13th century another chamber ("the Il-khanid mosque," Figure 18.8) was built west of the Bāyazīd Mosque and south of a recently constructed mausoleum belonging to an unknown prince or wealthy patron (Figure 18.7). About fifty years later the facing tomb (Figure 18.10), which is presumed to be of Moḥammad, son of the sixth Shi'ite imam, Ja'far al-Šādeq, was built. In about 733/1333, according to Ebn Baṭṭūṭa (III, p. 82; Pers. tr., I, p. 443), the latter tomb and that of Bāyazīd were located under one dome, but this assertion is incorrect: Moḥammad's mausoleum, which dates from the time of Oljāytū (except for the eastern side), could not have covered Bāyazīd's tomb (Figure 18.1). By the end of the 7th/13th and the early 8th/14th century other constructions had been added: the mausoleum traditionally considered that of the putative founder of the shrine, Bestām Mīrzā, and now believed to be that of Ġāzān Khan (see above and Figure 18.14); the western *ayvān* (Figure 18.12);



and in 713/1313-14 the *ayvān* and monumental vestibule on the eastern side of the complex (Figure 18.11). One side of this harmonious entrance *ayvān* opens into the Šāhroḳīya *madrasa* (Figure 18.6), which was probably built by Šāhroḳ (807-50/1405-47) on the site of the hostel where Ebn Baṭṭūṭa had stayed in about 733/1333 (III, p. 82; plan in *Survey of Persian Art*, 2nd ed., III, fig. 389).

The complex of monuments at Beṣṭām has been continually altered and repaired. A *takīya*, still in use, was built in the late Qajar period on the northwestern side of the complex. The most important works, however, were completed in 1255/1839-40: additions to the southern part of the Šāhroḳīya *madrasa* and replacement of the Saljuq/Il-khanid dome, which had just collapsed, with a flat roof. Having forgotten the meaning of the original two small mosques (see above and Figures 18.2-3), the Beṣṭāmis demolished the partition between them, thus creating a single rectangular sanctuary (Figure 18.5).

Iran having been Shi'ite since 907/1502, the putative tomb of Moḥammad b. Ja'far had become the new center of the complex.

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**Figure 17.** *Masjed-e Jāme’*. 1. Kāšāna funerary tower (begun before 701/1301, completed 708/1308-09). 2. Il-khanid wing (completed 706/1306-07). 3. *Ayvān*



leading to the Kāšāna (700/1301). 4. Western *Šabestān* (reconstruction completed 1357 Š./1978). 5. *Šahn* with the bases of four piers (from the 3rd-4th/9th-10th century mosque). 6. *Šabestān-e Bozorg* (period not yet determined). 7. Northern *šabestān* (reconstruction completed 1357 Š./1978). 8. Entrance *ayvān* (period not yet determined).

**Figure 18.** *Complex of monuments built around Bāyazīd's tomb.* 1. Bāyazīd's tomb (d. 234/848-49). 2. Small original mosque (ca. 50-200/670-815). 3. Straw barn converted into a mosque (ca. 2nd-early 3rd/ca. 8th-early 9th century). 4. Cell (*šawma'a*) and anteroom, late 2nd-early 3rd/early 9th century, extensively restored in 702/1302-03. 5. Bāyazīd Mosque built over the first two mosques (nos. 2 and 3) in 514/1120-21, repaired and redecorated in 699/1299-1300, reconstructed with a change in plan in 1255/1839-40. 6. Mausoleum of the last Ghurid prince, 'Alā'-al-Dīn Moḥammad (construction completed by 612/1215). 7. Anonymous mausoleum (late 7th/late 13th century). 8. Il-khanid mosque (turn of the 8th/14th century). 9. *Haštī* (party from the turn of the 8th/14th century). 10. Presumed mausoleum of Moḥammad b. Ja'far, previously designated occasionally as of Emānzāda Qāsem (begun in 700/1300-01 or slightly later). 11. *Ayvān* and monumental vestibule (713/1313). 12. Western *ayvān* (early 8th/14th century). 13. Caretakers' room (period not yet established). 14. Mausoleum now known as Ġāzān Khan's, previously attributed to Beštām Mīrzā (late 7th-early 8th/late 13th-early 14th century). 15. *Šarbat-kāna* (partly of the 4th/10th century, remainder of undetermined date). 16. Southern *ayvān* (partly built or extensively restored in the 10th/16th century). 17. *Rewāq* (vault of the 10th/16th or 13th/19th century). 18. Tomb of the Afghan Amīr(-e) A'zam Khan, "Prince of Kabul" (1286/1869-70). 19. *Šahn* (courtyard; unsuitably repaved in stone in 1364 Š./1985).