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magisterial, *Science and Civilization in China*, 7 vols. in 27 (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1954-), alchemy is covered in vol. 5, pts. 2-5; medicine in vol. 6, pt. 6. On the importance of paper in the Islamic world see Jonathan M. Bloom, "Silk Road or Paper Road?" *The Silk Road* 3/2 (2005): 21-26, which summarizes his elegant book *Paper Before Print: The History and Impact of Paper in the Islamic World* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Pr., 2001). A good many (but by no means all) of the important Arabic sources are available in English

translation. Note in particular the translation of *The History of al-Tabari / Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l muluk*, 40 vols. (Albany: State University of New York Pr., 1985-); *The Fihrist of al-Nadim: a Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, Bayard Dodge, ed. and tr. (New York: Columbia Univ. Pr., 1970); *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, A.D. 1325-1354, tr. H.A.R. Gibb [Works issued by the Hakluyt Society, 2<sup>nd</sup> ser., nos. 110, 117, 141, 178, 190], 5 vols. (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1958-2000).

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### **On the Road:**

## **Caravan Routes of Iran**

**Frank Harold**

*University of Washington, Seattle (USA)*

*Photographs by* **Ruth Harold**

For travelers and merchants of the middle ages, Iran was unavoidable. The great caravan roads that linked China and India to Rome or Constantinople passed through Persian lands, and the sea-lanes terminated at ports in the Persian Gulf. Iranian rulers took full advantage of their geographical opportunities: they taxed foreign trade, and made every effort to keep East and West from making direct contact. Merchants chafed at the exorbitant tolls, but there was little they could do about it; efforts to by-pass Iranian spaces, either by land north of the Caucasus Mountains, or via the Red Sea, had only limited success. Iran's relative prosperity from medieval times through the 17<sup>th</sup> century was due, in no small measure, to revenue from trade.

Iran is a large country, with a continuous history of some 2500 years as a nation and a state. The major caravan routes, which trace back far into antiquity, remained in use into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and geography dictates that modern roads must generally run parallel to those of the past. In consequence, Iran's abundant legacy of art and architecture is quite accessible, or would be but for recurrent political frictions. The present article is the fruit of a

long road journey in 2000, when tensions abated for a time, which took us diagonally across Iran from northwest to southeast, roughly following the route of Marco Polo's journey in 1273 CE. The world of the caravans is vanishing fast, but those who look can still find places where the roar of automobile traffic has not yet drowned out "the whispers of the desert-wind, the tinkling of the camels' bell."

### **The world of the Arab geographers**

We are remarkably well informed concerning the historical geography of Iran, thanks chiefly to a small band of Muslim scholars, writing mostly in Arabic, who recorded in detail the state of the region in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. At that time, Iran was at least nominally part of the Abbasid Empire (though in practice much of the country was ruled by local dynasties or by the Seljuk Turks), and Baghdad was the center of the universe. This was the city glorified in "The Thousand and One Nights" (known in English as "The Arabian Nights"), a glittering metropolis of palaces, mosques and schools, hospitals and bazaars, that covered some five square miles and held more than a million souls.

