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CEMETERIES
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CEMETERIES

CEMETERIES (*qabrestān*, *gūrestān*) in Persian folklore. Cemeteries are found both inside and outside cities and villages, usually close to a holy shrine, or *emāmzāda*, in order to partake of its blessing. Throughout Persian history we are told that the bodies of the dead are brought to their home towns (see, e.g., *Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, II, pp. 247ff., VI, pp. 313ff.) or to sacred shrines, especially Qom, to be buried. One of the first to be carried to Qom was Moḥammad ʿAzīzī (ca. 3rd/9th cent.), a native of Qom from the line of Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādeq, who was killed at Nahrawān near Baghdad (Ḥasan Qomī, pp. 22-23). When ʿAżod-al-Dawla died in Baghdad in 373/983 his corpse was carried to Najaf for burial (Ebn al-Aṯīr, IX, p. 183, see also pp. 61, 241). Because cemeteries are transitional places between the realms of the living and the dead they are thought to possess great magical power in many cultures (Thorndike, I, p. 434). This is one of the reasons that they are either walled or are located outside the residential areas. In Persia, too, they were probably originally located outside the boundaries of towns and villages, and only with the passage of time did residential areas grow around them. This feature of cemeteries is still evident in smaller towns and villages in Persia (see, e.g., Pūrkarīm, p. 31). Cemeteries in towns were not walled, and were crossed by roads and even open water channels (Polak, I, p. 363, Pers. tr. p. 249). In the northern part of Isfahan, for instance, there used to be a cemetery called *ābbaḵšān*. A street passed through the middle of this cemetery, along which the traffic between western and eastern parts of the city had to pass (Mahdawī, pp. 40-41). Visiting cemeteries and praying for the souls of the departed are pious acts that have been recommended to all Muslims from the time of the prophet (Nesāʾī, pp. 52-56,

traditions nos. 25-26; Faqīhī, p. 462), but this activity sometimes became little more than recreational, as it still often is in Persia. A 64-year-old Isfahani lady told me that when she was a child her family used to go to the Taḵt-e Pūlād cemetery in Isfahan during the weekend, taking food and provisions and spending the whole day there, and prophetic traditions that prohibit sitting upon graves (Termeḏī, IV, p. 4, tradition no. 1050) suggest that people may have had a casual attitude with regard to the tombs. The former Ḥasanābād cemetery in Tehran, together with other cemeteries, such as Sar-e Qabr-e Āqā and the Ābanbār-e Qāsem Khan cemetery in the south of Tehran near Meydān-e Amīrīya, were treated as places of recreation and to some extent served the same function as parks in the West (Najmī, p. 443).

Cemeteries were visited not only on the seventh and fortieth day and a year after the passing of a loved one, but also during such religious holidays as *tāsūʿa* and *ʿāšūrāʾ*. On these occasions food and sweets are served almost invariably (Pūrkarīm, 1349, p. 66; and cf. Ḥekmat Yaḡmāʾī, p. 128). On the eighth day before Nowrūz, *rūz-e sar-e qabr* "the day of the grave side," people go to the cemeteries to repair the graves and remember their dead (Massé, p. 115, who has mistranslated the name of the day). Generally however, old cemeteries tended to lose their importance by the passage of time, and stones and building materials were even taken from these places. Western travelers who observed these practices found Persians to be less preoccupied with their dead than the Turks, and James J. Morier and Samuel G. Wilson reported that tombstones had been used in the construction of the Bāḡ-e Jahānnemā in Shiraz, numerous buildings in Isfahan and Tabrīz, and the Pūlīgān castle near Maḥallāt. The engineers of the Gardanne mission led by General Claude Gardanne (or Gardane), who was sent by Napoleon to help westernize the Persian army, even used old tombstones for the foundation of a fortress near Ardabīl (Massé, pp. 114-15).

