



BŪŠEHR I. THE CITY

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Geographic conditions and the origins of the military harbor. The city is situated at the northern end of a low-lying peninsula of quaternary sandstone, situated largely parallel to the continental coast but connected to it only by an alluvial isthmus. The origin of the name is uncertain. The popular etymology, according to which it is derived from Abū Šahr (father of the city), is totally unsatisfactory, and A. Houtum Schindler's suggestion (apud Curzon, II, p. 231) that it is a contraction of *Boḡt-Ardašīr* (Ardašīr has delivered) is plausible but unsupported by any real evidence. Būšeher has sometimes been identified with Mesambria (Gabriel, p. 43), known to the Greeks since Nearchus' expedition, but it is more probable that the latter town, which was surrounded by gardens and orchards, was on the site of modern Rīšahr (q.v.), about 10 km farther south on the western coast of the peninsula (see most recently Lindberg, p. 182). Yāqūt is supposed to have been the first to mention Būšeher (I, p. 503), but W. Tomaschek (p. 62; cf. Schwarz, *Iran* III, p. 127) thinks that his text must be amended to read Rīšahr. At any rate, Būšeher was only a small fishing village in 1734, when Nāder Shah Afšār established there the base for his projected Persian Gulf fleet and renamed it Bandar-e Nāderīya (Gombroon Diary, British East India Company, 5-16 July 1734, apud Lockhart, 1938, pp. 92-93).

Nāder Shah's reason for choosing this site merits investigation. It was assuredly not because of easy communication with the mainland. The isthmus



is marshy, with occasional patches of quicksand, and can be totally submerged at high tide. In the 19th century caravans were usually made up on the mainland, in order to avoid this dangerous passage, and merchandise was transported across the bay in boats (Fürstenau, p. 92); travelers always used boats, thus saving a day's journey the long way around (Williams, pp. 14-16; Bradley-Birt, pp. 50-53; Rausch von Traubenberg, p. 95). On the other hand, the navigational advantages of Būšehr were in no way remarkable. On the sea side there was no convenient approach, and in the 19th century European ships had to drop anchor 2-3 miles offshore in the open sea and transfer cargo in boats. On the bay side there were good depths near the city, but a high sandbar prevented access for ships drawing more than 10 feet. Doubtless the basic reason for Nāder Shah's choice must be sought in his strategic thinking: He was careful to establish his naval force as near as possible to the Ottoman frontier. It may also be that, because the peninsula lay in a turbulent region in which he could maintain his authority only with difficulty, he considered its relative isolation and advantage, for it could be more easily defended.

Whatever the reason, Nāder Shah exerted great, though fruitless, efforts to turn Būšehr into an important naval base, going so far as to transport large timbers from the forests of Māzandarān to construct a great warship, the shell of which remained visible for a long time and drew the attention of several European travelers (Niebuhr in 1765; Dupré in 1808, II, p. 40; Ouseley in 1811, I, p. 188).

The main commercial port of Iran (ca. 1760-1915). The decisive factor affecting the destiny of the town was, however, the shift of the center of power in Iran to Shiraz, to which Būšehr was much closer than Bandar-e 'Abbās. In the reign of Karīm Khan Zand (1163-93/1750-79) Būšehr thus became indisputably the leading commercial port of Iran. This position was underscored in 1763 by the establishment there of a factory of the British East India Company and the concomitant abandonment of Bandar-e 'Abbās. An understanding between the British and the Arab governor of the region was confirmed by a firman of Karīm Khan, who exempted the former from port taxes and granted them exclusive trading rights, including a monopoly of the wool trade, as well as the privilege of jurisdiction over their employees. Between 1763 and 1765 the East India Company's sales of wool cloth at Būšehr reached an average of 750 bales a year, one-fifth of the company's total sales (Amin, p. 79). Other products sold included metals (iron, tin, and lead) and from India sugar, spices, teakwood, and additional metals. At Būšehr the English bought raw silk, fine goat hair from Kermān, and old copper for England and the Indies and for the latter



destination carpets, tobacco, dried fruits, opium, rose-water, and asafetida as well. The Company's imports were already much higher in value than Iranian exports, and the difference was made up by a substantial outflow of bullion. In 1769 the English, after difficulties with Karīm Khan, transferred operations from Būšehr to Basra, but Karīm Khan's capture of the latter city in 1190/1776 led them in 1778 to fix their principal Gulf establishment definitively at Būšehr.

