Published: July 20, 2004
Last Updated: June 27, 2016

TEHRAN I. A PERSIAN CITY AT THE FOOT OF THE ALBORZ

TEHRAN, capital city of Iran.

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At the northern borders of Iran's arid central plateau, the southern foothills of the Alborz chain, which have the advantage of major precipitations, are particularly suitable for human settlements. The abundance of water running down the mountain, either as seasonal and occasional or perennially flowing rivers, or as underground waters, has led to the development of a more or less large cultivated strip, lined by numerous settlements forming a regular series from Azarbaijan across to Khorasan. Tehran is part of this group of settlements. Its destiny in the long term has been that of a modest village which successive historical circumstances of a most exceptional kind have gradually raised first to the status of a merely regional city, and afterwards to that of the country's metropolis.

Troglodyte gardeners.In this arable strip of the foothills, there was nothing inherently advantageous in Tehran's specific location. On the contrary, the town had no particularly important water resources. It was not situated at the outlet, but was more or less equidistant from the two main hydrographic basins which collected the waters coming down the mountains: those of the Karaj river, which, at about 40 kilometers to the west, had given birth to the

important town of Karaj; and those of the Jājerud, about thirty kilometers east. The latter, having crossed the little chain parallel to the main mountain axis of the ante-Alborz, fed the important town of Varāmin and the villages in the plain around it. Between these two urban areas, there was only one important city: this was Ray, at the westernmost point of the ante-Alborz, above the junction of the road between two variants, north and south of the secondary range (figure 1). It was here that there soon arose the city of Ray, watered by the right-hand tributaries of the Jājerud. It was one of the most important centers of Islamic Persia until its destruction by the Mongol invasion in the early 13th century. Tehran was for a long time merely a large village, about ten kilometers north of Ray and largely dependent on it.

The site was a plain with a slight southward slope (the medium slope is about 13% between Tajriš, at an altitude of 1,310 meters to the north at the foot of the mountains, and the railway station, at the southern end of the old city of Tehran, which is 1,100 meters high). The initial establishment had settled at the limit between the two zones of characteristic plain formations: coarse and permeable gravel in the north, finer and more impermeable alluvial deposits in the south. These formed the transition with the barren desert (*kavir*), at the level of which the subterranean sheets, which were still situated at the depth of some dozens of meters to the north of the city, came to approach the ground surface, making drainage and construction more difficult. On foothills that were long occupied by agricultural settlements (the important Neolithic site of about 6,000 BCE at Čašma(-ye) ʿAli is situated in Ray itself), relics of ceramics were found at various points of the present city of Tehran, and at Qayṭariya and Darrus north-west of the old town (data and bibliography in Adle, pp. 19-20). These witness the existence of a settlement developed on the Tehran site at the period when the Aryans arrived (ca. 1200-1000 BCE).

This development was no doubt originally connected with the utilization of current surface waters running down the glacis of the foothills in numerous rivulets attached to the Jājerud system. In the 17th century, the English traveler Sir Thomas Herbert (p. 214) could still discern two branches of them, separating the two parts of the city. But the development of the plain and the establishment of a steady network of irrigation channels, were particularly risky here. The surface of the piedmont is subject, at times of major precipitations, to exceptionally destructive sheet-floods. One particularly well-remembered occurrence ravaged the northern outskirts of the city on May 6th 1869 (Gurney, pp. 60-61, with full details. It caused considerable destruction,

making havoc with the existing natural networks of water discharge. Ever since the overall technique of subterranean draining galleries (*kāriz*) became common in the first millennium BCE, it helped to check the volatile aspects of surface flows and regularized the water supply. In this respect, they still play a crucial role even now (see below). As for unirrigated (dry) farming (*deymi*), they merely provided a very precarious contribution: the average precipitation (200 millimeters a year at Tehran airport for the period 1943-68; Bahrāmbeygi, 1977, p. 6), places the city at the borderline of profitability for any cultivation of crops relying solely on rainfall.

It was thus as an "inhabited garden," to use Chahryar Adle's felicitous phrase, (1992, p. 15), benefiting from its water resources and cultivations and contributing to the food supplies of the neighboring city of Ray, that Tehran first appeared in historical texts (though its origins were certainly much older), in the *nesba* of a certain Abū ʿAbd-Allāh Moḥammad b. Ḥammād al-Ṭehrāni al-Rāzi. This scholar died in ʿAskalān in Palestine in 261/874-5 or 271/884-5, and is mentioned in the history of Baghdad (II, p. 271; Karimān, 1976, pp. 12-15) by Ḵaṭib-e Bağdādi (d. 1071). The earliest extant reference mentioning specifically to the locality itself, a passing reference to the excellence of 'Ṭehrāni' pomegranates, is in Ebn al-Balḵi's *Fārs-nāma*, (p. 134), written between 500 –510/1108-1116. Nothing is known about more ancient periods.

