



DABBĀĠĪ

DABBĀĠĪ, tanning, the process by which animal skins are made into leather. In southern Persia, in Sīrjān, for example, tanning is also known as *'amal āvardan* (lit., “working the skin”), in the central regions, as at Jandaq, as *dast-varzī* (lit., “handling, kneading”).

Traditional tanning equipment and materials. For an animal hide to be converted into usable leather the hair and remaining traces of fat and muscle must be removed, usually by soaking and scraping. The hide is then treated with an agent—smoke, salt, alum, bark or roots, or chemicals—to remove excess water and bind and coat the protein fibers of the skin. The resulting leather is finished with oils and dyes. Most of the basic tanning methods have been known since ancient times, though major improvements were made in the 19th century.

Because of the associated stench, traditional Persian tanneries are located in isolated spots near running streams (though skin bags are sometimes tanned in villages). The tannery itself (*dabbāḡ-kāna*) includes covered areas where hides may be dried in the open air but out of direct sunlight. The necessary equipment includes large troughs or pools for soaking and rinsing the skins, a blunt wooden pole for stirring them, a smooth pole propped against a wall on which skins are draped while being scraped, a rack of horizontal bars for draining the wet skins, and a scraping knife with a blade curved like a sickle, called *dast-kāla* in Jandaq and *šafra* in Sīrjān.

Several substances are used in the various tanning processes. For the initial



treatment to remove hair and flesh, a solution of 30 kg of purified lime (free of sand and pebbles) or a mixture of lime and wood ash to 500 liters of water is common. For tanning, a solution of approximately 3 kg of crystalline or mineral alum and 1.5 kg of salt to 60 liters of water; a solution of 3 kg of chicken or pigeon droppings to 60 liters of water; or a mixture of 1 kg of the dried, ground leaves of the Persian turpentine tree (*bana*) to 20 liters of water is used.

Leather dyes can be made from ground and strained pomegranate skins mixed with water, sometimes with the addition of wild almond roots (in Jandaq known as *rūs*). Pomegranate flowers can be used to produce a brighter color. Tallow, sheep grease, or the oil of the wild rocket plant (*mandāb*) or poppy is also used to finish the leather.

Following are typical procedures for tanning leather, observed in Sīrjān, Jandaq, and Mašhad.

The tanning of cow or camel hide. In order to remove the hair, the skins are soaked in plain water for about a week and in a solution of water and lime for another week. They must be kept at about a finger's length beneath the surface of the water. Once a day or more they are stirred with the blunt wooden pole, in order to ensure that each entire skin is thoroughly soaked. Donkeys then carry the skins in a net, which permits drainage, to a stream, where they are rinsed in running water and kneaded with the bare feet to remove the lime or ash solution. The long soaking rots the skins slightly, so that the remaining hair can be removed easily by hand or with the scraping knife. Once the hair has been removed, the skins are again kneaded by foot in clean, running water. When the skins are completely clean, they can be wrung out without coloring the water. They are then hung out on frames for about a day. When nearly dry, they are hung inside out on the leaning pole, and any remaining traces of flesh or fat are removed with the scraping knife. The cleaned skins are then completely submerged in a tanning solution of alum and salt for about two weeks, during which they are stirred once or twice a day with the pole. After again being rinsed in clean water, they are drained on the horizontal rack and then spread face down on a smooth surface and scraped again. The final step is to rub the skins with grease, which penetrates and softens the leather. The resulting leather is white and ready for use. If brown-tinted leather is required, the skins are soaked in the pomegranate solution described above for about ten days before being dried and rubbed with grease. They must be stirred regularly to ensure an even color.



