



MEHRAJĀN

MEHRAJĀN (or Mehr(e)jān; locally known as Mehriḡun), oasis and the seat of Nakleštān district in **Ḳur-Biābānak** Sub-province, Isfahan Province.

Mehrajān is an isolated oasis on southern fringes of Dašt-e **Kavir**, situated at lat 33°29' N, long 55°07' E, 20 miles south of **Ḳur**, at an elevation of 2,392 feet above sea level, the lowest among the settlements of **Ḳur-Biābānak** Sub-province. Typical of the topography of the settlements in this secluded region in central Persia, Mehrajān is surrounded by long stretches of arid wasteland. Mt. Ṭaštāb on the north, halfway between Mehrajān and **Ḳur**, provides water to both oases.

True to its archaic name (cf. **MEHRAGĀN**), Mehrajān is one of the older settlements of Biābānak—a caravan transit district known since the 10th century. Mehrajān is first mentioned in the 13th century by Yāqut as a large, ruined village (*qarya*) between Isfahan and Ṭabas (Yāqut, IV, p. 699). There is in Mehrajān epigraphy on the tombstone of Šams-al-Din Ḥāji Moḡammadšāh 'Āref that bears the date 727 (1327 CE) as the year of his martyrdom (Ṭoḡrā, 2012, p. 198; Ḥaḡiḡat, p. 352; 'Āl-e Davud, endnotes in Dastān, p. 61), but there is no proof that the epigraphy itself is as old. Biābānak's Mehrajān appears to be unrelated to the Mehrajān Qaḡaḡ listed as one of the major districts of Pahla, that is, Media Major, by Ebn **Ḳordāḡbeh** (p. 57) and a major stronghold of the **Ḳorrami** movement by Maḡdesi (IV, pp. 30-31).

Documented history of Mehrajān begins under the Qajars as one of the Qorā-ye Sab'a, or the seven major villages that constituted the district of Biābānak



(E'temād-al-Salṭana, IV, p. 2260). The British colonel Charles Metcalfe MacGregor, who traversed Yazd–K̄ur–Mehrajān–Ṭabas in 1875, describes Mehrajān as a village with some 100 houses (MacGregor, I, pp. 96 ff.). The census of 1884 recorded 89 households with 324 souls in Mehrajān and 18 households with 88 souls in the hamlet of Dehnow, one *farsak* (4 miles) south of Mehrajān (Dastān, pp. 49-50). The demographic figures for Mehrajān had grown by the time of the 1966 decennial census to 194 households and 758 inhabitants (Markaz, 1969, p. 24), but the number was slightly reduced to 687 individuals by 2006 (Markaz, 2007). Apparently, emigration to K̄ur and other places outweighed the otherwise high birthrate.

The morphology of Mehrajān consisted of adobe houses, marked by wind towers (Figure 1) and separated by a grid of lanes, some roofed (*sābāt*). The lofty fort of Mehrajān was constructed to offer shelter to the villagers during the forays of the Baluch, but in the securer decades of the late 19th century the fort was tumbledown, and its intact sections were used as a warehouse (MacGregor, loc. cit.; Dastān, p. 49). Nevertheless, the fort served as a refuge, probably for the last time, under the raids of Nāyeb Ḥosayn Kāši in the aftermath of the [Constitutional Revolution](#) (Rastagār Yağmā'i; Ṭoğrā, 2010, p. 268). The fort is now totally in ruins, but the relatively old mosque (*mazget*) of the village still stands, as does the well-shaped Gonbad-e Šams-al-Din Mohammad, and there are two *emānzādas* (Ṭoğrā, 2012, p. 85). Under the Pahlavis the oasis saw a structural transformation through construction of orthogonal streets and a full set of social establishments, namely, a school, an infirmary, a post office, a cooperative (*šerkat-e ta'āvoni*), and a house of justice (*kāna-ye enšāf*) (Markaz, 1969, p. 24; Ḥekmat Yağmā'i, pp. 282-83).