The identification proposed by Michaël Jan de Goeje, in a note to his edition of Eṣṭaḵri (p. 209), with the *B.h.zān*, *B.h.tān*, or *B.h.nān* mentioned by the latter and other Arab geographers (Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 366; Moqaddasi, p. 386), is not acceptable (Adle, pp. 20-21), although it has had its advocates (Qazvini, 1928, n. 36-39; Eqbāl-Aštiyāni, 1942, quoted by Adle). This site is in fact located by Yāqut (*Boldān* [Beirut], I, p. 31) at six *farsaḵ*s (about six kilometers) from Ray, and clearly distinguished by him from Tehran, only a farsakò away. The etymology itself remains problematic and there are no convincing interpretations at hand (they are discussed by Minorsky, *EI1*, art. "Teheran," and by Adle, p. 22). One can discard the popular etymology *Tah+rān* = "the one who hunts, who pushes (people)" or "who dwells" at the bottom, under the ground, evidently suggested by Yāqut's text, which will be mentioned later, about the troglodyte ways of the inhabitants. Schindler (1896, p. 131) had seen in the name a *Tir-ān*, on the basis of an initial element *tir*,for which the sense "plain, desert plain" is attested, the morphological variance being explained by peculiarities of regional dialect. He contrasted it with the name of the village

(near the city to the north) called *Šemrān*: a place where there is a water reservoir. There was also the idea (Kasravi, 1973, pp. 273-83) to explain the twin terms Tahrān–Šemrān (the latter spelt *Šamirān* or *Šemirān*) by the contrast between a "warm place" for Tahrān and a "cool place" for Šemirān. Vladimir Minorsky himself proposed the meaning "what lies below Ray" on the basis of a *Tah* (attested to mean depth in the northern Iranian dialects) and the name of the city of Ray (Raḡān = Rayyān = Rān). But this is incompatible with the existence of another locality (a large village north-east of Isfahan), which is called by this same name of Tehrān, and could evidently have had no connection with Ray. On the whole, all this seems purely conjectural, and we should probably give up trying to find out the original meaning of the name. The spelling itself has changed. The initial *ṭ* was used for a long time in the same way as *t* and was the preferred choice in most documents written up to the early 20th century. Yāqut had used the Arabic option of *t*Â in his writings, while at the same time pointing out that it was a Persian word (*ʿajamiya*), which was pronounced Tehrān by the inhabitants, who did not use the sound *ṭ* in their speech.

The physiognomy of the place, in any case, appeared clearly when there were more indications in written texts in the 12th and 13th centuries. Various other occasional data point out that well-known personalities had passed through Tehran or stayed there for more or less long periods. Substantial episodic references have been contributed by Yāqut (Boldān, ed. Wüstenfeld, III, pp. 564-65; Beirut, I, p. 51; Adle, pp. 36-37, for a detailed discussion of the meaning of terms used by him). Yāqut had no personal knowledge of Tehran, but was in Ray in 617/1220, eight years before the Mongol invasion. Here he collected information about Tehran from an inhabitant of Ray whom he considered as trustworthy. Later we have descriptions from Zakariyāʾ b. Moḥammad Qazvini (I, 228), who wrote in 674/1275, to a great extent reproducing Yāqut's account, but probably adding to them as well. Yāqut describes the place as a market-town (*qurā*) or even "a large market-town" (*qariyaton kabiraton*) consisting of twelve quarters (*maḥalla*), a merely symbolic figure perhaps. Each of these quarters was headed by an elder, a (*sheikh*; Qazvini), and these sheikhsfought one another to the point that the inhabitants did not dare to venture into each other's quarters. Qazvini states that the relations were just as bad with the authorities. The inhabitants of Tehran had bitter disputes with the provincial governor about the amount of their taxes, and when this amount was agreed upon, they wanted to pay it in goods as valued by themselves; thus paying merely lip service to the authorities.