Graves were often raised to mark them, but this habit was frowned upon by the Sunni tradition (e.g. Termeḏī, d. 279/892-93, IV, p. 3, no. 1049) and was condemned by Ḡazālī (450-505/1058-1111; I, p. 78) as a reprehensible Shiʿite practice. Persian graves are also often marked by gravestones, of which three kinds are used: *ketābī*, *meḥrābī*, and *ṣandūqī* (Šakūrzāda, p. 217, and see figures on p. 220). In Khorasan people commonly use a so-called "all purpose stone" (*sang-e har-kāra*), which is relatively soft and easy to carve. This stone is said to have been taken from the *kalaj* mountain, which was allegedly blessed by Imam ʿAlī al-Reżā (Shaikh ʿAbbās Qomī, pp. 509-10). Although writing upon

the graves is improper (*makrūh*) according to prophetic tradition (e.g. Termeḏī, IV, p. 6, no. 1052), in Persian practice carving on the tombstones the name of the deceased and the date of death, together with some verses of poetry is common (Šakūrzāda, pp. 218-19; Āl-e Aḥmad, p. 85). The practice of writing poetry on the gravestone is attested from the time of the Buyid princes in the 4th/10th century (Faqīhī, p. 814), and earlier reports indicate that verses of poetry were carved upon the gravestones of the Saffarid Yaʿqūb b. Layṯ (d. 265/879) and Ṣāḥeb al-Zanj (killed 270/883; Abū Ḥayyān Tawḥīdī, II, pp. 504-05). In addition, certain designs are engraved on the stone, for instance, of tools to indicate the person's trade, swords, candlesticks, lamps, or religious articles (Massé, pp. 115-16; Pūrkarīm, 1348, p. 45; Šakūrzāda, p. 220; Āl-e Aḥmad, p. 86) or designs meant to indicate the gender of the deceased, for instance, a one-sided comb for a male, a two-sided comb or a mirror for females (Maʿṣūmī, p. 36; Šakūrzāda, p. 220). One may speculate that such iconographic representation is a modern version of the old custom of placing provisions and furniture in the grave to equip the dead for his life in the other world. Other ways of marking the grave are the following: Pietro della Valle reports that near his house in Shiraz lay the tomb of a man martyred by infidels, which was kept the color of blood, as were also the branches of two cypresses planted at the grave side (Massé, p. 97). At Tehran's Behešt-e Zahrā cemetery, there is a fountain with red water, dyed to commemorate the martyrs of the Revolution of 1357 Š./1978-79 and the war with Iraq. Sometimes, especially in the countryside, graves are marked by crude statues of lions or rams (Massé, p.117; see figure 137 in Morgan, I, p. 259), variously explained by local people. Some say that the statue of a lion is placed at the grave of a brave man (Dānešvar, II, pp. 98-99; Massé, pp. 116-17, quoting a number of western travelers). One of Wilson's native informants informed him that the statue of the ram represents the ram which was sent to Abraham to be sacrificed in the place of Isaac, whereas Baron de Bode, traveling in Azarbaijan, has suggested that these ram statues may refer to the period when Azarbaijan was ruled by the Qara Qoyunlū Turkmen. This is an unlikely hypothesis, as such sculptures are found in many parts of Persia, and their use is reported in old Armenian burial places (Jackson, p. 79; Massé, pp. 116-18, and especially p. 117 n.2 for reports of these statues from other territories). Furthermore, in the *tafsīr* literature it is clearly stated that on the day of resurrection, death will be brought forth in the form of a ram (*nar mīš*) and killed, upon which time no one will die any more (Ṭabarī, I, p. 49). The lion effigies are perhaps to be connected with the famous chthonic figure of the lion-headed under-world God (see, e.g., Schwartz, p. 416 n. 38; Hinnells, p. 79).

