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ISFAHAN X. MONUMENTS (5) BRIDGES

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On the southern edge of the city of Isfahan lies the Zāyandarud River, the unnavigable river that has been the major source of water in the region since the earliest settlements in its environs. Until the transfer of the Safavid capital to Isfahan in the late 16th century, the river was well outside the city walls. Bridges, however, have been constructed across the river since as early as Sasanian (224-651) times. The Šahrestān or Jay Bridge, located just outside the city to the east, is the oldest one to span the river in the vicinity of Isfahan, and its construction has been attributed to the period before the Arab conquest in the 7th century, displaying, according to Arthur Upham Pope (pp. 1230-31), features of Roman Bridges. Its name Jay/Šahrestān derives from the name of one of the two original town settlements (Yahudiya was the other) that were subsumed into medieval Isfahan (Abu Noʿaym, I, pp. 15-16; Ebn Ḥawqal, pp. 362-63; Moqaddasi, pp. 388-89; Golombek, pp. 20-22). Presumably the Šahrestān Bridge remained the main point to cross the river for centuries for it had been restored and maintained during the Buyid and Saljuq periods (Moḥammad-Mahdi, pp. 108-9; Honarfar, 1965, pp. 8-9; Mehrābādi, pp. 305-6).

When in 1598 Shah ʿAbbās the Great officially designated Isfahan the new imperial capital of the Safavids, the court historian Eskandar Beg Torkamān gave in his history prominence to the role of the river in the choice of the city, saying that "having gone there often, the special qualities of that paradisial city [*balada-ye jannat nešān*], the suitability of its location, and the waters of the Zāyandarud as well as the Kawthar-like channels [*juyhā-ye Kawṯar meṭāl*] which branch off the aforementioned river and flow in every direction, [all these things] lodged in the resplendent heart [of the shah]" (Eskandar Beg, I, p. 544; tr. McChesney, p. 110). Given the southward direction of the development of the Safavid capital, building bridges became not only a necessity, but it also gave additional opportunities for patronage of architectural and engineering marvels in harmony with the imperial scale of the projects in the Meydān-e Naqš-e Jahān (see PLATE IV [1]). Two major bridges, the Allāhverdi Khan Bridge (1011-15/1602-07) and the K̲vāju Bridge (1060/1650), were added during the reigns of Shah ʿAbbās the Great and Shah ʿAbbās II. A third, known as Pol-e Juʾi or the Rivulet Bridge, a finely wrought stone footbridge with a watercourse running at its center, was also built in 1067/1657-58 by Shah ʿAbbās II. Unlike the other two larger public bridges, Pol-e Juʾi was for the exclusive use of the harem as it connected riverfront palaces across the two banks of the Zāyandarud River (Moḥammad-Mahdi, pp. 108-9; Honarfar, 1965, pp. 575-76; Mehrābādi, p. 303).

Since the Zāyandarud River is not navigable, engineering of the bridges over it need not concern boat traffic. Nevertheless, Safavid bridges demonstrate extraordinary ingenuity in the ways they turn utilitarian dams and slues into architecturally harmonious and visually exciting forms and spaces. The Safavid bridges helped control the flow of water and to manipulate it for the irrigation of agricultural lands and private gardens alike as well as for the regulation and distribution of fresh water for the city's consumption. Most extraordinarily, however, the Safavid bridges of Isfahan were designed to partake in the city's expanded arenas of public entertainment and leisure. Like a promenade, the two Safavid bridges are affixed with wide walkways both open to the elements and covered for poor weather; they have seating niches and royal pavilions for recreation purposes, where royal festivities took place or from where denizens of Isfahan watched regattas and other aquatic entertainment held in the small reservoirs that were created by the bridge dams or along the Zāyandarud River. The Safavid penchant in the monuments of Isfahan for the theatricality of the relationship between architecture and urban space and for the multi-functional acrobatics of buildings and

ensembles is brilliantly on display in the two bridges, which serve simultaneously as bridges, dams, promenades, pavilions, and viewing stages.

Allāhverdi Khan Bridge. Already in 1596 when Shah ʿAbbās the Great's campaign for the Čahārbāḡ Promenade (see ČAHĀRBĀḠ) had begun, the project anticipated the building of a bridge to connect the northern and southern stretches of the avenue as well as of the city as it were being developed for the residence of new social groups in Isfahan. (PLATE I [5]). This need was materialized between 1011/1602 and 1015/1607 with the construction of the Allāhverdi Khan Bridge (popularly known as Si-o-seh pol "The bridge of thirty-three spans" and as Pol-e Si-o-seh čašma "The bridge of thirty-three arches;" Mo-ḥammad-Mahdi, p. 108; Honarfar, pp. 487-88; Mehrābādi, pp. 317-27; for new dates, see Melville, p. 71). Eskandar Beg Torkamān called it "A sublime bridge, consisting of forty vaulted arches of a special type that would open so that in time of floods the water would pass through each one of the arches, having been built to span the Zāyandarud," and in the 19th century, Sir Percy Sykes described it as "even in decay must rank among the great bridges of the world" (Eskandar Beg, I, pp. 544-45, tr. in McChesney, p. 111; Sykes, II, pp. 201-2; Pope, pp. 1235-37).

The bridge measures approximately 300 meters in length (388 yards according to Sykes, p. 201). Along its sides are thirty-three arches, giving the bridge its popular name of Si-o-seh Pol. The central lane of the bridge was designed as a path for beasts of burden while the sides were raised for use as pedestrian promenades. Along the walkway the arches form small pavilions, where passersby can rest in shade and take in views of the river and its banks. Until the 19th century, the interior was decorated with paintings (as was that of the Ḵᵛāju Bridge) of subjects often referred to by European travelers to have been erotic (Ouseley, III, pp. 48-49, apud Pope, p. 1235).

