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FAMINES

FAMINES. Famines have been reported throughout Persian history by numerous authors and observers. According to a compilation made by Charles Melville, they occurred in Khorasan in 115/733 (Melville, p. 130), in Sīstān in 220/835 (Melville, p. 130), in Khorasan and Sīstān in 400/1009-10 (Melville, p. 136), in Khorasan in 1099 (Melville, p. 136), in Kermān in 576/1180 and 662/1264 (Melville, p. 130), in Fārs in 683-85/1284-66 and 698/1299 (Melville, p. 130), in Yazd in 858/1454 (Melville, p. 130), and throughout Persia in 1870-72 (Melville p. 130), 1929-30 (Melville, p. 138), and 1948-49 (Melville, pp. 138-39). To these should be added the years 735/1335 sqq. (Aubin, pp.131-32), 1226/1811 (Morier, I, p. 170), 1232/1817 (Johnson, I, pp.195-97), 1277/1861 (Brugsch, II, pp. 307, 364-65 and passim), 1296/1879 (Wilson) and “the beginning of the 20th century” (Malcolm, pp. 233, 235-36). However, this enumeration probably remains very incomplete as more or less recurrent episodes of famine have plagued various parts of Persia until the middle of the 20th century. “Hardly a year passes in which there is not a famine in some province of Persia,” wrote a European observer in the beginning of the 20th century (Chirol, p. 97). These famines have had spectacular and terrifying aspects: people eating weeds (Morier, I, p. 170, near Persepolis; Bellew, pp. 427, 432) or unearthing roots (between Isfahan and Kāšān; Morier, I, pp. 195, 197); multitudes of beggars and skeletons roaming the city and village streets (Brittlebank, pp. 95-8, 137, 141; Bellew, pp. 333, 339-40, 412, 429, 433, 435, 448); corpses not buried, devoured by dogs, on the roads, in villages and even cities (Brittlebank, pp. 169, 180, 191; Bellew, pp. 396, 432; Bassett, p. 72); skeletons and bones abandoned in villages (Bassett, p. 127); or on the roads (Bellew, pp. 354, 421; to

such an extent that this traveler, a British physician with an interest in anthropology, picked up a skeleton completely stripped of flesh and intact), or still scattered in vineyards, where people had died of exhaustion eating vine leaves (Bellew, pp. 434-45); graves hurriedly dug on the side of roads (Bellew, p. 342); fresh cemeteries marked out at the gate of cities (Bellew, p. 437; in Kermānšāh); even reports of cannibalism, mentioned in the 14th century C.E. in Azarbaijan (Aubin, pp. 131-32 with sources; Āmolī, ed. Ḵalīlī, p. 138; ed. Sotūda, p. 204; Ebn Bazzāz, p. 305), and also in Mašhad, in 1871, where parents are reported to have eaten their own children (Smith, p. 361).

Causes. The territories of Persia and Afghanistan comprise vast, desertic or semi-desertic, regions where the natural variation in precipitation is considerable (see BĀRĀN). Rain water agriculture, which provides an important part of the food resources, is thus especially vulnerable. Drought is obviously the most frequent cause of famine, as was the case in several of the famines mentioned by Melville (p. 130). Unusually rigorous winters on the high Iranian plateau can have the same effects as happened in Khorasan, Sīstān, and the central plateau in 400/1009-10; Khorasan in 492/1099; and Isfahan in 1929-30 (Melville, pp. 136, 138). Both factors can also combine, with the succession of a dry summer by a harsh winter especially to be feared, as in the great famine of 1869-72 or Sīstān in 1949-50 (Melville, pp. 147-48). Other natural, more episodic, causes have been reported, such as the locust invasion of 1890 in Qara Dāḡ (Wilson, p. 168).

Equally as much can be attributed, however, to human causes (Gilbar, p. 135), which have been aggravating factors to climatic disasters. Changes in the modes of culture, such as the preference given to the opium poppy over cereals, could have had some effect (Wilson, p. 168, for 1879). Neglect in the development and maintenance of the irrigation system during periods of weak administrations has certainly played a role. Above all, the absence of, or great difficulty with, transportation until the middle of the 20th century, has been a determining factor. Speculation by merchants, large land owners, and even government officials and members of the clergy, who did not hesitate to monopolize grain, should also be blamed. Toward the end of the 19th century the governor of Tehran and several high ranking members of the court had thus caused an increase in the price of bread by provoking an artificial shortage. It was only when the supply of the Cossack Brigade was affected that its leader, general Kosogowsky, ordered the barriers that had been raised around the capital to prevent the arrival of grain torn down (Chirol, p. 97).

