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MAZĀR-E ŠARIF

MAZĀR-E ŠARIF, the largest city of northern Afghanistan.

The religious origins of the urban area. On the northern slope of the Hindu Kush, the heart of the plains of Afghan Turkestan has always consisted of the alluvial cone deposited by the Balḵāb and irrigated by its waters. Divided between 18 channels (*haždah nahr*), the waters supply a considerable expanse of arable land, which in 1879 had a population of some 550,000. It inevitably came to support a sizable urban area, and it was there that the main political center of the entire region was established. This was Balḵ, which lent its historic name (Bactria) to this entire northern fringe and benefited from its central position in the oasis, not far from the apex of the cone from which the channels diverge, in a location predestined to be a commanding position. In practice it remained for centuries, up until the middle of the 19th century, the capital of the local kingdoms that succeeded each other north of the mountain, or, at the very least, a major provincial administrative center within the structure of larger empires or states. However, contemporary Balḵ appears to have eschewed all of its leadership responsibilities, while a sizable urban area has grown up some 18 km to the east, on the easternmost channel, the Nahr-e Šāh, which edges this side of the oasis, in a very peripheral position in relation to the vast agricultural land of the alluvial cone and to the population it supports. How could this be possible?

This is a remarkable example of the role that can be played by religious factors, even when they seem to contradict local geographic conditions, in the establishment of major urban centers. There was on that spot, for a very long

time according to the evidence, a simple village, established on the northern shore of the Nahr-e Šāh that here flows north-northeasterly, at the location where there appear, below the channel, irrigable lands, as well as the rocky areas of *dašt* (“plain”) that occupy its right bank, on the hillsides that reach toward the mountains. It bore the name Ḵayr (later Ḵᵛāja Ḵayrān), which clearly indicates that the location was a pleasant one.

It was there that, in the time of Sanjar in 1135-36, an inspired mystic received the revelation that the Caliph ʿAli was buried there (the location of whose tomb had always given rise to much speculation; see ʿALI B. ABI ṬĀLEB; see also Brockelmann, I, p. 477). A mausoleum was built there, nearby which miraculous cures occurred, and which rapidly became a popular pilgrimage site. (Local popular traditions pertaining to this story have been collected by Yate, pp. 280-81). Destroyed, no doubt, during the invasion of Genghis Khan, it came back into favor and the present tomb was erected in 1480-81 under the Timurid Solṭān Ḥosayn (Mirḵᵛānd, III, pp. 260-61), who endowed the shrine with significant income in *waqf* (see McChesney), allowing almsgiving that made possible its expansion. From then on, the tomb never ceased receiving visitors from throughout Central Asia, although it seems to have experienced something of a decline during the period of Uzbek dominion. The place received the name Mazār-e Šarif ‘the noble tomb,’ which was already the only name in use by the time of the arrival of the first European travelers in the 19th century.

There was already at that time a small village there, which remained quite unimportant. ʿAbd-al-Karim Boḵāri (tr., I, p. 4) does not even mention it in his list of towns of Afghan Turkestan. Moorcroft, who was the first Westerner to visit, in 1825, found its streets “dirty” but nonetheless considered it more important than Tāšqurḡān (Ḵolm; Moorcroft and Trebeck, II, pp. 488-91), and Burnes (I, p. 232) accords it about 500 households. Mohan Lal, who accompanied the latter, saw it, on 10 June 1832, thus long after the end of pilgrimage season, as still “numerously peopled” (Mohan Lal, p. 109). It was administered by a spiritual leader who reported to the governor of Balḵ. When Ferrier passed by in 1845, however, it did not appear to him to count more than “200 households at the most” (Ferrier, I, pp. 394-96). In the climate of anarchy that prevailed in Turkestan at the time, it was in the hands of a minor quasi-independent local secular chief, who had about 250 horsemen and was able to raise from his territory as many as 1,000 in case of need. This was the basis of a rebellion in 1852 against the Afghan governor; it was ruthlessly

suppressed, and Afghan authority was never again challenged. Vambery, who was there in 1863, speaks at great length of the attendance at the shrine, and of the miraculous roses that blossomed on the tomb. But there was nothing in the air to predict the future political and economic destiny of the holy place, to which the English *Gazetteer* of 1871 accords only the slightest interest (MacGregor, pp. 600-601).