This magnificent feat of engineering facilitated linkage through the Čahārbāḡ between the royal precinct (the Dawlat-ḵāna) and the new inner city zones around the Meydān on the one hand, and the suburban palace retreat of Hazār Jarib and the southern suburbs on the other. In addition to connecting the mansions of the elite that lined the southern flank of the Čahārbāḡ, the bridge served to connect to the city the Armenian merchant enclave of New Julfa, an economically vital community incorporated into the household by Shah ʿAbbās the Great and his immediate successors. (Baghdiantz-McCabe, p. 57). The mediatory role of the new elite of the reconfigured Safavid household is similarly exemplified through the surrogate patronage on behalf of Shah

ʿAbbās the Great and the royal household, which Allāhverdi Khan (q.v.), the commander-in-chief of the armies, extended in this integral feature of the urban campaign.

Ḵᵛāju Bridge (Pol-e Ḵᵛāju). Located farther to the east, Ḵᵛāju Bridge may have replaced a 15th-century bridge that traversed the river and connected Isfahan to the old road to Shiraz (PLATE II [5]; PLATE III [5]). The bridge is variously known as Pol-e Ḥasanābād for the old neighborhood to its north, as Pol-e Bābā Rokn-al-Din for a nearby shrine, and as Pol-e Šāhi, especially at the time of its construction because of its royal associations. Its construction dates to 1060/1650, during the reign of Shah ʿAbbās II at a time when the monarch had shifted eastwardly the urban development of Isfahan (Waliqoli Šāmlu, p. 517; Pope, pp. 1237-40; Moḥammad-Mahdi, pp. 109-11; Honarfar, pp. 582-85; Mehrābādi, pp. 306-17; Luschey, pp. 143-51).

Some hundred and thirty-two meters long and twelve meters wide, the bridge served several newly expanded urban functions in this area of the city. It connected the Ḵᵛāju Čahārbāḡ and residential quarter to the north of the river to the suburbs on the south including the Zoroastrian neighborhood of Gabrestān (this was the second time Zoroastrian community of Isfahan was forcibly moved; the first was instigated by the Čahārbāḡ of Shah ʿAbbās the Great; Hillenbrand, p. 803).

Like most other Safavid bridges in Isfahan, the Ḵᵛāju Bridge is not only a means for crossing the river but also acts as a space for leisurely strolls and for recreational activities. The bridge is constructed on two tiers. On the lower level, the open niches and closed pylons alternate and accommodate visitors with shaded places to sit and water flow with structures to regulate it; the upper level consists of a “walled” passageway that is lined with an arcade of double niches and is articulated at its center with an embedded octagonal pavilion that looks out onto the riverscape and the pedestrian promenade. The main central aisle on the upper level was slightly lower and was used by horses and carts, while the raised outer vaulted paths on both sides of the bridge were for pedestrian use.

The singularly sophisticated engineering of its dams provided the means for the efficient regulation of the water flow and the irrigation of nearby gardens. Utilizing a series of sluice gates, they create retractable dams that could be raised and lowered. The downriver levels were much lower as the water passed over a series of steps under the bridge. When the levels of the river

were low enough, either naturally or through usages of the dams incorporated into the bridge, these stepped buttresses reached down to the water from the lower level of the bridge between the weirs and acted as additional social spaces for evening gatherings and picnics. In this regard too, the architectural and engineering of this bridge provides an extraordinary range of visual and aural experiences.

Closing the dams of the two bridges, the Allāhverdi Khan and the Ḵᵛāju, created a lake out of the river in the area of the riverbanks, where Shah Ṣafi I and Shah ʿAbbās II had developed the royal retreat of Saʿādatābād. The Ḵᵛāju Bridge was consequently well positioned to serve not only as a place of recreation for the public but more pointedly for the royal household and their guests and entourage. Persian and European chronicles describe festivities held at the central pavilion of the Ḵᵛāju Bridge and along its length, where the space served as a stage for viewing fireworks, boat races, and the like. For example, Waliqoli Šāmlu, the historian of Shah ʿAbbās II, relates that for the Nowruz celebrations shortly after the completion of the bridge, the shah ordered the bridge of the river to be decorated with lights and flowers, and many of the court and government dignitaries were entrusted with the embellishment of the niches and the pavilion. The king spent about a month there and the event was commemorated in a number of poems, including an ode (*qaṣida*) by Ṣāʾeb of Tabirz (Waliqoli Šāmlu, I, pp. 517-19; Mehrābādi, pp. 311-12; Honarfar, p. 583).

The interior surfaces of the pavilion and the walls of the central alley of the bridge were decorated with tiles, possibly of 18th century date, that are especially noteworthy for their distinctive striped patterns and yellow palette. Nearly all the painted decoration of the pavilion’s niches are lost, but Sir William Ousley’s observation of “erotic” imagery indicates that at least some of the murals had figural subjects, perhaps of similar leisurely poses that grace the walls of Čehel Sotun Palace, that may have appeared risqué to the Victorian mores of Ousley. The 17th-century traveler Jean Chardin provides us with the text of one of the inscriptions in the mural decoration, which said “The World is truly a Bridge; pass over it. Weigh and measure all that you meet with on your passage. Everywhere Evil encompasses the Good and transcends it” (Blunt, pp. 147-48).

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