The great famine of 1870-72, the best documented one (Smith, passim; Brittlebank, passim; St. John, pp. 94-98; Bellew, passim, Fasāʾī, pp. 327 sqq.; Eṣfahānī, pp. 281-82; Wazīrī, p. 214), was thus the result of a series of combined climatic catastrophes made worse by poor administration and the human factors previously cited. Since 1863-64, and except for 1865-66, rainfall had regularly been below average. The output of *qanat*s and springs had fallen. The winter of 1869-70 had once again had very little snow and rain, especially in the low plains of Fārs, where herds of nomads who where there during that season suffered greatly. Camels and goats survived, however, and allowed the more prosperous nomads to reach the highlands in spring. Many of the poor ones died. At the end of 1870, famished crowds flocked to Bušehr. During this second winter, however, villagers suffered little. Rain crops in the *garmsīr* (warm areas) had failed totally, but date crops had been abundant. Artisans in the city, however, were harshly affected by the very high prices of grain (especially in Isfahan, Yazd, and Mašhad). In 1870-71, rains, abundant in the south, were scarce in the north and the east of the country. Large land owners in the south and west hoarded their grain. The distress was great in Isfahan. Fruits were in abundance during the summer of 1871, but the crowd of paupers in the city was swelling. During the winter of 1871-72, rains began earlier and were satisfactory. However the winter was rigorous and prolonged. Heavy snowfall broke down lines of communication. Famine killed thousands of people in the highlands. In the spring, speculation and hoarding hindered the replenishment of provisions. In Isfahan, the two main buyers were the imam of the Friday Mosque and the main customs official. When the arrival of a shipment of grain from Shiraz was announced in the spring, they did not hesitate to block the provincial border to prevent it from reaching the city. Their maneuver was thwarted, however, through the telegraph, which had announced the departure of the caravan (St. John, p. 97). In June, when large land owners from Hamadān decided to ship their grain to Tehran, they used the Qom route, which is longer, to disguise its origin and avoid being accused of having kept the grain from the previous crop, which is what they had in fact done (St. John, pp. 97-98).

In earlier periods, then, purely human causes such as nomad invasions, disturbances, and periods of insecurity were enough to provoke famines even in the apparent absence of any triggering climatic factor. This was the case in the years following 735/1335 in Azarbaijan, where famine seems to have been linked essentially to the continuous fighting between different claimants to the title of il-khan (Aubin, p. 131).

Geographical distribution. From the preceding comments, it can be understood that the quasi-totality of dry regions could be affected by famines from strictly climatic causes. The more humid regions of the north and west of Persia (the Caspian range, the western chains of the Zagros, and even Azarbaijan), however, have been largely spared. In 1862, it was reported that the *mann* of bread was worth 4 to 8 *šāhīs* in Tabrīz on 21 March and 12 *šāhīs* on 11 April—therefore much less than in Tehran (Brugsch, II, pp. 342, 380)—while all the way to Zanjān, the misery was indescribable (Brugsch, II, pp. 364-65). In 1872, a British traveler saw the signs of distress beginning to diminish in the mountains northwest of Tehran, which he began crossing on 12 May, heading for Rašt. Corpses, which had been numerous along the road until that point, were from then on properly buried (Brittlebank, pp. 206-7). The famine of 1872 had, however, spread over all the western regions, including the mountains of Kurdistan (Bellew, passim).

The human factors previously cited could have triggered famines indiscriminately in all regions. However, those areas which enjoyed greater accessiblity were able to escape them. For example, the Persian Gulf coasts, which in the 19th century could receive rice from Asia by way of sea, were relatively spared (Gilbar, p. 136). Likewise, Šāhrūd, on the internal edge of the Asian Alborz, which could easily receive grain from Astarābād, was not affected by the famine of 1870-72 (Smith, p. 378; Bellew, pp. 393-94). Elsewhere, competent administration was sufficient. Kermān, thanks to its governor's wise measures, avoided that catastrophe (St. John, p. 94). In Kuhestān, otherwise much affected, the city of Bīrjand seems to have been spared (Bellew, p. 302), perhaps for the same reason. These cases, however, seem to have been rare.

Fighting Famagainst famines. The fight against famines seems never to have been taken up efficiently; indeed it has been written (Gilbar, p. 136) that until the beginning of the 1960s, the Persian government was completely indifferent to famines and even the establishing of grain reserves in government warehouses was seldom practiced. The embargo on cereal exports, established in 1863, never had any effect since high-ranking government officials did not hesitate to subvert it (Gilbar, p. 136; Chirol, p. 97). In Tehran, the seat of power, grain was actually imported from the western part of the country in 1870-71 and sold at a loss to bakers (St. John, p. 96). In 1871-72 as well, there were many refugees in the city, some of whom had been hired to build roads and repair fortifications (Bassett, p. 118). The main relief measures were due to

Europe and the United States, especially through the intervention of missionaries. Priority for this aid was given to the Christians and Jews, who received funds from their co-religionists abroad: for example, Jews and Armenians in Hamadān in 1872 (Bassett, p. 134). But relief was soon extended to Muslims. In Isfahan in 1869-72, a certain Mr. Bruce, an English missionary, is reported to have assisted seven thousand people, among whom were two thousand Armenians and the rest Muslims (Bassett, p. 157). On the road from Tehran to Hamadān, an English missionary distributed bread to the villagers along the way (Bellew, p. 426). That same year, the Armenian employee of the Anglo-Indian telegraph in Kāzerūn distributed dates to the population (Brittlebank, p. 132). Monetary relief was sent from London to Persia through the Persian Relief Fund Committee (Brittlebank, p. 191). However, the belief that preference should be given Christians and Jews in matters of aid remained deeply rooted. In such a situation, in Kermān, at the beginning of the 20th century, according to a missionary, two hundred Muslim shopkeepers led by a *sayyed* went to the British consul demanding to be converted to Christianity so that they could have bread (Malcolm, p. 236).