The emergence of its political function. The transfer of political power to Mazār was a complex undertaking, which can only be understood by the combination and sequencing of numerous factors, taking into account the troubled conditions of the period and the ceaseless internal wars that ravaged Afghanistan in general and Afghan Turkestan in particular. The starting point is indisputably the increasingly prominent decline of Balḵ in the middle of the 19th century. The town did not recover from its destruction by the emir of Bukhara in 1840. It became more and more unhealthy, with malaria developing in the wake of the disruption of the channels. The population that remained there regularly left it in summer, whenever they had the means, for more salubrious locations, in particular Mazār (MacGregor, p. 601). Moḥammad Afżal, in charge of the region from 1854, formally abandoned it to establish the seat of his authority at Taḵta-pol, a village slightly more than halfway along the road from Balḵ to Mazār. In 1864, when he went about establishing the command structure of the administrative divisions of Turkestan, it was still at Taḵta-pol that he located the government intended for his son ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān (Adamec, p. 25). But the attractiveness of Mazār was already apparent, to which Šēr-ʿAli paid a visit with great splendor in 1864 (idem, p. 26). In the course of the civil war for the throne, it was at Mazār that Šēr-ʿAli and Fayż Moḥammad concluded an oath of alliance in 1867. The structural system for the governments of Turkestan set up by Šēr-ʿAli at the end of the same year included a province of “Balḵ and Mazār,” the command of which he proposed to confer on one Rostam, a native of Mazār (idem, p. 31). When Afghan Turkestan surrendered entirely to his power, it was meanwhile again at Taḵta-pol that he was honored with a 21-gun salute in 1869 (idem, p. 34). The date of 1866 that Barthold fixed as the year of the final transfer of authority to Mazār by the new governor Moḥammad ʿĀlam is thus a trifle early. This governor, who was a Shiite, nonetheless fixed on Mazār without hesitation as the center of his administration, and established his roots there, until his death in 1876, by many works of beautification, especially by setting up a rectangular town square, edged by straight streets, within which stood the shrine in the midst of a *čahārbāḡ* . The reputation for healthfulness of the

place and the personal religious affiliation of the governor were in the final account the determining factors in the decision.

Urbanization and contemporary industrial development. The consequences were not long to wait. The growth was very rapid. In 1878, the reports of Russian officers describe it as a big town, with a population estimated, perhaps a bit optimistically but significant for evaluating its growth, around 30,000 inhabitants (Marvin, 1880, p. 279-84; Kostenko, 1880, II, p. 157). In a Turkestan that thenceforth, beginning in 1880, was under the iron fist of ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān, the localization of military power constituted an essential asset. The descriptions by the British officers entrusted with marking the Russo-Afghan border in 1886 already present Takẖta-pol as an abandoned fort (Yate, pp. 280-81). Mazār then had a garrison of 1,200 men and sheltered 700 workers in an arsenal that, in a northern Afghanistan that was still poorly linked to Kabul, was the sole center of manufacture and maintenance of arms, which, north of the mountain, were the official instruments of power (Peacocke, observations of 1886, in Adamec, p. 413). The town nestled in extensive gardens, which spread widely from a central core (shrine and bazaar) which alone was surrounded by a wall, perforated by six gates. They spread for several kilometers around the channel upstream from the town. The town appeared very active, already attracting the greatest part of the trade with the Russian possessions, which was accomplished via the Termez ferry on the Oxus. But the bazaar was still covered only with wood battens and reed matting (Yate, p. 276). The population estimates by the English commission, agreeing with those of the Russians, came to 3,000 families in the town proper and 6,000 in all for the settlement including the inhabitants spread among the gardens.

The situation seems hardly to have changed over the next half century. A second phase of expansion set in then in the 1930s, especially after 1933 when the opening of a highway suitable for motor vehicles through the Šēbar pass made possible regular communication, at least in summer, with the capital. Mazār from then on rapidly became the chief commercial center of all northern Afghanistan, where cotton, wheat, caracul hides, and grapes were collected for the journey to Kabul. A large portion of the bazaar was then rebuilt with caravanserais (Grötzbach, 1975, p. 421). But the deciding factor turned out to be the development of industry beginning the late 1950s, when there was still only a single factory that processed cottonseed. In 1973 their number had risen to three, to which were added a factory for weaving cotton

fabric and two raisin factories, a number that grew to four in 1978, a cooking oil plant, and several major metallurgical shops related to the working of the oil and gas deposits of the region. Most of these facilities were built to the south of the town, in the rocky areas of Dašt-e Šadyān on the right bank of the channel. To the west, several kilometers from the center of the built-up area, was created at Dehdādi, in 1974, the first fertilizer factory in Afghanistan, which used gas and oil as raw materials. In 1982 a second cotton fabric factory was completed, which brought the total capacity of the two installations to 20 million meters of material per year, the number of employees rising to 3,000 (Grötzbach, 1990, p. 302). A major thermal power plant, fueled by gasoline, completes the tableau of what is today, thanks to these natural resources, the largest industrial center of northern Afghanistan. It is moreover there that the largest part of the administration and offices that run the works has been established. To its role as political and administrative center Mazār has thus, in a quarter century, added a significant modern economic role (Grötzbach, 1979, p. 100; idem, 1990, p. 302).