From that time on the position of the town as the principal Iranian port remained uncontested for a century and a half. At the beginning of the 19th century, after the troubles marking the advent of the Qajar dynasty, about 100 English and Arab ships a year came there to trade from India and Muscat, bringing the products of Europe and India and also of China: cloth, metals, spices, indigo, tea, rice, sugar, pottery and porcelain, and wood for shipbuilding. Persian exports, clearly inferior in value, consisted of dried fruits, silk, wine from Shiraz, saffron, asafetida, occasionally wheat and barley, horses, carpets—and bullion to make up the deficit. In addition, there was an important short-haul trade with Basra, organized in convoys of fifteen to twenty ships because of the danger from pirates. From the latter city came dates, rice, wood, and belts and shawls from Baghdad, in exchange for foreign merchandise reshipped from Būšehr (Dupré, II, pp. 43-47). Altogether, between 1817 and 1823 three quarters of the merchandise imported at Būšehr came from India and China, one quarter from Europe (Issawi, p. 90).

The nature of this traffic did not change noticeably through most of the 19th century. In 1860 imports valued at 5 million thalers (Brugsch, II, pp. 243-44) consisted mainly of textiles, tea, porcelain, and glass, as well as sugar from the Dutch East Indies. Exports (2.8 million thalers) included raw silk, raw wool, dates, and horses destined for India. In addition, there were occasional curiosities like the twenty beautiful cats from Isfahan, each one meowing more loudly than the other, that a European traveler saw in the harbor in 1866, about to be shipped to Bombay (Lycklama, III, p. 54). The most striking change was a great increase in volume in the last quarter of the 19th century. Traffic seems to have doubled between 1875 and 1883 (Issawi, p. 83). In that period Būšehr accounted for a quarter of the total Gulf trade in monetary terms. In 1883 (Rausch von Traubenberg, p. 95) one third of exports (cotton and silk, tobacco, and opium), which never reached more than half the value of imports (textiles, indigo, metals, and sugar), were shipped to China (especially opium) and a quarter each to Great Britain and British India. Four-



fifths of imports came from the latter two countries. In 1889 (Curzon, II, pp. 571-73, 580), the proportion was 95 percent, but only half of Persian exports went to Great Britain and India. At the same time an appreciable short-haul trade flowed into Būšehr, which had to be provisioned almost entirely from outside. Shipment of lime for construction from several different points on the coast was almost continuous from the beginning of the 19th century until about 1930 (Lindberg, pp. 55, 194).

Stimulated by this commercial expansion, the growth of the town was rapid. In the 18th century the population was estimated at 20,000 inhabitants (Parsons), and similar estimates were repeated throughout the following century (Dupré in 1808: 3,000 families; Coste in 1840: 2,000 Islamic households; Brugsch in 1860: 20,000 inhabitants; Curzon in 1892: 15,000 people). This population was quite heterogeneous and included large minority components, the importance of which increased throughout the century. In 1808 Dupré counted twenty-four Armenian and Jewish households; Coste in 1840 found 200 Jewish and five Armenian households. The infrastructure of the city was characterized by large warehouses and caravansaries, where imported merchandise was stored before distribution. The number of these caravansaries, which had fallen to three almost totally ruined buildings in 1802 after the turmoil at the end of the 18th century, had risen to twenty-five in 1840 (Coste, p. 325). In contrast, the *bāzārs* for retail trade seem always to have been small and poor (Brugsch; Coste). On the whole, the town, which was crowded and in summer stifling, despite the forest of *bādgīrs* (air vents) crowning its roofs, had nothing to recommend it. The water was very bad. The wells near the city yielded only brackish water; acceptable quality was obtainable only an hour's journey (Dupré) or 5-6 miles (Curzon) away. Attempts to establish reservoirs, the absence of which Dupré had noted at the beginning of the century, were undertaken in the 1880s (Curzon, p. 234), but they rapidly became infested with Guinea worm and could not be used. For these reasons, diplomats and European trading agents sought residences outside the town itself. The British resident, abandoning the urban building in which the consulate general was located, transferred his residence to Sabzābād 6 miles south of town on the maritime coast of the peninsula, beyond the main structures of the Anglo-Indian Telegraph (finished in 1876) and the German and Russian consulates. At the beginning of the 20th century, however, despite all the inconveniences of the location and the absence of a real harbor, Būšehr was by far the main Gulf port of Iran, outstripping Bandar-e 'Abbās and Bandar-e Lenga. Commercial volume remained generally



