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SOAP

SOAP. Soap was manufactured in Persia from antiquity (for some observations on the etymology of the word *ṣābun* under which soap is known in Arabic and Persian see Dietrich). In the 10th century, in the Islamic period, various Persian towns produced soap, among them Bost, Balkh, Arrajān and Termed, modern Termez (see *Ḥodud al-ʿālam*, tr. Minorsky, p. 110; Moqaddasi, ed. de Goeje, p. 396). A number of medieval poets, such as Ḵāqāni, Nāṣer-e Ḵosrow, and Neẓāmi, also mentioned soap in their works, indicating its continued use and production in the following centuries (Dehḵodā, s.v. *ṣābun*).

Soap manufacturing must have been of considerable economic importance, for the Timurid ruler Šāhroḵ (r. 1405-47) established a state-owned soap works (*ṣābunḵāna-ye dawlati*). However after protests by the soap workers, he ordered the closing of the works and permitted again soap production by private operators (*Maṭlaʿ al-saʿdayn*, ed. Šafiʿ, II, pp. 319-20).

In the Safavid period, Shah Ṭahmāsp I (r. 1524-76) likewise tried to establish a monopoly by ordering that butchers sell their suet *(pih)* only to government appointed officials who delivered it to the government soap-works (*ṣābunḵāna*). After protests, he rescinded the order in Moḥarram 981/May 1573 and ordered the state soap works to stop operating, forbidding them to return to business ever again. However, this proved to be ineffective, for soon later the government once again began to operate its own soap-works. The private soap-producers complained again, as a result of which the operation of the government soap-works was once more stopped by Ṣafi I (r. 1629-42; see Navāʾi, ed., pp. 511-12; Eqtedāri, pp. 319-20; Keyvani, p. 133, n. 27-28).

In the Safavid era, soap was made in almost all towns, that of Qom being particularly famous. Workers, called *ṣābunis*,made soap in a so-called *ḵārḵāna-ye ṣābun-pazi* (Sotuda, p. 162 [with regard to Hamadan]; Thévenot, II, p. 88). During the Qajar period, each town (especially Isfahan, Tehran, Qom, Jolfā, Tabriz, Qazvin, Mashad, Astarabad, Rāʾin), as well as many villages, manufactured their own soap. Soap makers, like tanners and butchers, belonged to profession that was considered as ritually impure. This is the reason why their operations were carried out in a separate part of town. Good and cheap soap was made with a substance called *barek* that came from Qom (Olmer, p. 67; Polak, II, p. 181). In 1853, there were 51 candle-makers *(šammāʾi*s; see also CANDLE i*)* and soap makers (*ṣābuni*s)in Tehran (Saʿdvandiān and Etteḥādiya, p. 38). At the beginning of the 20th century, there was also a specific group of people (*ṣābunforuš*) who sold solely soap (see Šahri 1992, II, p. 264).

Production. According to Polak, the manner in which soap was made in Qajar Persia (as well as in the preceding centuries) was very similar to the way this as it had been done in the past in Europe. The main difference was that in Persia more ashes were added from a certain root, because of the dearth of potash. Local soap was either black or white in color, while the finer types were imported from Europe (Polak, I, p. 51; Höltzer, p. 51; Schlimmer, repr. 1970, p. 501).

Persian soap was made of mutton, beef, or goat-suet, as well as ashes of strong herbs. It was soft, did not whiten well, had a bad scent, but was cheap. Nevertheless, it was not used as much as in Europe, clothes normally being washed with cold water only (Chardin, repr. 1988, p. 276; idem, *Voyages,* IV, p. 150; II, p. 417; Villotte, p. 126). Because fat was used by both soap- and candle-makers, almost all soap-makers also were candle-makers in Qajar Persia. They melted the fat, used the most pure fat for candle-making, and the rest to make soap (Olmer, pp. 97; Höltzer, pp. 51). Because both soap and candles were major household items, their raw materials, such as fat, were rather expensive. Therefore, “the suet or tallow was carefully removed by the butchers and set aside for the candle makers, and was sold at higher prices than meat” (Wills, p. 299). Despite the fact that the price of fat varied over the seasons, the soap-makers often made a deal with the butchers for a supply of fat for an entire year (Olmer, p. 70).

An entirely different raw material was used in the Caspian provinces, where soft soap was made from olive oil (Polak, II, p. 181). The soap produced was of

inferior quality, however, and was mainly used for local consumption. In 1869, the export of the soap of Rudbār in Gilān to other provinces came to 62,000 Pound Sterling per year at most, with some exports to Russia (Orsolle, p. 171).

In Astarabad, the soap-works used an entirely different ingredient for the production of soap, namely sesame oil. Soap boiling was an important economic activity in that town (Adamec, II, p. 42). In 1881, there were some 13 soap works operating in Astarabad, who were all were small in size and used a crude technology. The soap produced was of a dirty gray color, very soft and deficient in detergent property, according to the British consul Lovett. Contrary to most other towns. Astarabad exported much of its soap, "of which a great deal is manufactured here and goes to all neighbouring provinces; oil of sesamum and the seed, are also used in the manufacture of soap" (Adamec, II, p. 46).

