



HAMADĀN III. HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY

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The city of Hamadān lies at the extreme northwest of the series of major urban sites stretching along the line of contact between the Zagros range and the central plateau. While travel is easy from the plateau northwards to Qazvin, Zanjān, and Tabriz, the two routes that lead to Mesopotamia go across the mountains: one to the west toward Kermānšāh and Baghdad and another to the south by way of Borujerd and Korramābād toward Kuzestān and the Persian Gulf. These routes meet at a location with an ample supply of water flowing from small streams that descend the Alvand and feed the rich irrigated soil of the valleys just to the south and southeast of the city itself. With annual average precipitation of 332 mm (1956-71), Hamadān falls within the zone of rainy season cereal production, which is possible throughout the foothills. It thus belongs to the oldest category of those Iranian towns that predate the development of irrigation by subterranean channels (*kāriz*, *qanāt*). This technology allowed areas without surface water to be cultivated and permanently inhabited.

The convergence of these conditions indeed favored the early presence of a major population, but the precise set of circumstances that presided over the



birth of Hamadān remains a moot question. The name itself, transmitted by the Classical authors as Ecbatana (q.v.), appears as *Hamgmatāna*– in an inscription of Darius I at Bisotun (DB 2.76 ff.; Ahmatan and Hamatan in its Armenian variants; see Weissbach, col. 2155; Ahmetā in biblical Hebrew in Ezra 6:2). This can be read as a form of the OPers. *hamgmata*- (“[place of] gathering”; see Kent, pp. 183, 212). The Elamite form, *hal.mata.na*, suggests the meaning “land of the Medes” (Frye, p. 105). Whether this is the case or not, the town entered history as the recognized capital of the Median tribes. Herodotus attributes its creation to the Median king Deioces (q.v.), who, at the end of the 8th century B.C.E., compelled the Medes, until then living in scattered communities, to construct a single town on an isolated hill (Herodotus, 1.96-101). He had this hill, perhaps identical with the present-day Moşallā Hill in Hamadān, fortified with seven concentric ramparts. This description by Herodotus now appears rather fanciful when it is compared with another description by the Greek physician Ctesias (apud Diodorus, 2.13.4-8), which was derived from a different source and is more in line with the present site. The most plausible interpretation is that Deioces declared a pre-existing town to be the new capital of a people he unified and which he then ordered to be renovated according to his schemes. The history of that prior urban center itself remains vague. The Assyrian texts dating from the time of Tiglathpileser I (ca. 1,100 B.C.E.) mention a place called Amadana, but there is no evidence to connect these two similar names. The site that Deioces made his capital and the present location of Hamadān was probably the “fortress of the Babylonians,” known to have existed during the later expedition of Tiglathpileser III into the region at the end of the 8th century B.C.E. (D’yakonov, pp. 201, 279, map on pp. 224-25). It makes sense that Deioces, given the pressure he faced from the Assyrians, would have chosen as the capital of the tribes he had just unified an easily defendable spot at the meeting point of the main routes across the Zagros Mountains. The attractions of that site themselves make it unlikely that he founded an urban center where there would have been none before.

The Persian conquest in the 6th century B.C.E. shifted the political center of gravity, but Ecbatana remained the summer residence of the Achemenids, and its role as a focus of power grew within the context of an Empire that had brought the Iranian plateau and Mesopotamia under one rule. The prosperity of the town apparently persisted through the period of the Arsacids, who also made it their capital, a function it lost under the Sasanians. In early Muslim times it nonetheless remained a vital center, and all Arab geographers (see



Schwarz, *Iran* V, pp. 523-28; Le Strange, *Lands*, pp. 194-96) depicted it as a large town, occupying an area of a square league (*farsakò*) according to Eṣṭakrī (p. 198) and Ebn Ḥawqal (p. 362; tr. Kramer, II, p. 353). Under the Saljuqs it again served as capital. It was destroyed during the Mongol invasion, but it regained its former prominence under the Safavids and was described by Pietro Della Valle in 1617 (II, p. 23), Jean-Baptiste Tavernier in 1644 (I, p. 206), and Paul Lucas in 1701 (II, p. 81) as a large city, one of the biggest in the country, and a commercial site on the route between Baghdad and Isfahan. In 1655 the Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi emphasized its mighty fortress and garrison of 9,000 men, its abundant supply of water, the scale of its *bāzār*, and estimated its dwellings at 8,000 (VII, pp. 82-89). After the fall of the Safavids, its proximity to the border between Persia and the Ottoman Empire exposed the city to considerable hardships (Lockhart, pp. 267 ff.). The Ottomans occupied it for eight years (1724-32) and during this period established a detailed fiscal register of the city and its province. These records, preserved in the archives at Istanbul (Lewis), are unfortunately still unpublished.

From the 19th century on, the wealth of descriptions and accounts by European travelers provides increasingly comprehensive information on the population and its activities: Guillaume Antoine Olivier in 1796 (III, pp. 28-35; cf. p. 29), Adren Dupré in 1807 (I, pp. 158-268; cf. p. 259), James Morier in 1812 (II, pp. 120-141; cf. p. 125). James Silk Buckingham in 1816 (I, p. 284) describes it as “a pile of ruins.” Āqā Moḥammad Khan Qājār had its fortress torn down. Though the trade in luxury items that had flourished under the Safavids stagnated, especially that in silk and nankeen porcelain, commerce was not negligible. There were active commercial links with Baghdad, Isfahan, and Tehran. The city exported fur, in particular fox and wolf, linen, as well as silk and cotton. From Baghdad and Erzerum came copper, lead, and saltpeter, as well as cloth (Dupré, I, p. 265; Morier, p. 139). There were regular caravans to Kuzestān. In 1807 Dupré estimated there were 8,000 dwellings (I, p. 265). In 1813 John Macdonald Kinneir put that number at 10,000 (p. 127). By all evidence, though the city still may have borne the scars of its hard times in the 18th century, both the population and its activity had returned approximately to what they had been under the Safavids.