It was perhaps partly for this reason of insecurity that Tehran at the time harbored a peculiar feature that appeared striking to early observers. The dwellings, dispersed as they were within dense and bushy enclosures, provided a safe haven for the inhabitants, since access to them was to a great extent made very difficult by the fact of their being subterranean or semi-subterranean, that is to say, totally or partially covered under the ground. Qazvini described them as "similar to jerboa holes" (*ka-nafi-qāʾi al-yarbuʿ*). These troglodytic or semi-troglodytic habits, continued at least partially up to fairly recent times. Although authors of the Safavid period no longer mention it, Ker Porter (I, p. 312) still saw in 1818, within the city, at a distance of two or three hundred meters from the Qazvin gate, wells and excavations leading to subterranean lodgings for poor people or used as stables for beasts of burden. These troglodyte habits might certainly have contributed to security within the troubled atmosphere of the town. But in fact, the phenomenon was quite frequent all over northern Persia as a way of combating the winter frosts (numerous examples in Planhol, 1960, 1964, p. 31, 1, 1968, pp. 420-2; other references in Adle, p. 24), and not all the houses were subterranean in Tehran at the time of Yāqut and Qazvini. Yet their number must in any case have been sufficiently important to attract the attention of visitors as an exceptional case.

These stubborn and pugnacious people evidently had a bad reputation. There was no reason to attribute this hardly flattering quality, as did Karimān (pp. 100 and 102), to the animosity of certain (Sunni) authors of these texts against the inhabitants of a small town, which was already certainly Shiʿite (see below). They were in any case very skilful gardeners, making a living of the product of their gardens (*basātin*) and orchards, and evidently taking their fruits and vegetables to the market at their adjacent large town, of Ray. Balḵi (*loc. cit.*) already praised the remarkable quality of their pomegranates, and this has often been repeated later. About five centuries later, it was reported that Shah ʿAbbās the Great had eaten so many fruits in Tehran that he had fallen ill, and Pietro della Valle (III, pp. 434-35) wrote that this was the reason why the king never again entered Tehran as such (see, however, below, for another explanation for this).

The inhabitants cultivated exclusively with the hoe and spade, and had no plows, a fact which has led to some hasty conclusions. They certainly had cattle, contrary to the statement of Adle, p. 36, who wrongly interpreted Yāqut's text. The latter mistakenly attributed the absence of plows to the fact that the inhabitants might fear attacks by their neighbors on their cattle or

small livestock (*dawāb*), the existence of which is in any case implied in the text. The point is evidently a literary development by Yāqut, who mentioned the insecurity in the town, although, as we have seen, he had no personal experience of it. The large livestock, indispensable for providing the manure for the gardens, and without which the agricultural prosperity of the place could hardly be contemplated, was certainly provided by more or less permanent supply of grazing and fodder (lucerne), thanks to the abundance of water. Tehran presented a familiar example of a widespread agricultural model found in every oasis and all irrigated sectors of the Iranian plateau (Planhol, 1993, p. 483), based on the combination of hoe cultivation and intensive use of manure, as well as a great deal of manual labor. It was here indeed particularly well represented, within a very specialized and certainly monetarized economy, integrated with the great urban market of Ray, where the inhabitants of Tehran no doubt procured part of their cereals.

The emergence of urban functions. How did this large market town of gardeners, with its clever though rebellious and quarrelsome peasants, manage to acquire the prestige of a city, the necessary prelude to an even more august future? It was evidently the consequence of the almost total destruction of Ray by the Mongol invasion. Of course, Tehran was equally damaged. Nor did the devastation spare the countryside. Ḥamd-Allāh Mostawfi, writing in 1340, considered Tehran as “an important small town” (*qaṣaba-ye moʿtabar*), but declared that it was no longer as populated as before (*Nozhat al-qolub*, ed. and tr. Le Strange, text p. 53; tr., p. 60). Yet the decline of Ray had certainly been more catastrophic, and besides it never ceased. While this stretch of dusty and desolate ruins no longer had anything attractive and was being progressively abandoned by its survivors, the rural area of Tehran, livened up by its gardens and waters, could indeed quite quickly acquire a pleasant aspect. It was hence probable that the inhabitants of Ray began to settle there. Within a century, it became in any event the most important nucleus of the region. The evolution of its description in contemporary Mongol texts is significant. In sources belonging to the years 1284 and 1294 (references in Minorsky, art. “Teheran,”*EI1*), it is qualified as “Tehran near Ray,” a description still marking the hitherto at least nominal supremacy of the former great city. But an attempt at re-populating it by the Il-khanid ruler Ḡazān Khan (1295-1304) met with failure (Mostawfi, *Nozhat al-qolub*, ed. and tr. Le Strange, p. 53, Eng. tr. p. 59; Le Strange, *Lands*, p. 216); and in 1340, when Mostawfi was writing, it was Varāmin which had become the capital of the Mongol province, and Tehran was one of the four districts composing it

(Mostawfi, p. 54), and certainly including Ray, over which its preeminence was from then on established. Tehran had become the main center of the region.