Modernization. Although foreign soap did not play any role at all in traditional Persian households before the Qajar period, there was nevertheless an awareness of better quality soaps in Persia in the 19th century. There was also a small, but growing import of foreign soaps towards the end of the 19th century. From then onwards, soap had not only to be strongly perfumed, but it also had to be nicely wrapped in attractive paper, without it did not sell well. However, most Persians still regarded foreign soap as being religiously impure (*najas*). There was one exception, that is the so-called "Windsor soap," which (because it smelled of violets) found a ready market as *ṣābun-e benefša* or violet soap (Floor 2003, pp. 311-27).

Towards the end of the Qajar era, soap was made in two varieties. One, a black soap, for use in clothes washing; the other and better kind of soap was white, used to clean the body, and known as *ṣābun-e bargardān wa āštiāni.* Domestic soap had a very bad smell, especially if made from low quality fat. The soap bars looked like bricks (Šahri 1988, II, p. 346). As in other sectors of the economy, Persian entrepreneurs and intellectuals were interested in modernizing their society in general and industry in particular, including this artisanal activity. As a result, a toilet-soap plant was erected in Tehran, the concession for which was given, on 14 Ḏu'l-Qaʿda 1328/17 November 1910 to Rabiʿzāda and partners, which allegedly produced an excellent soap (Jamālzāda, p. 95). The new factory, however, was not able to eliminate the more traditional soap-works. For, in 1920, there were still 16 *ṣābunpazis,* or soap-manufactories, operating in Tehran, employing 17 masters (*ostāds),* 47 apprentices (*šāgerds),* and 5 errand-boys (*pādow*s)(Keyhān, III, p. 328). In the

beginning of 1922, there were 10 *ṣābunpazis* employing 60 workers in Tabriz (Mikailian [Sultanzade], IV, p. 102.

Under the new, modernizing regime of Reżā Shah (r. 1925-41) a large state-owned factory at Tehran was erected, which had a maximum annual capacity of 8,000 tons of soap per year. However, the difficulty of collecting animal fats and vegetable oils from scattered slaughterhouses and oil-presses reduced production in 1942 to 300 tons of soap per year. Two other soap factories in the north of the country had a total annual output of 1,700 tons, and 13 smaller plants varied from 50 to 300 tons each a year (Great Britain, Naval Intelligence Division, pp. 460, 524 [with regard to Qazvin]; Floor 1984, Annex 1 [also for smaller traditional plants and their location]). In, 1947, there were 20 soap-manufacturing plants, mainly in north, employing 450 workers. The largest factory, state-owned with 300 workers, was in Tehran (Roberts, p. 22).

By 1947, there was production of 10,000 tons of laundry soap and 1,000 tons of toilet soap. Per capital consumption was low due to both availability and high cost. Only 200 tons of toilet soap were imported. The large Tehran factory produced about half of toilet soap use, and 20 percent of laundry soap. It was not completed and only worked at 40 percent of its planned capacity. Another 20 percent was made in 15 medium-sized plants and the rest made throughout the country in a large number of small traditional soap-works. The output was constrained by traditional technology and the shortage of fats and oils (Overseas Consultants, Inc., pp. 167-68).

As part of the modernization of the industrial sector in the 1950s, the soap-making technology was updated and the mix of raw materials to make soap was also changed. Currently, Iran is a major producer of natural sodium sulfate, which is the major input for soap production. In 1995 and 1997, total world production was 2,500 metric tons (total, including synthetic, 4,000) and 2,400 (4,000), respectively, while Iran’s share was 280 and 290, respectively (US Geological Survey).

In 1974, the production of washing-soap bars increased from 27,631 tons in 1962 to 65,000, of which 30,000 tons were exported. In 1999, production reached a level of more than 42,000 tons by 222 production units in addition to a total production volume of liquid hand-soap by 24 units of 8,433 tons (Echo of Iran 1963, p. 244; 1975, p. 246).

The production of detergents had been only 10 tons in 1961-62. In 1975,

already 70,000 tons of detergents were produced of which 30,000 were exported. Currently, the major manufacturers are Paxan, Tully Press, Pakvash, Paknam, Behdad and Pars (P.I.P.). In 1999, their total production volume reached 290,000 tons, 244,000 tons of which were normal powder detergent and the rest washing machine powder (Echo of Iran 1963, p. 244; 1976, p. 206).

Apart from these traditional soap products, Iranian factories now also produce shampoo, whitener, and liquid dish soap. In 1999, the total production volume of shampoo by 195 production units reached nearly 44,000 tons. The total production volume of whitener by 93 production units surpassed 66,000 tons in 1999. The total production volume of liquid dish soap reached 189,000, indicating 13 percent growth compared to a year earlier.