In connection with this industrial development, Mazār has faced immigration not just from the nearby region but also from Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat. In 1973 the administration estimated the male population at 33,000 for the settled area (no doubt an underestimate), without including non-permanent residents (military, students, etc.); the total population must have already been greater than 70,000 (Grötzbach, 1979, p. 101). The 1979 census gave the figure 103,000 people (Grötzbach, 1990, p. 300), and it has certainly increased greatly during the quarter-century of troubles, the fraction of the Afghan population that has sought refuge beyond the borders having been fairly small in northern Afghanistan. It is likely that the town is now the second largest urban area in the country.

This is expressed in a spectacular feat of urban renewal, beginning in 1957, on plans drawn up in 1956. Comparison of conditions in 1958 and 1973 is revelatory. Around the shrine, which is now broadly free-standing, a garden square is edged by wide commercial streets, and most of the old urban fabric has yielded either to new bazaars, warehouses, and detached bungalows. These are also expanding more and more throughout the north side of the town at the expense of traditional makeshift dwellings and since then have been organized along a major highway.

Economic progress was also accompanied by infrastructure development that places Mazār, on this metric, far above average among Afghan towns. The

water supply is guaranteed by deep wells that provision a 64-kilometer network that feed the public fountains and reservoirs. If we add many private networks, the thermal power station permitted a regular electricity supply and in 1973 60 percent of the dwellings were connected to the network, without fear of the frequent outages that affect most other Afghan towns. All the major streets were paved early on. The educational level (teachers' colleges, technical institutes for gas and oil workers, high schools for girls) and the public health level (hospitals, but also private hospitals for the personnel of the various factories) are fairly high (Grötzbach, 1979, p. 101).

At the same time, activity in the bazaar increased greatly, even as this structure was transformed. In 1973 the town had about 2,350 shops and craft shops, and 73 *sarāy*s (including warehouses and offices) and supermarkets. Even though the old commercial center was maintained in the cuts across the old urban fabric that used to extend south and east of the shrine, the shrine's perimeter was totally rebuilt, in a rectangle of avenues around the tomb and its surrounding park, with modern two-story buildings (the upper floor often occupied by offices or accommodations for medical or other professions, above the ground floor housing shops). The shrine is surrounded by shops, restaurants, and hotels for the pilgrims. Facilities for the lower social classes and for the rural element are widespread north of the shrine, in new *sarāy*s and organized bazaars and the streets around them. To the west, on the Balḵ road, are found most of the garages and auto mechanics, the bazaar that was built to the east on the Kabul road for specialists in these trades being much more modest. Traditional craftsmanship provides a great deal of cotton fabric (*alača*) and cloaks (*čapan*), which are sold in 130 shops, whose owners are often wholesalers. *Alača*-weaving is for the most part grouped in 80 workshops located in three *sarāy*s built west of the town. The economic structure of Mazār is thus remarkably closely linked to its modern aspects, having already entered the industrial age, with institutions that are otherwise very traditional (Grötzbach, 1979, p. 104).

The religious function, finally, of the pilgrimage center remains central, and highly visible. It is manifested notably during the forty days following New Year's Day (21 March), when the celebrations in honor of Caliph ʿAli take place (see above). Tens of thousands of pilgrims, who flock from Afghanistan but also from elsewhere (especially Iran), visit the town during this season, filling the hotels and inns, while business in the bazaar increases greatly (Grötzbach, 1981). One major *madrasa*, connected to the shrine, contributes to the spiritual

growth of the town.

Mazār remains, furthermore, a major center of agricultural production, in orchards and gardens that in part belong to the town-dwellers and in part to the peasants of the hamlets and villages of the oasis, which extends far to the west and northwest of the town, as well as to the east, along the Nahr-e Šāh, and much less to the north, where in the bottomlands swampy areas have developed that are more or less briny. To the south, on the right bank of the channel, the countryside is that of a *dašt*, broken here and there by rain-based farming.

Among the towns of Afghanistan, then, Mazār is especially dynamic and developed. It is by far the largest urban center anywhere in the north of the country, on the northern slope of the Hindu Kush. Its growth, though, has been seriously blocked by the large number of towns in this region, and their linear distribution over a distance of more than 1,000 km, which has been an obstacle to constructing a true hierarchical network around Mazār, which in fact controlled only a fairly limited cross section, and did not really function as a center for Konduz or Maymana, which were indubitably destined to emerge as major, independently active centers. There is a further element that might interfere in the possible unifying role of Mazār: its location at an ethnic crossroads between the Uzbek population to the west, Tajiks to the east, and Hazāras to the south, who have engaged in bloody conflicts on several occasions over the past quarter century. Still more recently, after the fall of the Taliban regime, the militias of two “warlords,” one Uzbek and one Tajik, fought over control of the city. It is only in a truly peaceful multiethnic Afghanistan that Mazār, at once traditional and developed, will be able to fully enact its role as a center of progress.

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