



HERAT I. GEOGRAPHY

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The province of Herat constitutes roughly the northern one-third of the western lowlands of Afghanistan, bordering on Persia and comprising the eastern extensions of the province of Khorasan. Altitudes range from an average of 900 m in the west in the lower valleys of the Harirud River to an average of 1,300 m in the east in the upper valleys of this river. Data on climate and precipitation and climatic variation in the province are sparse and inconsistent. Freezing temperature is common in winter but rarely reaches -10° C. Early spring is marked by occasional freezing temperature, which rises to an average of 21° C in May. The average temperature in summer is about 30° C, but it occasionally reaches 45° C. Autumn ushers in increasingly cool temperature that ranges in average from 20° to 25° C. Annual precipitation for the province, mostly in the form of rain, during 1965-66 was 79.1 mm with 54.7 mm falling during the month of February and almost all of it from November to February (Akram, pp. 11-12). The peripheries of the Harirud valley have provided some of the best grasslands in all of Asia for pastoral nomads to graze their flocks and herds (Ferrier, p. 192). Ruins around Herat suggest that the valley used to be much more extensively cultivated and settled than it is today (Barthold, p. 49).

The town of Herat (34° - $20'$ N, 62° - $12'$ E) is situated in the west of the province in a fertile valley irrigated by the Harirud River, which springs from the Ġur



(q.v.) mountains in the east and turns north along the border with Persia before turning west, vanishing in the sands of the desert on the Persian border with the Republic of Turkmenistan. The highland plain of Herat borders Bādġis (q.v.) to the north, Safid Kuh (the Paropamisus Mountains) and Ġur to the east, Sistān to the south, and the Harirud to the west. The Harirud runs through its valley, bypassing the town, which lies about 5 km to the north at an altitude of 2,650. Herat has long been an oasis surrounded by pastoral hills and steppes (Malleison, p. 42).

Urban morphology. The city of Herat consists of the new and the old town, surrounded by a partly preserved outer wall. The old town, nearly square in plan, is separated into four quarters formed at the old city gates; Bāzār-e Kušk in the east, Bāzār-e ‘Erāq in the west, Bāzār-e Qandahār in the south, and Bāzār-e Malek in the north, at the northern end of which lies the Royal Fort (Arg-e Šāhi) and beyond it the new town, Šahr-e Naw (*Gazetteer of Afghanistan* III, p. 161).

Monuments. Major monuments of Herat include Masjed-e Jāme‘, Arg-e Naw, and the Moṣallā remains from the 15th century (six minarets and a mausoleum). In 1885, on the advice of the British and in order to leave no fortifications usable in the event of a Russian attack, Amir ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān Khan destroyed the mosques, *madrāsas*, and mausoleums north of the city in the Moṣallā, thus turning into debris much of Herat’s urban history that dated from the 15th century. Only nine minarets were then left standing (Charles Yate, pp. 30-32; Holdich, pp. 142-43). Two more fell during an earthquake in 1931 (Byron, p. 99), and today only five remain standing in Herat. The roofs of the Čahār-suBāzār deteriorated over time, finally collapsing in around 1930, at which time the streets were being widened, as Herat, a city of pedestrians and pack animals up to that point, was opened up to motor traffic (Najimi, pp. 6, 32). The city walls of Herat crumbled away during the course of the 20th century.

Trade routes. Herat was once the point of convergence for several important caravan routes and was famed as the granary of Central Asia. The north-south road along the Harirud River from Bukhara and Marv to Sistān and Kermān passed through Herat. And since the 13th century, the Silk Road from West Asia to China also passed through there, including a southern branch that crossed the Harirud over the twenty-six arched bridge of Mālān on the way to Kandahar and India (Yate, pp. 26-27; Byron, p. 114). Thus Herat turned into a thriving emporium for varieties of Asian products and remained a vital



commercial outpost until the construction of the Trans-Caspian Railway in the 1880s (Barthold, p. 54).

Ethnic groups. Herat was a frontier area between different geographical and cultural zones, bringing together the Turkman steppes, the deserts of Sistān, the Iranian plateau, and the Hindu Kush. It was the frontier between the desert and the sown. A number of Turkic, Turko-Mongol, and Iranian tribes, including the Hazāra of Qala‘-ye Naw, the Jamšidi of Košk, and the Turkman tribes on the steppes of the Morġāb, held pastures along the edges of the valley. Although pastoralists, such as the Turkmans, raided the settled population, they also made major contributions to the economy and culture of Herat, as they passed through the area. As a result, Herat society has been extremely heterogeneous, a mix of Turkman, Tajik, Uzbek, Jamšidi, Taimani, Firuzkuhi, and Hazāra communities. During the 19th century, the population also included several hundred Hindu bankers and pawnbrokers, as well as communities of Armenians and Jews (the city had a Jewish quarter), who were the main wine producers of Herat (Arthur Yate, pp. 139-40; Hamilton, p. 169). The numerous pilgrimage sites in the Herat valley teemed with migrants, mullahs, and pilgrims, as well as a large number of *hoffāz*, or those who have memorized and recite the Qur‘ān (Charles Yate, p. 34).

Population. Over the last two centuries, the population of Herat has been particularly unstable and fluctuating. Arthur Conolly guessed in 1931 that the town had 45,000 permanent inhabitants (Conolly, II, p. 1). Joseph Ferrier, who was there in 1845, claimed that the population had dwindled to 6,000 or 7,000 subsequent to the Persian siege of 1838, but that it had risen to more than 22,000 since (Ferrier, p. 172; *Gazetteer of Afghanistan* III, p. 174). During the Great Game, Herat became highly prized as “the road to India” and subsequently became the focus of Russian, British, and Afghan intrigues. Fears of a Russian siege of Herat, as well as the presence of Afghan troops within the city, drove much of the population out during the late 1880s, as reported by members of the Afghan Boundary Commission (Charles Yate, pp. 28-29). Yet, for most of the late 19th and early 20th century, Herat was estimated to have a population of between 40,000 and 50,000 (Marvin, p. 103; Fayz Moḥammad, I, p. 4).



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