stable during the twenty years preceding World War I, and Būšehr, on the eve of the war, accounted for 40 percent of all traffic in the Persian Gulf ports, leading even newly important Kōrramšahr/Moḥammara on the island of Ābādān. Some estimates, no doubt exaggerated but nevertheless indicative, put the population in that period at nearly 60,000 inhabitants (Kortum, p. 360).

This commercial importance led on several occasions to British military intervention, aside from maintenance of a permanent guard for the resident. An initial occupation during the Anglo-Persian war of 1273/1856-57 (q.v.) was followed in 1911 by the landing of Anglo-Indian troops during the troubles provoked by the Constitutional crisis. In 1915, at the time of the revolt of Tangestān, reinforcements were sent, in order to counteract the moves of the German consul, Wilhelm Wassmuss. On that occasion a narrow-gauge railway 37 miles long was constructed to link Būšehr with Borāzjān, on the way to Shiraz, which may have seemed the spearhead of an invasion of the country by rail. At the same time a factory for constructing railroad equipment was established at Būšehr. The evacuation of the town by the British in March 1919 put an end to these attempts, however.

Decline and rebirth of Būšehr. The events of World War I marked the beginning of the port's decline. In connection with their military operations at the head of the Gulf the British had undertaken important dredging operations at Ābādān and Basra, already linked by railroad to Baghdad, and the Baghdad-Tehran road had been considerably improved. Traffic from Iran thus flowed mainly toward Basra immediately after the war, long before the construction of the Trans-Iranian and other highways linking Tehran directly to Kūzestān in the 1930s. After World War II, in 1947, Būšehr lost its position as Persian Gulf headquarters for the British resident, and in 1952 the vice-consulate that had remained there was closed. The population, estimated at 30,000-40,000 inhabitants in 1927 (Naval Intelligence, p. 502), had fallen to 18,500 by the time of the first Iranian census, in 1335 Š./1956. By 1345 Š./1966 it had risen to only 23,547 inhabitants, reflecting no more than the expected natural increase.

A new chapter was opened in the 1960s, however. Between 1963 and 1968 the harbor capacity was enlarged, not without difficulty, from 70,000 to 200,000 tons a year, including access for ships of 5,000-ton capacity (Kortum, pp. 361-62). At the beginning of the 1970s a modern highway linking Būšehr to Shiraz was completed, ensuring communications with the interior. In 1974 access to the port was made possible for ships of 7,500-ton capacity. Since then military and naval installations have spread to various points on the



peninsula. The first nuclear plants in Iran were constructed at Ra's Ḥalīla on the peninsula 12 km south of Būšehr. At the time of the Revolution of 1357 Š./1978-79 two 1,300-mw power lines were planned. Although work was halted during the revolution, it has recently been resumed, and the first line was to be completed (1367 Š./1988) by a tripartite consortium of firms from Germany (KWU), Spain (Empresarios Agrupados), and Argentina (Enace). The increase in population generated by all this economic development has been spectacular. According to the census of 1355 Š./1976, the population had passed 57,681, with an annual growth rate of 9.3 percent during the decade 1345-55 Š./1966-76, the third highest growth rate after those of Karaj and Bandar-e 'Abbās. Subsequently the urban population of the peninsula (the *šahrestān* of Būšehr) rose to 87,533. Since the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war Būšehr's relative proximity to the theater of operations has brought about a new decline. In the (unpublished) census of 1365 Š./1986 the urban population of the *šahrestān* was 98,554, lower than would result from natural increase, an obvious indication of large-scale movement out of the area.

For a music sample, see [Jangnāme](#).

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