Tanning goatskins and sheepskins (tīmāj). In Sīrjān dried skins are soaked in plain water for two to four days, a step that is unnecessary for fresh skins. The skins are spread on a smooth surface, with the outer sides down. Powdered alum or a solution of one part alum to fifteen or twenty parts water is then sprinkled on the skins, which are left in the open air. After a full day the alum has penetrated the skins, and they are placed on the leaning pole. The hair can be easily removed with a scraping knife, after which the skins are again soaked in an alum solution for a week, then rinsed in a stream. They are next soaked in a solution of chicken or pigeon droppings for eight to twelve hours until the skin is soft and pliable. After being rinsed in clean water and kneaded with bare feet sheepskins are soaked in a solution of water and the powdered leaves of the turpentine tree, goatskins in a solution of white alum crystals and salt, for eight days, during which time the solution must be replaced once or twice. The skins are then stretched on the leaning pole and any excess flesh scraped off with a knife. After scraping they are spread on a piece of smooth marble and beaten until they are flat. The skins are next laid in a flat place with the outsides up and sprinkled with ground salt to reduce the moisture content. After being rinsed once more in plain water and soaked for another day in the leaf or white-alum solution they are given a final rinsing and drained on the horizontal rack. They are finished with a rubbing of poppy or wild rocket oil, then spread out to dry in an open covered area. Oiled *tīmāj*, called *šebrow*, is usually made from lambskins, which are hung on the leaning pole and polished by rubbing (*mohra-kešt*) until they are shiny.

Tanning skin bags. Whole skins are often used as water bags (*mašk*) and **churns**. The skins of billy goats (*takka*) are preferred for water bags, as they are more durable than those of nanny goats or sheep. Yogurt containers and churns are usually made from the skins of nanny goats.

The fresh or dried skins are soaked in a solution of ashes (*dūgāb*) for a day or two, after which the hair can be removed easily by hand or with a scraping knife. They are rinsed in plain water and then again soaked in an ash solution to soften and strengthen them. After about a week in summer and ten to twelve days in winter the skins are rinsed in running water and kneaded with bare feet until all traces of the ash solution are gone. Next they are soaked in a pomegranate solution for a week to remove the smell of ash and make the skin more resistant. After a final rinse the skin is sewn shut to prevent leaks. The resulting bag is filled with a solution of ground bitter-almond root and water and is hung for a week or two in the open air until the smell of the hide has



dissipated. In the case of yogurt bottles and churns, a ground mixture of clay, straw, mint, and water is substituted for the solution of bitter-almond root.

Leather is also tanned in this way for items like coin purses, handbags, pipe cases, and flasks. After the skins are removed from the pomegranate solution, they are put in a solution of bitter almond for a day to fix the color, then oiled until they are lustrous.

Tanning fleeces and pelts. For rugs (*taḳta-pūst*), coats (*pūstīn*), and hats the hides must be tanned in a way that does not remove the hair or fur. One such process, suitable for the skins of deer and other forest animals, sheep, and suckling lambs, will be described here.

In a covered open area a fresh or moistened skin is spread with the outer side down on a smooth surface and completely covered with salt. A second skin is placed on top of it, with the outer side down and also sprinkled with salt. Additional pelts are stacked on top in the same way. After two or three days they are shaken out and left to air for a day, then rinsed in running water to remove the remaining salt and aired again. Then the damp skins are spread on the sheltered floor of the tannery with their inner sides up and thoroughly kneaded with a solution of barley flour and salt in equal proportions. The skins are then stacked with the treated inner sides touching. Once or twice a day they are sprinkled with water from a soaked broom, stretched, and restacked. This treatment is continued for a week or two. Then the skins are rinsed in running water and laid on the ground with the hair or fur sides up. Once they are drained and shaken out, they are again brought into the tannery, sprinkled with water, and stacked in pairs, with the inner surfaces touching as before. A day or two later, after another rinsing, the inner surfaces of the skins are scraped until all fragments of flesh and fat have been removed. Ground pomegranate skins are then sprinkled and rubbed into the moistened inner surfaces. Once more the skins are stacked, with the inside surfaces together. Every few days they are shaken out and more pomegranate powder added until the desired color has been achieved. After the last of the pomegranate powder has been removed and the inner surfaces rubbed with wild rocket oil the pelts are stretched, dried, and shaken and are then ready for use.

See [Čarm](#).



BIBLIOGRAPHY

The coverage of the topics in this entry is based on first-hand information from Reżā ‘Āmerī, Keyvān Mīrzā Faṭḥ-Allāh, Eqbāl Yağmā’ī (all from Jondaq), ‘Abbās Fāṭemī (from Mašhad), and Reżā Rahnemā (from Sīrjān).

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