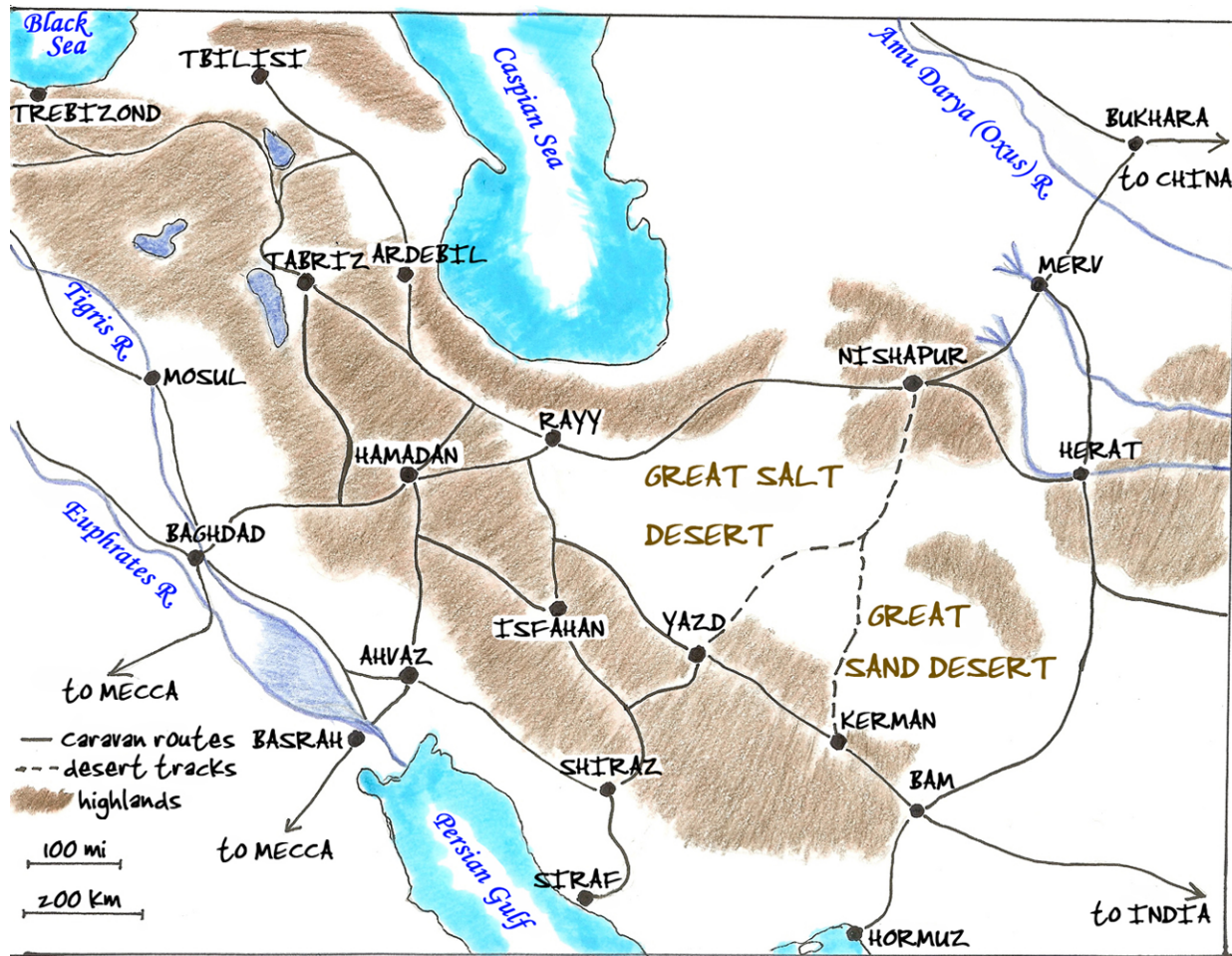


Fig. 1. Towns and trade routes of medieval Iran, 10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> centuries.

As the focal point of an empire that stretched from China to Spain, Baghdad was a magnet that drew luxury goods from all over the world, and the Caliph's court had no equal for wealth, prestige and display.

The Arab geographers were a much more sober lot than the brilliant fabulists who invented Aladdin and his lamp. In the early years of the 10<sup>th</sup> century Estakhri, a native of Iran, traveled extensively and recorded his journey, with emphasis on Fars and western Iran. This pioneering work was augmented and incorporated into that of his successor, Ebn Hawkal, a native of Nusaibin in Syria, who roamed the Abbasid world for thirty years as a merchant and missionary, and compiled his observations in a book entitled "Configurations of the Earth." The grand master of geographical science of that day was their younger contemporary Muqaddasi, a well-educated son

of Jerusalem, who produced a systematic treatise intended to be useful to merchants and educated men. In the following century Nasir-i-Khusraw, an Ismaili Persian from a land-owning family in Transoxiana, embarked on a pilgrimage to Mecca that lasted for seven years, and came to include Syria and Egypt as well. His account is one of the earliest in Farsi. These pioneers and their successors described an extensive web of roads, radiating from Baghdad, that knit together a vast region that was reasonably well ordered and prosperous, and whose life was linked to faraway lands beyond the bounds of the Eastern Caliphate. The map shown in Fig. 1 has been purposely simplified, omitting several of the known routes so as to emphasize the chief lines of communication across the Iranian plateau.

The chief thoroughfare of that time was the Great Khorasan Road, by which travelers could

proceed to northern Iran, across Central Asia (a region Iranian in speech and culture, and part of Khorasan, land of the sunrise), and eventually to China. The route was already ancient, antedating the coming of Islam by more than a millennium. The armies of Cyrus and Darius had marched that way, extending the rule of the Great King across Afghanistan as far as the Indus River. Alexander the Great followed in their footsteps. Goods from China had come by the Khorasan Road since the time of the Han, the Parthians and the Romans in the first centuries CE. So long as strong government was entrenched in Chang-an, and the rambunctious Turks were under control, the Khorasan Road was the premier artery of long-distance trade and matches our common perception of the Silk Road. And after the Arab conquest, pilgrims from the cities of Central Asia took the Khorasan Road on the annual Hajj to Mecca in Arabia.