It could hence be rightly considered as a "city," and even a "great city" (*grand ciudad*), and that is how it was described by Ruy Gonzales de Clavijo, the Spanish ambassador at Timur's court (pp. 117-18 of the Spanish text, p. 98 of the Eng. tr.), who stopped there on 6th July 1404. He found the place pleasant and well provided with all kinds of products. There was a royal residence (*posada*), where the ambassador was lodged, and at least two further important buildings, one of which was occupied by Timur's son-in-law. The Timurid palace was situated, according to Clavijo, two miles (about 8 kilometers) from Ray, which had been abandoned at the time (*agora deshabitada*). We must point out that Yāqut, two centuries earlier, placed Tehran one farsaḵfrom Ray. This discordance between the two texts is highly significant. Even if estimates of distance were merely approximate, it appears evident that the Timurid palace had been built at the northern end of Tehran. From this period on, there was a tendency to move the city northwards, towards pure and fresh waters coming down the mountains, this being a constant historical development of the city, continuing to the present and explaining the major features of its social geography (see below). The Timurids, like most Turks, were particularly fond of cool air and an abundance of running waters, and thus started a trend that survives to the present.

The exact site of the Timurid city within the present town can indeed be easily reconstituted (figure 2, on the Berezin [q.v.] map), in terms of the establishment of certain *emāmzāda*s and cemeteries existing at this period. These were the most ancient monuments of the present city, and had certainly been built at the extreme limits of this Timurid town (Adle, pp. 32-33). The south-eastern limits of Tehran were approximately marked by the dome (*boqʿa*)of Emāmzāda Sayyed Esmāʿil (Mostafavi, pp. 15, 446-47; Karimān, pp. 140-44), which had been built before the date of 886/1481 which appears on a wooden door within the mausoleum. This is the oldest date attested in Tehran and still existing *in situ* (in the Čāla-meydān quarter). In this same extant quarter, the Emāmzāda Yaḥyā (Mostafavi, pp. 16-22; Karimān, pp. 144-48), which had certainly existed before the year 628/1231 (a funerary plaque in ceramic bearing this date was still in place as late as 1939) determined the north-western limit of the city. North-west of it was the Timurid palace, established on the present-day site of the Golestān palace (q.v.), within the

enclosure of the future *arg* of the capital. Towards the southwest, the limit of the town did not reach as far as the Emāmzāda Sayyed Naṣr-al-Din (Mostafavi, pp. 16-22; Karimān, pp. 144-48), which was built in the 15th century (in any case before 993/1583), but was situated south-west of the Emāmzāda Zayd built before 902/1497 within what is presently the bazaar quarter. This Timurid city could thus have had an area of about one square kilometer.

Tehran had thus in the Timurid period acquired one of the essential attributes of urban status. It was, at least for temporary periods, an abode for princes, enjoyed by great personalities and the sovereign himself when he was in the country, certainly preferring it to Varāmin, which was much farther away from the mountains. But it was as yet a very incomplete picture. Clavijo pointed out that it was not fortified. He does not mention a central bazaar being organized, and it is certain that this was built later on. It evidently must have had at least a few commercial streets in various quarters. A decisive episode took place under the Safavids when Shah Ṭahmāsp I endowed it in 981/1554 with a central bazaar and surrounded it with a wall (Amin-Aḥmad Rāzi, *Haft eqlim*, quoted by Adle, p. 25; other sources in Minorsky, “Teheran,” *EI1*.) The bazaar was of the most basic type, linear in its formation with rows of shops next to each other, behind which there gradually arose a number of warehouses (according to the definition of Wirth, 1974-5), a form that could still be observed in the early 19th century (see below). When Herbert visited the city in 1627, only one sector was as yet covered. The wall is well known, for it remained in place until the 19th century and is shown on the earliest plans of the city. It had a ditch along it, and 114 towers (matching the number of the verses in the Qurʾān). These could be still clearly distinguished on the plan of 1858, and only four gates at the origin. A fifth was added in the 18th century by the Afghans, north of the arg, to allow them, as tradition had it, to slip away more easily in the case of a rebellion (Moghtader, p. 20, according to Ḍokāʾ).