A number of rituals are associated with the visiting of cemeteries. Customarily, Persians visit the grave of their departed on the seventh day (*hafta*), the fortieth day (*čella*), and additionally one year after the death (*sāl*). The tendency is to visit the cemetery in odd numbers, that is, 3, 5, 7, etc., as it is believed that visiting cemeteries in even numbers brings bad luck and possible harm (Massé, p. 114). During the visit on the seventh day, sweets, usually *ḥalwā* and dates, are served and during that of the fortieth day food is served. In Khorasan it is believed that during the *hafta* and *čella* ceremonies the soul of the departed comes from heaven and sits by its body in the grave looking at the visitors, while during the ceremony of the *sāl* the soul descends and sits by the grave, watching them and praying for the visitors (Šakūrzāda, p. 224). At the *sāl* the female relatives of the deceased go to ask his permission to take off their black garments of mourning. If the deceased was a young man, especially a young husband, fruits and sweets are placed on his grave, and the grave is surrounded with lit candles (Massé, pp. 106-07). Generally, when a young person dies, he is referred to as *javānmarg* "young dead," and his death is bitterly mourned. Maḥmūd Katīrāʾī reports that in Tehran, when a young person dies, black candles are lit on his grave on the seventh day after his death and are kept burning throughout the ceremony of *hafta*. If the deceased was particularly well liked in the neighborhood a model of the *ḥajla* (nuptial chamber) in the form of a small wooden dome built on a round base and supported by small columns is made in his name. The surface of the dome is covered by small mirrors, and shining spheres are hung from it. It is adorned with large plumes dyed white, black, or red, and several white and black candles are lit and placed on the round tray serving as the base. If it is a male, a picture of the deceased, with a black ribbon fixed on it would be mounted on his *ḥajla*, which is kept in one of the streets of his neighborhood, and a piece of paper announcing the date of his *hafta* is attached to it. The *ḥajla* stays in the street until the night of the seventh day visitation (*šab-e haft*), when it is carried to the cemetery and placed on his grave (Katīrāʾī, p. 262 especially n. 1; Dānešvar, II, pp. 103-04, for the ceremony in Kāzerūn). Currently a large number of such *ḥajla*s, commemorating the young people who were killed during the Persia-Iraq war are seen in the streets. Visiting cemeteries on Thursday nights (*šab-e jomʿa*) is religiously desirable (*mostaḥabb*). During these visits water is customarily poured upon the grave to refresh the departed's soul. The desirability of pouring water on the grave of the departed is sanctioned in Islam (Termeḏī, IV, p. 7 n. *dāl*; Massé, pp. 107-08; Šakūrzāda, p. 308; and cf. Dundes, pp. 101-04, for references to discussions of the significance and meaning of such rituals). Tribal women cut off some of

their hair and place it on the dead body (Wadīʿī, p. 25) or on his tombstone at the cemetery (Massé, p. 115).

The Sunni inhabitants of the island of Ḵārg plant a certain bush called *gīāh-e ṣabr* "plant of patience" on the grave of their dead, believing that this plant will enable the survivors to bear their loss more easily (Ḵosravī, p. 111). Natives of Khorasan believe that an *esfand* "wild rue" plant growing on a grave means that the deceased is enjoying God's grace (Šakūrzāda, p. 225).

Because of the special character of the cemetery as intermediate between the realms of the living and dead, in many cultures, including Persia, it is believed to he inhabited or haunted by numerous supernatural beings. Persians believe there are ghosts (*arwāḥ*) residing in the cemetery, who are sometimes benevolent and protect or help the survivors, but sometimes malevolent. Ghosts appear as skeletons half covered by a white shroud, and their presence is betrayed by an almost imperceptibly cracking sound (Massé, p. 109). Certain charlatans, called *kafanpūš*, used to exploit this fear of the populace in order to trick those who passed through the cemetery in the evening out of money. The *kafanpūš*, dressed in a shroud, would jump in front of an unsuspecting passerby, saying, "*zendahā sahm-e mordahārā bedahīd*" (O living ones give up the share of the dead; Najmī, p. 350; Kahn, pp. 12-13). Supernatural beings called "*marda āzmā*" are believed to inhabit cemeteries in southern Khorasan. They are in the form of women with long and frightening faces crying by a grave, exceedingly ugly, with a vertical mouth full of sharp horizontal teeth (perhaps a *vagina dentata* in place of a mouth, see, e.g., Devereux, p. 74), who are afraid of light and mimic everything their victims say; when the unsuspecting victims go to comfort them and to offer their condolences, they attack (Mīhandūst, p. 50). In Khorasan roaches and crickets singing in the cemeteries are thought to be the sad wandering souls of the departed (Šakūrzāda, p. 225).

Scavenging animals (e.g., jackals and hyenas) were common in graveyards, where they dug up corpses and fed on them. For this reason, in many parts of Persia, people lit fires upon the grave, especially during the first three days after the burial, to dry the fresh dirt and make it look old (Āl-e Aḥmad, p. 85) and so fool the beasts away (Massé, p. 114; Šakūrzāda, p. 214). Thieves who specialized in stealing shrouds (*kafandozd*, lit. shroud stealers) frequented cemeteries and marked fresh graves during the morning in order to return at night to dig up the corpses and steal the shrouds (Najmī, p. 263; Šahrī, pp. 12-13). Corpses that were not ritually cleansed were considered prone to

possession by the devil (Mahdawī, p. 42). When the death of a person was followed by a series of deaths in his extended family, it was believed that he had taken his shroud in his mouth or was biting on it (*kafan be dahan gerefta*). In order to prevent further deaths, his grave would be opened and the shroud removed from his mouth (Aʿẓamī Sangesarī, p. 52; Šakūrzāda, p. 225). In Gonābād the grave was opened and a key placed next to the corpse with the words: "We buried the key of the clan/tribe next to you. Take the shroud out of your mouth" (Šakūrzāda, p. 639), while according to Āqā Jamāl Ḵʷānsārī (p. 6), a single shoe belonging to the deceased must be placed next to him in the grave. Similarly, in Eastern European vampire lore the vampires in their graves had such a hunger that they would eat the cloth they found around them; they would come out of their tombs and go about at night, violently embracing and seizing their friends and relatives and sucking their blood, killing them (Barber, p. 1). It has not yet been proved, however, that the Persian and European beliefs are historically connected.

