



BĪRJAND I. THE TOWN AND SUB-PROVINCE.

i. *The town and sub-province.*

The town and district in the southeastern part of the province of Khorasan.

Town. The traditional town (lat 32°52' N, long 59°13' E), situated at an elevation of about 1,500 m, was built on low hills separated by a dry riverbed called Šāhrūd. It had two forts, one on a prominent high ground in the south and the other on low ground in the north of the city. The old town was about three miles in circumference and had a few gardens and green fields known as Kešman in the southern sections. For years it served as the administrative and trading center for the whole southeast of the province.

The 7th/13th-century author Yāqūt (I, p. 783) seems to have been the first geographer to mention Pīrčand as one of the chief places of Qūhestān/Kūhestān (q.v.) without providing any details, although the district was evidently well known to earlier geographers (e.g., *Ḥodūd al-ālam*, tr. Minorsky, p. 103; Eṣṭaḳrī, pp. 273-75). Later, in connection with the events of 688/1289, it is mentioned as a major town of Qohestān. The 8th/14th-century author Ḥamd-Allāh Mostawfī (*Nozhat al-qolūb*, p. 144) mentions Berjand as a provincial center with a few dependencies, where a great deal of saffron and some grain was produced; fruits, particularly grapes, were grown in the surrounding villages. Edrīsī (6th/12th century), however, does not refer to this



town; he stresses instead the importance of Qā'en (q.v.), approximately 90 km north of Bīrjand. As the center of Qohestān, Qā'en, known to geographers of the 4th/10th century, prospered until the middle of the 13th/19th century, when Bīrjand became the political and administrative center of the Qohestān district. Both Bellew (1874) and Goldsmid (I, p. 336) speak of about 15,000 inhabitants in the 1870s, Yate (1900, p. 69) of about 25,000 people toward the end of the 13th/19th century. Stratil-Sauer (1950) mentions 40,000 in 1932, a figure which is probably too high. After that the city underwent decline for a decade or so because of droughts and migrations (Ganjī, 1327). However, it revived soon and grew far beyond its traditional limits, with the result that in the 1355 Š./1976 census it showed a population of no less than 46,943. It has continued to expand prodigiously over the past decade or so. The new city has grown to occupy almost the entire area between the old city and the Baḡran mountains to the south. In the 1365 Š./1986 census, the district had an urban population of 91,889, most of which belongs to Bīrjand, as the only other urban center of the area, Qā'en, has been made the center of an independent district (see below).

Bīrjand commands a high strategic position in the eastern part of Iran, almost halfway between Zāhedān near the borders of Pakistan and Afghanistan, on the one hand, and Mašhad, center of Khorasan on the other. By virtue of this geographic situation it played important roles in both world wars, as a major link in the defense line of the East Persian Cordon during the first (Dickson, p. 37; Wright, p. 173) and as a key point on the Allies' supply route to the USSR in the second (Skrine, pp. 89, 94, 138, 189; the British opened a consulate there in 1909, see Wright, p. 87). The modern Mašhad-Zāhedān highway is of tremendous economic and military importance; it was completed in 1359 Š./1980, bypasses Bīrjand by only a few kilometers, and thus enables the city to maintain its old economic importance as the main distribution center in southern Khorasan.

Owing to the generosity of the enlightened local governor, Šawkat-al-Molk Moḥammad Ebrāhīm Khan 'Alam (d. 1323 Š./1944), Bīrjand was among the first cities in Iran to enjoy piped drinking water (since 1341/1923), which was supplied from the hills about 10 km to the south. Before that, drinking water was stored in about a dozen large water tanks or *ābanbārs*, the remains of which can still be seen all over the old city. In addition, two brick dams were built across mountain valleys a few kilometers to the south of the city, in which rain water was stored for use in dry summers. Several years earlier



(1326/1908), the same governor had established the first modern school in Bīrjand (Madrassa-ye Šawkatīya), using his own funds; this school later developed into a university (1355 Š./1976; Skrine, pp. 100-01). Šawkat-al-Molk later founded more schools, which were responsible for the high literacy rate among the population of Bīrjand (cf. Lambton, p. 390 n. 1). According to the 1986 preliminary census report, no less than 72 percent of the urban population was literate, the average for the country being 61.96 percent. Again using his own funds, Šawkat-al-Molk also introduced new grafts of fruit and pistachio trees to the area, which he freely distributed (*ibid.*).