Going eastward, the Khorasan Road climbed onto the Iranian Plateau, crossing country inhabited chiefly by Kurds, and passed through cities that have endured triumph and disaster from antiquity to the present day. Then as now, Kermanshah was the chief city of Kurdistan, noted for its many trees, abundant fruit and the rock-cut alcoves of Tagh-e-Bostan with their spectacular Sasanian sculptures. Darius' triumphal inscription on the cliff of Bisitun was well known, though perhaps not fully understood: Ebn Hawkal read the panel depicting Darius with the tributary kings as the representation of a school-house, with the master and his boys. Hamadan, once capital of the Medes, was described as a fine and large city that had recovered from the destruction inflicted during the Arab conquest. The road then went by the important center of Rayy (see below), today a suburb of sprawling, smoggy Tehran. It then followed the southern foot of the Alborz Mountains to Nishapur, the chief city of Khorasan, described in detail by both Ebn Hawkal and Muqaddasi. Like other large towns of that time, Nishapur consisted of a fortress, the town proper and a suburb. All three were defended with walls, pierced by numerous gates that gave access to the extensive markets. No town in all of Khorasan was healthier or more populous than Nishapur, or more celebrated for its rich stores of merchandise and the wealth of its merchants.

Continuing east, the road passed through Tus, a few miles north of today's Mashad (which did not yet exist), an important regional center that was home to the poet Ferdowsi who flourished around 1000 CE. Here, on the fault-line between Iran and Turan, Ferdowsi composed the *Shahname*, Iran's national epic. Nothing of Tus remains, except for the bleak ruins of its citadel. Turning northward, the Khorasan Road dropped down into the Kara Kum desert, making for the oasis city of Merv. Watered by an extensive network of canals, Merv is believed to have held a million inhabitants when the Mongols took it, and butchered every one. Of the splendors of Merv, only confused ruins and the mausoleum of a Seljuk sultan survive today. Beyond lay Bukhara, Samarkand and eventually, across the high Pamirs, half-legendary China.

Well-traveled branches diverged from the Khorasan Road at many points, of which only the chief ones are shown on the map. From Hamadan one could journey southward onto the Mesopotamian plain, or southeast to the ancient city of Isfahan, several times the capital of Iran. One could also head north for Qazvin, there to pick up a western branch of the Silk Road for Tabriz, Dabil (not far from today's Yerevan in Armenia) and eventually the port of Trebizond on the Black Sea. A further branch led northward to Ardebil, Tbilisi and the Caucasus. Nishapur was the point of departure for a track southward, between the parched basins shown on the map as the Great Salt Desert and the Great Sand Desert. And from Merv, routes led to Balkh, Herat, Kandahar and India.

Little enough remains today of Rayy, the Greeks' Rhages, which was a major hub of commerce and transport, and considered by some the finest city east of Baghdad. Rayy was the starting point for the major caravan route that skirted the western and southern side of the central deserts, on the way to the Persian Gulf or to India. Way stations still featured on maps include Qom, Kashan, Na'in, Yazd, Kerman and Bam, several of which we shall visit below. From this road, also, branches led forth. Several routes led to Isfahan and Shiraz; the latter began as an Arab foundation that grew into an important center, and today rules the South. Shiraz could also be reached from Baghdad, via Ahvaz. Several routes led northeast, across the central desert. Most important, here was the



access to ports on the Persian Gulf. Much of the trade with India and China was conducted by sea. Basrah has been the key to this commerce from antiquity to the present, with direct links by water to Baghdad and destinations to the west. Even the Iranian Plateau received imported goods via Baghdad, though it did also have ports of its own. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE, the chief harbor on the eastern shore of the Persian Gulf was Siraf; that town was utterly destroyed in 977 by a powerful earthquake, from which it never recovered. Siraf's place was taken by Hormuz, and eventually (in the 17<sup>th</sup> century) by nearby Bandar Abbas, which remains an important harbor to this day.