In 1999, a total of some 285,000 tons of various light powder detergents (98 percent of total production) including 237,000 tons of normal and 47,000 tons of washing machine powder was distributed. The prices of soap products are determined by the "Organization for the Supervision and Inspection of the Pricing of Goods and Services." However, as the total production volume exceeded the scheduled level and with an efficient distribution practice, there was no shortage in the country and prices were according to the approved rate.

Export. Shampoo (6,524 tons), toothpaste (304 tons), and soap (5,721 tons), with a total value of 7,9 million US dollars were exported in 1999, mostly to the Central Asian and Caucasian nations and the Persian Gulf states. Excluding "Pars International Products Co.", every single powder manufacturer took measures to export its products. They faced heavy competition due to smuggling, the emergence of new rivals, and lack of appropriate marketing techniques. The price of Iran-made powders in Central Asia in 1999 was 50 percent below the actual export value. The abundance of raw material and existence of the huge domestic and foreign markets in the neighboring states had prepared the grounds for expansion of this industry in Iran. Only 50 percent of Iran's potential production capacity is now being used.

Traditional alternatives to soap. Although the information on the alternatives to soap refer to the period of the 17th century, the materials described were used also in the preceding centuries. People in Safavid Persia used various alternatives to soap. For example, in "[...] Armenia and Persia, you may meet with abundance of Bole-Armonick, and a Marl which is like White Soap, and serves them for the same Uses as Soap. The Women use it, most especially

when they wash their Heads at the Bagnio" (Chardin, *Voyages,* IV, p. 359). This substance was probably the same as cerusite, which was used for the same purpose in Qajar Persia. There was even a third product, the produce of the lotus tree (*konār*) tree, which "yields a small fruit with a kernel, resembling our cherries but ripening sooner, of a yellowish colour inclining to red, and of no unpleasant taste. It possesses, moreover, this property that its leaves, reduced to powder and soaked in water, produce a lather, and serve instead of soap, and is the only thing used by the ladies of the country for washing their faces" (Della Valle, IX, p. 114).

Another product was *safid-āb* or white lead (cerusite), which was used especially by women. They mixed it with cow fat and applied to their body when they took a bath. It allegedly made their skin white and facilitated massaging, which took place after the bath, and drove out the bad humors. At Shiraz, near the Kuh-e Saʿdi, a natural non-crystalline cerusite was found. It was a friable white, a bit yellowish, stone. The stone was pounded under a strong mill, by hand, while it was kept humid. The thick broth that was the result was mixed with water, then wildly shaken, and after five minutes decanted. The turbid water, which holds the lead carbonate in suspense, is placed into stone vats in which it is allowed to rest. The deposit was collected, dried, and sold. The first deposit was thrown away. It was sold at 0.15 Franc per kg. The cerusite from Isfahan was of higher repute and known under the name of *safid-āb-e šayḵ* (Olmer, pp. 66-7; Schlimmer, p. 518).

Elsewhere, as in the Safavid period, the *konār* or lotus tree (*Zizyphus lotus;deraḵt-e konār* or *sedr)* provided the necessary ingredients to make a kind of soap (Sykes, p. 198). According to Schlimmer, even the rich as well as traditional Muslims considered it to be an act of piety to wash themselves occasionally with water, which had been beaten for several minutes with lotus leaves *(barg-e sedr),* which then formed a kind of froth, as if soap had been used. These leaves were mainly collected at Konār-e Taḵt, near Kāzerun (Schlimmer, p. 557).

In Baluchistan, Floyer noticed a plant, the root of which was used as a soap, "and which, without any preparation whatever, possessed the most wonderful bleaching properties. It was a little round, flattened bush with pinnatifid leaves, having a white silky gloss upon them. The root was like that of a carrot, but fibrous" (Floyer, p. 228). In eastern Persia and western Afghanistan, the root stock of *Acanthophyllum macrodon*, as well as of *Gypsophila paniculata,* locally known as *beḵ,* was used as a substitute for soap in the washing of

clothes, woolens, and the like. The root was found in all the bazaars of the larger villages. Another *Acanthophyllum* root, namely *squarrosum* (var. *Brachyodon*), called *čuba,* was also used in a pulverized form as a substitute for soap by the poor, as well as for washing silk and woolen fabrics. Barilla (*ḵār, ešḵār*)and lime (*āhak*) were also used to wash woolens and clothes (Aitchison, pp. 6, 22-23, 196, 219). In Fārs, a kind of clay, known as head-washing clay *(gel-e saršuʾi),* was mined near Ardakān (see ARDAKĀN-E FĀRS) in the Geriva mountain. Elsewhere, this kind of talcous earth was also known in pulverized form as *sang-e saršuʾi* and it was in particular use to wash the head (Fasāʾi, ed. Rastgār, II, p. 1638).

Soap as medicine. In addition to the use of soap for washing one's body and clothes, soap was also as medicine to treat certain illnesses. Therefore, medical books contained amongst other things a detailed description how to best make soap for medicinal purposes, the best of which was made with olive oil rather than with ricinus (Ḵorāsāni, repr. 1992, pp. 561-62; Šahri 1999, V, pp. 370-71).

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