Because of its geographical isolation, Bīrjand has never figured prominently in the political and cultural life of Iran. Yāqūt (I, p. 783) mentions a prolific author Ḥosayn b. Moḥammad Pīrčandī; the famous poet Sa'd-al-Dīn Moḥammad Neẓārī Qohestānī (d. 721/1321) and the 10th/16th-century Muslim astronomer and author Mollā Neẓām-al-Dīn 'Abd-al-'Alī Bīrjandī (Nafīsī, *Naẓm o naṭr*, pp. 384-85) were also natives of Bīrjand. Neẓārī's mausoleum has been rebuilt there in recent years.

District (šahrestān). The district of Bīrjand (83,425 km²) was the largest administrative unit of its kind in Iran until 27 Bahman 1358 Š./17 February 1980, when a small portion of its northernmost part was cut off to form the independent *šahrestān* of Qā'en (Badī'ī, II, p. 251). Nevertheless it still ranks among the large districts, being one of the sixteen *šahrestāns* in the *ostān* of Khorasan. According to preliminary reports of the last census, taken in 1365 Š./1986, it had a total population of 352,687, of which 91,889 (26 percent) were urban, 258,885 (74 percent) rural, and 1,768 nonresident. The *šahrestān* consists of four subdistricts (*baḳš*): Markazī, Darmiān, Kūsf, and Nehbandān (Badī'ī, II, p. 227).

The district of Bīrjand belongs to the eastern Iranian upland and consists of a series of almost parallel ranges with the valleys between. The hills culminate in the Mo'menābād block to the northeast of Bīrjand (elevation 2,787 m), which forms the main watershed between the surrounding playa basins. Climatically the district is considered to have a steppe or semidesert type of climate. Although extremes of 43° and -14° C recorded at Bīrjand seem to indicate a harsh climate, on the whole the upland is pleasant, compared with the surrounding deserts. Rainfall is meager, ranging from 10 to 25 cm per year at Bīrjand, with an average of 15 cm for the whole area. There are no permanent streams in the district, and consequently life depends on water obtained from the *qanāts* that are normally found along the foothills and in



the plains, where all the inhabited villages are to be found. Agriculture, often combined with some sort of animal husbandry and local crafts, is the main way of life. Cereals—mostly rain crops (*deymī*) in rainy years—cotton, grapes, melons, beets, and all kinds of fruits are grown fairly extensively, but, on the whole, agriculture depends on the annual rainfall. Saffron (*za'farān*) and barberries (*zerešk*) are the most valuable items of export from the district. In rainy years considerable quantities of asafetida (*angoza*) and other natural gums are collected from the desert.

Carpet weaving and rug making are traditional industries, and looms are to be seen in almost all villages; Mūd and Dorokš are the main centers. Natural dyes are extracted from shrubs that grow abundantly in the area.

The district is rich in minerals. Copper is known to have been mined in the past and many remnants of old mines are seen in the mountains. The old mine of Qal'a Zari (lit., gold fort), lying 185 km to the southeast of Bīrjand, has been reopened in recent years and is presently yielding considerable amounts of minerals of all sorts for export. Asbestos and chromites are mined for export. Recent explorations have revealed large reserves of magnesite. A sugar factory of meager capacity has been in operation for some twenty years and a firebrick factory was planned for operation in Bīrjand in 1367 Š./1988. A large soap factory is also being organized in Bīrjand.

Over the past two centuries or so the names of Bīrjand, Qā'en, and Qā'enāt—an administrative name for both areas—have been associated with a family of local rulers (*omarā'-e Qā'en*) otherwise known as the 'Alam family. The first member of the family, apparently belonging to the Arab Kozayma tribe, was appointed governor of Qā'enāt by Nāder Shah Afšār in 1144/1732 (see '[alam khan](#)'). His son and grandson, who ruled the district, were mostly engaged in wars with their Afghan neighbors (Āyatī, p. 124) or subjugating the local rulers of Sīstān and Baluchistan. During the reign of Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah, Mīr 'Alam Khan established his position as amir of Qā'enāt. He succeeded in driving insurgent elements out of Sīstān, thus adding that province to the area under his control. The family extended its influence over Baluchistan (Lambton, pp. 265-66), creating a hereditary governorship, nominally subject to, but practically independent of the governor general of Khorasan (Dickson, p. 15). The leading figure and politically the most important member of the family was Šawkat-al-Molk Moḥammad-Ebrāhīm Khan 'Alam, the father of Asad-Allāh 'Alam, prime minister, minister of court, and so on in the Pahlavi period. Between 1732 and 1944, when the late Šawkat-al-Molk and consequently the



entire 'Alam family moved to Tehran, altogether seven generations of the family ruled over Qā'enāt (Monşef).

See also ku^vhestān.

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