### Caravans

Those were tracks and routes, of course, not proper roads, that crisscrossed the uplands and assured Iran a central role in the commerce of western Asia. Wheeled vehicles and made roads all but vanished from the Middle East after the Arab conquest, not to be seen again until the 19<sup>th</sup> century; and in Iran, true roads had hardly ever existed. Indeed, caravans of pack animals — most often camels, but sometimes mules or large donkeys — were better suited to the circumstances: vast spaces, sparsely inhabited and infested with robbers, where wells were few and far between and a vicious storm might blow up at any moment. Caravans have been the engines of trade since antiquity (remember those double-humped camels depicted on the bas-reliefs at Persepolis), allowing men and goods to travel in relative security on fixed routes and on a predictable schedule [Fig. 2].

There was nothing haphazard about the trade caravan, which would spend weeks or months on the road to multiple destinations, and required careful organization. The animals, sometimes hundreds of them, were linked together in strings of twenty or so, each in charge of a leader. A large booming bell announced the

caravan's approach, "the insignia and alarum of the leading camel alone" (Curzon). The enterprise as a whole came under the command of a chief, who made all the necessary arrangements and chose the route and halting places. Individual travelers paid the chief a lump sum for each animal, which covered a share of the cost of fodder, guides and guards. Goods were bundled into packs weighing up to 200 lbs each; passengers could be carried in panniers. The route was generally well established, sometimes marked with cairns or poles, with halts determined by the location of settlements or wells. But the track was not always obvious, and so caravans employed local guides familiar with the terrain. The danger of attack was always just over the horizon; travelers went armed, and caravans were accompanied by guards. Individual travelers must perforce attach themselves to a caravan and take care not to fall behind.

Caravans were of several sorts. Most of them were engaged in trade, and much of the traffic was local. Everything moved on animal-back: grains, dates and dried fruit, dried fish from the Caspian Sea and the Gulf, firewood and salt and cooking oil. Certain manufactured goods were distributed across Iran and were also exported: Nishapur was famous for its black-on-white ceramics, cottons came from Fars, Rayy, Bam and Khuzestan. Silk was spun in Yazd, Nishapur and Transoxiana; Ardebil and Qom produced leather goods. Carpets (the chief furniture of the East) traveled all over, and remote Baku was known for a useful medicinal substance, petroleum. Even the winter's snow was in demand, to cool the palaces of the Caliph and his ministers during Baghdad's torrid summers.



Fig. 2. Caravan country: Taft, in central Iran.

It's the long-distance trade that conjures up the romance of the Silk Road. Goods of high value but low bulk were carried across Iran to destinations far to the west or east — Constantinople, Baghdad or Chang-an. Few individual mer-

chants ever traveled the whole route; instead, goods changed hands many times along the way. From China came silk, of course, but also porcelain and paper; turquoise and lapis lazuli were shipped from the oasis cities of Central Asia. In exchange, the West sent woolens, brocades and colored glass, but much of what Europe imported was paid for in gold. There was active trade with the Volga basin and points north, from whence came furs, amber, honey (the sweetener of antiquity), beeswax for candles and especially slaves. Iran paid chiefly in silver coins, which have been found in large numbers in both Russia and Scandinavia. Trade with India and Southeast Asia was conducted by sea. Arab dhows brought rubies, musk and perfumes, indigo and a miscellany of spices to the port cities of Siraf and Hormuz; pearls, coral, weapons and even horses traveled the other way.

Pilgrims made a large contribution to the traffic on the caravan routes. Muslims are enjoined to make pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime, and many thousands did so every year. One caravan that left Isfahan for Mecca in 1715 CE was said to number 30,000 men and women, plus an untold complement of beasts! Pilgrims from Central Asia and Iran made their way to Baghdad, and thence to Aleppo and Damascus, where they were joined by another stream from Anatolia and Istanbul. Shiites also traveled to the holy cities of Najaf and Kerbala on the plains of Iraq, sites of the martyrdom and burial of the Caliph Ali and his son Hussein. Shah Abbas, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, promoted the pilgrimage to the shrine of the Imam Reza in Mashad, and to that of Shaikh Safi in Ardebil, as alternatives that avoided the territories of his chief rival, the Sunni Ottoman sultan. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the pursuit of salvation took a macabre turn: it became fashionable for pious Shiites to be buried near the holy precincts, and huge caravans were formed to transport corpses from one end of Iran to the other.