Shortly thereafter there was renaissance of architectural renewal under Fath-‘Ali Shah, who had grasped the strategic importance of the city. He sent his son Moḥammad-‘Ali Mirzā Dawlatšāh as governor to oversee the construction of new *bāzārs*, caravansaries, and a large garrison, and had him accompanied by



numerous administrators. In 1818 Robert Ker Porter described the progress of this resurgence of activity (II, pp. 102-4). He set the population at 40,000 to 45,000 and estimated that 3,000 dwellings, about a third of the total, were inhabited by state employees.

This was the period at which the city reached its greatest level of prosperity due to trade with Baghdad, which remains, along with the routes towards the north and the northwest, a principal avenue of trade for Persia. The population has not ceased growing. In 1845, Joseph Pierre Ferrier put it at 50,000 inhabitants (p. 38); in 1861 Heinrich C. Brugsch raised that number to 70,000 (I, p. 371), and concurred (I, p. 376) with Ferrier (p. 38) that the *bāzārs* were both attractive and lively. In 1867 Tinco Lycklama offered the figure of only 50,000 inhabitants, but it nonetheless appears that this period coincided with a surge of growth. Leaving aside international trade, local crafts and trades were very prosperous: leatherwork and tanning, shoe-making, felt, carpets, copper works, dyeing and woodwork (the manufacture of writing desks; Kinneir, p. 127; Ker Porter, p. 103; Morier, p. 139; Lycklama, III, p. 519; Bishop, II, p. 151; Brugsch, I, p. 137; Ferrier, p. 38). The growth of these industries was accompanied by the increasing presence of religious minorities, who were active in trade. The Jewish community had long been important. In 1701, Lucas wrote (II., p. 81) that they were more numerous in Hamadān than elsewhere in Persia. Their number was put at 200 families by Dupré in 1807 (I, p. 264), at already 600 families by Ker Porter in 1818 (II, p. 104), and at 400 by George Keppel in 1824 (p. 102). During the demographic peak of the city's population, Brugsch, however, counted only 150 families (I, p. 373). Later in 1889, George Curzon cited the figure of 2,000 persons in the Jewish community (I, p. 510) and in 1890 Isabella Bird Bishop wrote of between 1,500 and 2,000 (II, p. 155). It is hard to discern if this variation reflects the inaccuracy of the source or real changes over time. Given what is known about the fate of the Armenian population, which did in fact vary significantly over time, the second hypothesis may be true. Dupré reported (I, p. 264) that the Armenian community had once comprised 3,000 persons before its persecution and expulsion by Nāder Shah Afšār. Only six families had remained when he visited the city in 1807. Eleven years later, in 1818, Ker Porter counted 600 families (II, p. 104), and in 1867 Lycklama gave the figure of between 4,000 and 5,000 Armenians present in Hamadān (III, p. 523). It is obvious that the return of the Armenians was related to the growth in commerce during the 19th century, and it is plausible to assume that the Jewish community also varied in strength over the same period and for



similar reasons, though the details are unknown.

The peak of economic activity and population growth was reached in the 1860s, and a marked decline set in during the last third of that century. In 1885 Henry Binder (p. 375) lowered the population estimate to 30,000 persons; Isabella Bishop in 1890 (II, p. 156) put its figure at 25,000, even observing that it had fallen. George Curzon in 1889 (II, p. 575) had offered a figure of only 15,000 inhabitants. Perhaps this drop was a lingering demographic effect of the great famine of 1870-72 (q.v.), though the causes of the decline of Hamadān in these times remain difficult to ascertain. Alexandr Tumanskiĭ, who lived in the city in 1894, only five years after Curzon's visit, claimed that the population was again between 40,000 and 50,000, stating that "the city had grown much over the past twenty years because of English trade through Baghdad" (p. 30). Economic motives were without a doubt significant in the discrepancies between these sources, so close in time, since they are difficult to reconcile.

In any event, the shift of trade in Persia to the north and in particular to Tabriz in the beginning of the 20th century negatively affected Hamadān, which fell into decline. In the 1931 census, the population was numbered at 51,000, and from that point on the city grew regularly and rapidly (100,000 in 1956; 165,000 in 1976; 272,000 in 1986; 401,000 in 1996), due to the general trend toward urbanization and demographic expansion throughout the country (see v, below).

Throughout this period Hamadān set itself apart from other Persian cities by its unique pattern of urban development. Starting in 1926, Persian cities were remodeled under the impetus of Reżā Shah, whose planners opened, through the ancient city centers, a grid or checkerboard layout of broad crisscrossing and parallel avenues (Scharlau). Hamadān is an exception to this rule, since its modern layout consists of avenues opened consecutively and radiating from a center point (cf. fig. 1, based on the plan by Razmārā, pp. 5 and 6, and the adjoining aerial photograph taken before the plan, in which one can see Avenue Šāhpur, only partially finished). The exact cause of this unique exercise in urban planning is not known, but the effect is that of an architecturally defined center point of the city between the Friday Mosque and the Jewish shrine of Esther and Mordechai (q.v.). This exceptional arrangement may well have been a scholarly allusion to the concentric circles that Herodotus described in his version of Ecbatana. Be that as it may, within the context of Iranian urban planning in the second half of the 1920s,



Hamadān is a conspicuous anomaly.

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