A number of magical actions associated with graves and graveyards include the following: Girls who want to secure a husband for themselves may go to the graveyard, find the grave of a man who has died young, and cook and distribute *ḥalwā* by the grave (Šakūrzāda, p. 88), others sit astride the lion statues found by the grave. Women who want to have a baby girl, wrap a handkerchief around the effigies' heads. Individuals who wish the speedy return of a traveler go behind the lion statue and push it forward, those who desire wealth must anoint its head with oil. In the cemetery of Ḵʷāja Rowšanāʾī in Mašhad there was a lion effigy by the grave of a *pahlavān*, at which women lit candles to obtain their wishes. Sterile women straddled it while cutting a cord with forty knots (Massé, p. 118). In Tehran certain talismans made to create enmities were first immersed in dirty bath water, then black wax and a dead cockroach were added, and they were buried in an old cemetery or in the grave of an Armenian (Šahrī, p. 279).

The graves themselves also have magical powers. In Khorasan, for instance, it is believed that should rain drops fall into a grave during a burial, drought would result, because the rains would come under the binding spell of the grave (*bārān gūr band mīšavad*; Šakūrzāda, p. 345, n. 3).

Many beliefs connect pregnancy and birth with graveyards: A pregnant woman who died a few days before giving birth would deliver in the grave. A child born in the grave was called *bačča-ye gūrzā* "grave born." In Khorasan, when a pregnant woman was buried, a hollow piece of bamboo was vertically

placed between her legs in such a way that it would be protruding out of the grave; someone would then be hired to sit by the grave and listen for the cry of the baby so that, if the baby was born, the relatives were informed and could take the child away. The existence of such children, who were thought to be short (or dwarfs, according to one of my Isfahani informants) and very smart (Šakūrzāda, p. 153), is attested not only in folklore but also in Muslim textual tradition. For instance, Bayhaqī, who lived in the time of the ʿAbbasid Caliph al-Moqtader (295-320/908-32) wrote of a man who informed the Caliph ʿOmar b. al-Ḵaṭṭāb (13-23/ 634-44) that his son was born in the grave after his wife's death (I, pp. 457-58). If a woman dies in childbirth, or during pregnancy, all her sins are forgiven, and when she is buried an egg must be placed next to her grave, so that, if her husband marries again, the egg will break, instead of her eyes bursting with jealousy (Šakūrzāda, p. 153).

There are various legends connected with cemeteries. According to a Muslim legend two ravens were sent by God to teach Cain by example how to bury his slain brother (Motif no. A1591.1; Ṭabarī, II, p. 397). In one folk tale (type 470) a dead man invites a *lūṭī* to dinner as his guest. When the *lūṭī* comes to the cemetery he finds the grave of his host decorated with flowers and beautiful rugs. He enters the grave and finds a wonderful garden, where he stays for a while before leaving, against his friend's advice. When he comes out of the grave he finds that over a hundred years have passed (Enjavī, II, p. 172; Marzolph, tale type 470; and cf. Motifs E238, D2011, and F2). In another, especially beautiful tale, the folk idea of the continuation of life after death is expressed: An old woman who is about to die tells her daughter that it is time for her to be planted in the earth so that she may bring forth flowers. After her burial, a beautiful flower grows out of her grave. When the daughter smells the flower she finds that it has her mother's scent. The flower is called *gol-e bū-mādarān* "the flower of the maternal scent" (Enjavī, II, pp. 1-3; Marzolph, tale type *407). In another tale a boy killed by his father is buried in the garden by his sister, who also plants a hollow piece of bamboo on the grave. After seven weeks a nightingale comes out of the bamboo and flies off (Lorimer, pp. 158-60). The story, known as *Bolbol-a sargašta* (The wandering nightingale), was turned into a screenplay by ʿAlī Naṣīrīān in the early 1340s Š./1960s.

See also burial.

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