What was the reason for this initiative taken by Shah Ṭahmāsp? The cause for the interest shown by the Safavids in this city has been sought in the fact that one of their ancestors, Sayyid Ḥamza, was buried at Ray near the mausoleum of Šāh ʿAbd-al-ʿAzim (sources in Minorsky, *EI1*); or else in the fact that Tehran had certainly for a long time been an active center of Shiʾism, as was indeed almost the entire province of Ray at least until 1340, so that the most ancient Islamic monuments preserved in the city are indeed Shiʿite (Adle, p. 29). But these factors, which may have played a part, are evidently not sufficient. We must above all resort to the historical circumstances of the period. Shah

Ṭahmāsp's building of the wall took place for good historical reasons at the height of the Safavid war against the Ottomans. Being threatened by the latter, he had to move his capital from Tabriz, which was too exposed to the enemy, to Qazvin, where he remained for the rest of his reign. Thus his attention was drawn to the Tehran region, which, some 150 kilometers east of Qazvin, could potentially provide his forces with a convenient fall back. It was certainly in connection with this establishment of the capital at Qazvin that the important operation of Tehran's urbanism was undertaken. It must indeed be observed that the task was obviously excessive and disproportionate considering the real needs of the existing small town. The enclosure, measured outside of the ditch, was about 8 kilometers long (a mistaken eastern source quoted by Minorsky *EI1*, and again reproduced by Moghtader, 1992, p. 39, quotes a length of one farsakò), corresponding with a surface of about 4.5 sq. km (another misleading quote to the contrary by 19th century European visitors mentioned the surface to be 7.5 sq. km. [Olivier, III, p. 50], and later 8 sq. km [Berezin], the latter still repeated by Moghtader, 1992, p. 41; cf. Ahrens, p. 46). Even when taking account of the dispersion of the houses within the gardens, and the lack of density in this kind of settlement, the surface area was enormous for a population not exceeding 15,000 to 20,000 (Herbert, p. 214, in 1627, was to attribute 3,000 houses to the city). The enclosure of Shah Ṭahmāsp could in fact shelter more than 100,000 people, and this was indeed the case in the 19th century, a time when (see below) the *intra muros* framework marked out in the 16th century still included a large number of empty and non-built-up spaces. There was indeed room enough to establish a powerful army, with all its equipments and supplies, and it was from this point of view that the operation could be understood.

The disproportion between the closed surface of walls and the population was all the more striking due to the fact that the city seemed to have more or less stagnated during the following two centuries. Amin-Aḥmad Rāzi, himself a native of Ray, praised the incomparable abundance of its gardens and canals, as well as the charm of Šemirān, in his *Haft eqlim*, written in 1028/1619. In 1618, Pietro Della Valle (Italian text, 1843, I, pp. 702-703; Fr. tr., III, pp. 435-36) described it as a "large city" (*città grande*), more spacious than Cascian (Kāšān), "which, however, was neither populated nor inhabited, because all that could be seen were large gardens (*grandissimi giardini*) with all sorts of fruits." The city kept its aspect of an "inhabited garden" with innumerable canals crossing it and big plane trees shading its streets, as well as the *čenārestān* ("park of plane trees") surrounding the royal residence. The city

was evidently a regional administrative center. It was the home of a *beglerbegi*, a provincial governor (*gran capo di provincia*), whose authority extended as far as Firuz-kuh. But there were "neither buildings (*fabbrica*) nor any other noteworthy things." And the Safavids had built no grand mosques or any new prestigious edifices there. All their attention was turned towards the kind of grandiose urbanism that was being developed in Isfahan. Chardin merely mentioned Tehran by the way, describing it as a "small town."

Despite the lack of interest shown by Shah ʿAbbās and apparently also by his successors in the city–whatever the cause may have been (the excessive indulgence in fruit as mentioned above, or the fact reported by Pietro Della Valle, that the town had never welcomed him in the way he had wished)–he nevertheless had a new residence built there (the *Čahār bāḡ*). He sometimes stopped in Tehran when he traveled north, and the texts mention it on various occasions. Shah Soleymān (1667-97) had an imperial secretariat (*divān-ḵāna*) built in the *čenarestān*, where Shah Solṭān Ḥosayn received the Ottoman ambassador in 1720 (Ḏokāʾ, p. 3 and 18; Douri effendi, 1810, p. 4; cf. Moghtader, p. 40, who mentions the date 1722). But Tehran was certainly no more than a modest provincial town. In the 18th century, it certainly suffered a great deal from the siege by the Afghans and the unrests that followed as a result.

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