Gradual disappearance of famines. In the 20th century, the gradual improvement of transportation caused the progressive disappearance of famines. At least there were no longer widespread famines, only local shortages. In spite of periods of drought, serious episodes of famine occurred only during the two world wars, for socio-political reasons (Melville, p. 130). There were still, however, deaths from hunger in Isfahan in 1929-30 (Melville, p. 138), and in eastern Persia in 1948-49 (Melville, pp. 147-48; Lambton, p. 391), though the very harsh winter that year which caused considerable losses of livestock of the Šāhsevan of Moḡān did not involve any real famine (Melville, p. 130). Nevertheless, in the middle of the 20th century, it was estimated that bad crops caused difficulties an average of one year out of five. Since that time, the country's overall economic progress put an end to this problem. In Afghanistan, however, genuine conditions of famine prevailed in all of the western and the northwestern part of the country following the drought years of 1970-71 (Rathjens, p. 183).

Demographic consequences. The demographic repercussions of famines have certainly been considerable, though they are difficult to evaluate precisely (Gilbar, pp. 134 ff.). They can undoubtedly be regarded as one of the principal factors in the population stagnation of Persia during the second half of the 19th century. There are suggestive estimates for the effects of the great famine.

A British traveler in 1872 declared he had not seen a single young child on the road between Qāyen and Tehran; they had all died of hunger (Bellew, p. 330). In 1871-72, during the nine months from fall to spring, 11,630 corpses were counted being taken out the gates of Zanjān (Bassett, p. 76). This represented without a doubt half of the city's population. In Hamadān, losses would have been of the same proportions (Bellew, p. 429). Another estimate gives the number of dead during the winter at 25,000 (Bassett, p. 134). In Tehran, three hundred Jews died of hunger before the arrival of outside aid (Bassett, p. 108). In the village of Sīrčen, near Mīāna, the population fell from forty to twenty families (Bassett, p. 74). Near Torkamānčāy, a village which numbered a hundred families a few months before was reduced to about fifteen households (Bassett, p. 71). Mašhad had lost 24,000 people and the surrounding area 100,000 (Smith, p. 361). At Jāgarq, twenty miles west of the city, four hundred out of the seven hundred families had perished (Smith, p. 367); in Dehrūd, half of the three thousand inhabitants (Smith, p. 369). In Nīšāpūr, only 150 shops, out of six hundred, remained open (Smith, p. 370). In Sabzavār, only three thousand households could be counted out of the nine thousand before the famine (Smith, p. 373). According to another estimate, half of the four thousand households had disappeared (Bellew, p. 381). The Torbat district had lost twenty thousand inhabitants (Bellew, p. 349); Dāmḡān had been reduced from one thousand to two hundred families (Bellew, p. 401); a village southwest of Tehran from sixty to fifteen households (Bellew, p. 419). Even if all those figures were exaggerated, the overall conclusion is beyond doubt, and the assertion that the provinces of Isfahan, Yazd, and Mašhad had lost a third of their inhabitants (St. John, p. 98) should be considered plausible.

Socio-economic consequences. Apart from the direct loss of human life, the socio- economic effects of famine have been important. In the region of Isfahan in 1869-72, many fields had been abandoned by the peasants and were added to the crown lands. Desertion of villages following famines are known to have occurred until the middle of the 20th century (Planhol, for the Saraḵs region). Nomads who had lost their livestock were constrained to become sedentarized, as was the case in Fārs in 1870 (St. John, pp. 95, 98), or in Afghanistan in the region of Ḡaznī in 1971-72 (Balland and Kieffer). The reestablishment of commercial contracts for livestock was slow, and paralyzed business. In Mašhad in 1872 all the animals in the city—horses, donkeys, mules, cats, rats—had been devoured, and it was impossible to buy horses (Smith, p. 361).

Political consequences. Though certainly not negligible, the political consequences of famines are more difficult to ascertain. In Tehran in 1862, riots were numerous, and the city's Europeans felt threatened (Brugsch, pp. 329-30, 334). It has been suggested, as a working hypothesis at least, that the great drought of 1927-28 in the Kabul region, and especially the sparse rainfall that winter (which at only 156 mm is the lowest one known), was a factor in the revolution during the winter of 1928-29 which overthrew Amān-Allāh (q.v.; Rathjens, p. 185). It is equally possible that the drought and famine of 1970-71 could have played a role in the fall of the monarchy in 1973 (see BĀRĀN, p. 751.)

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