In addition to the aforementioned Dehnow, Mehrajān's hamlets and farms include Šamsābād, Dowlatābād, Moḥammadābād, Šekarābād, 'Abdallāhābād, Jalāliya, and Mazra'a Ḥāji (Ḥekmat Yağmā'i, pp. 282-83; Ṭoğrā, 2012, p. 87); all of these names attest late origins. In spite of Mehrajān's relative decline, in 1989 it was designated as the seat of the newly established Naḳlestān sub-district, with a population of 2,396 in 2006 (Markaz, 2007).

Mehrajān was a village of smallholdings (*ḳorda mālek*), whereas its nearby hamlet Dehnow was owned by Razāqoli Khan 'Arab and Sehām-al-Salṭana under the later Qajars, according to the contemporaneous Ebrāhim Dastān Yağmā'i in his monograph on Biābānak district (pp. 49-50). In those days Mehrajān's duty to the central government was 163 tomans of annual tax and 21 soldiers. True to the oasis' conspicuous role in caravan trade, many village

men worked in camel transport (*šotordāri*). The palm plantations by the village had a substantial yield, including a fine brand of dates called *qasb* or *ḳormā ḳarak*. Within the palm groves, the villagers also grew cereals and walnuts, which were sufficient only for a half a year of local consumption. The major cottage industry was silk spinning and weaving, which occupied all women and most men (Dastān, pp. 49-50). A century later, in the later 20th century, when camel transport was relegated to history and palm cultivation had dwindled, most of the population of Mehrajān were occupied in carpet weaving and silk spinning (*abrišamtābi*) (Ḥekmat Yaḡmā'i, pp. 282-83).

The lifeline of Mehrajān has been the manmade subterranean canals (*qanāts*, *kāriz*) that bring water from the upper gauge heights in foothills down onto the plains. In 1884 Mehrajān had a *qanāt* that was one *farsaḳ* (4 miles) long and 40 *zar*'s (50 yards) deep, with sweet water; another *qanāt* in Dehnow brought semi-saline water barely good even for irrigation (Dastān, p. 49). Both canals are still functioning, and a deep well has been dug to supply water to the growing population (Ḥekmat Yaḡmā'i, p. 283). The irrigation water is measured using the local unit known as *pangun* (Pers. *fenjān*), that is, the volume of water flowing from the *qanāt*'s outlet in a twelve-minute time period. The water distribution among the proprietors was scheduled based on a calendar, specific to Mehrajān, with a return period of 20 days, as shown in [Table 1](#). Some of the days are apparently named after proprietors (Alimehri, Qāsem, Hārūni, Balu), and there are names that are associated with water measurement (Šabānaruz, Nim-šabānaruz). The name of the 19th day, Karuzu, can be a contraction of *kahriz u* “*kāriz/qanāt* water.” Interesting is *bow* in the names of the fifteenth and sixteenth days and *bā-* in the eighteenth day; these can be related to the PIE root *wed-/wod- “water” (other possible derivatives of this root in Iranian are *bia* in Bia-piš and Bia-pas, lands flanking the Safīdrud; and Takestani *vūye* “water,” as proposed by Henning, p. 164, fn. 3).

Although a village in size, Mehrajān, similar to the rest of Biābānak, has a cultural demeanor that suggests an urban, rather than rural, setting: the inhabitants show much greater interest in Persian poetry, Qur'anic sciences, and Shi'i rites rather than local folklore, songs, and dance. The commemoration of the third Imam's martyrdom during the month of Moḥarram is observed through extensive *ta'zia* and *šabihḳvāni* performances using scripts specifically prepared for Mehrajān that are different from those of the neighboring Ḳur, Farroḳi, and Bayāza (Ḥekmat Yaḡmā'i, pp. 106-7; Honari, p. viii). As local tradition goes the Mehrajānis have a Jewish ancestry,



in contrast to Zoroastrian for the rest of the Ƙur region (Dastān, p. 49; Ʀoġrā, 2012, p. 118). On the other hand, it is believed that Mehrajān was Zoroastrian as well and indeed the home to the last Zoroastrian family of Biābānak district that emigrated to Yazd, in the early 19th century (Ĥekmat Yaġmā'i, p. 103); Qal'a-ye gabrhā (Zoroastrian fort) near Mehrajān may be taken as an evidence to such a claim (Ʀoġrā, 2012, p. 85). Moreover, there is a local legend that attributes the foundation of Mehrajān and Irāj to two Zoroastrian brothers named Mehraj and Irāj, respectively (Ĥekmat Yaġmā'i, p. 43). Because Mehrajān's *qanāt* had little water, Mehraj consulted with his brother and they dug a canal and lined it with lime plaster (*sāruj*) and stone to bring water three *farsaks* down from Irāj to Mehrajān; thus the Irāji idiom: *ow Erā be Mehrā dešu* "the waster of Irāj goes to Mehrajān" (Ĥekmat Yaġmā'i, p. 54 Amini, p. 56).

The language of Mehrajān. The Russian philologist Vladimir Ivanow, in his travels to Biābānak in 1913 and 1919 (Ivanow, 1926, 1929), collected linguistic materials from Ƙur and Mehrajān, as well as 'Abbāsābād (north of Ƙur), which dialects he found to differ very little, but to be distinct, from that of Garma and Irāj (qq.v.) on the east of Mehrajān. During Ivanow's second excursion in 1919, his earlier collection of 1913 (published in 1929) was not available to him, hence there is a considerable amount of overlap as well as inconsistency between the two papers of Ivanow. His first paper makes no distinction between the data collected from Ƙur and Mehrajān, while his second paper marks only a few items as specifically Mehrajāni (and even fewer as 'Abbāsābādi or Garma'i) (Ivanow, 1929, pp. 52-57). Discernable are the following items: *osu'd* (for Ƙuri *asudi*) "ashes," *dir* "far"; the imperative 2nd person singular forms *befor* "eat!" *arfin* "read!" *bepejo* "cook!" *biu* "come!" *buš* "say!" (-š may be taken as the 3rd person singular enclitic pronoun, meaning "to him"). The substantive verb conjugates as present singular 1 *ham*, 2 *hi*, 3 *hu*, plural 1 *hem*, 2 *hit*, 3 *hānde*; past singular 1 *bohom*, 2 *bihi*, 3 *bi*, plural 1 *behem*, 2 *bihit*, 3 *bóhand* (where the 3rd person plural forms are distinguished as Mehrajāni; Ivanow, 1929, p. 52). A sentence is documented as well: *de Mehriġun āz qadim jamiyat bā ānnozāye čorsot nefer bion* (Ivanow, 1929, p. 52), apparently "in Mehrajān since long ago the population is four hundred." Consequently, the local vernacular of Mehrajān was a variety of the Northwest Iranian language group spoken in Biābānak (collectively known as Ƙuri or Biābānaki).

Ivanow's documentation of the Mehrajāni dialects remains singular to this

date; no other report indicates any language other than Persian being native to Mehrajān. As early as the middle or late 19th century there remains a humorous poem attributed to a certain Esmā'il Beg, with the pen name 'Āṣi, which cites in each line a statement from an imaginary beloved from each of the major villages of Biābānak. Even if some words are not totally decipherable, there remains no ambiguity as to which language group the quoted sentences belong: of the Biābānaki type are those of Ḳur, Farroḳi (see Farvi), Garma, Irāj, Ordib and Ḳanj, contrasting with those of Jandaq, Bayāda, and Mehrajān, which are clearly Persian. The couplet on Mehrajān reads: *bā zabān-e mehrajāni goft, rāsi hān balan // gar del-at busa maḳa, jang-at maya, pul-at biār!* (where *maḳa* < *mēḳ'āhad*; *maya* < *mayād* "may it not come") "In the Mehrajāni language he said, 'O yes, indeed; should your heart desire a kiss, stop fighting and fetch your money'" (Ḥ. Yaḡmā'i, 1958, p. 48; idem, 1982, p. 387).

During my field trip to Biābānak in 2014, I could find no one in Mehrajān who knew the old dialect described by Ivanow; nor did I meet a senior citizen who recalled any language other than Persian being spoken in the village. The villagers carried an accent reminiscent of Yazdi Persian

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