Along the major routes travelers could expect to find caravanserais, spaced a day's journey apart — 30 to 40 km on the flat, more closely in the mountains. Many were substantial, even

forbidding buildings designed to hold off bandits and marauding tribesmen. Caravanserais were typically square or rectangular, with towers at the corners and along the curtain walls, but no windows. The single projecting entrance block featured a doorway tall enough to admit a loaded camel, barred with a heavy wooden gate. An open courtyard contained a well, occasionally a small mosque, and provided working space to load and unload animals. An arcaded portico surrounded the courtyard, with rooms for travelers behind; these were raised above ground level to keep animals from straying into the guest quarters. Stables and storerooms were placed into the corners or against the outer walls. Large caravanserais offered an upper story to accommodate official and affluent travelers. Outside the walls were likely to be market stalls where travelers could purchase cooked food, firewood and medicines, and make repairs to harness and packsaddles.

Hundreds of caravanserais were built all across Iran (Wolfram Kleiss located and measured some 500 of them, some of them pre-Islamic), and quite a few have survived [Fig. 3]. Some were put up by charitable



*Fig. 3. Safavid caravanserai near Yazd.*

bequest, but most of the caravanserais were constructed by designated government officials, who were also responsible for bridges, dikes and forts, and for the security of the roads. The state of the caravan net was always a reliable indicator of the government's effectiveness. Regardless, local rulers collected tolls, custom duties and bribes, especially in the towns. The road net probably reached its zenith in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, under the Seljuk sultans whose realm stretched from Afghanistan to Syria, with Rayy as the hub of trade. The system was wrecked by the Mongol tsunami, but





Fig. 4. Safavid bridge near Kermanshah.

recovered in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Strong central rule under the Safavids stimulated commerce, and construction boomed. If you ask the age of a bridge, fort or caravanserai [Figs. 3, 4 and 5], you may well be told that it was



Fig. 5. 19<sup>th</sup>-century fort near Yazd.

built by Shah Abbas the Great (1587 – 1629 CE). However, since the caravan trade continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, much of what one sees is likely to date to more recent times.

Towns grew up at the nodes of the road net, each with a surround of mud-brick walls, a citadel where the ruler dwelled, and a bazaar at its economic heart. The bazaar was, and remains today much more than a shopping center: it was the home of commerce, manufacture and civic life rolled into one. The traditional Iranian bazaar takes the form of a vaulted tunnel built of brick; small domes pierced by skylights enliven the roof and admit shafts of light [Fig. 6]. Small shops and workshops line the sides; they are too small to

step into, and crammed with merchandise. Business is transacted in front, amidst the bustle of shoppers and gawkers, porters and donkeys and boys scurrying to and fro carrying trays with tiny glasses of tea. Merchants are loosely grouped by trade. Baths, mosques, schools and inns open onto lanes leading off the main bazaar, and add to the din and the congestion. Money makes this world go 'round, but for its inhabitants it is also the center of social life, religion and politics. To this day bazaaris, the permanent merchants, make up a cohesive society that wields real power.

### Through Western Eyes

Then as now, trade waxed and waned with the political weather. Long-distance commerce prospered when powerful empires guarded the main roads, but withered when central authority faded and banditry made travel too dangerous. The Silk Road flourished in the first centuries CE, when the Han held sway in China, the Parthians in Iran and the Kushans in between. Another florescence came in

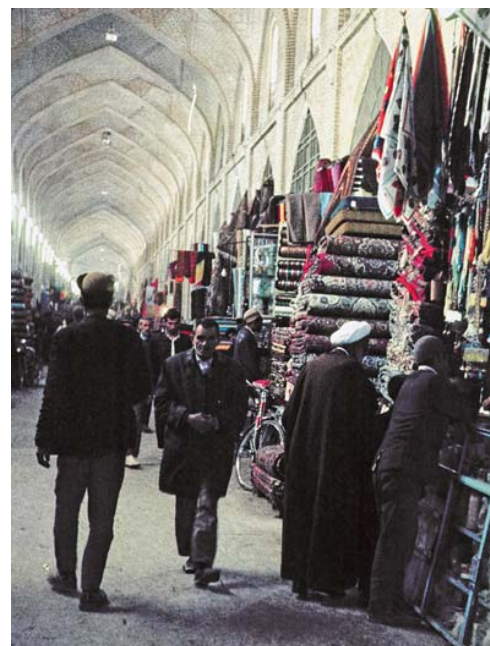


Fig. 6. In the bazaar, Shiraz.

Abbasid times, the 8<sup>th</sup> through 10<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, and again when the Seljuks dominated the region in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, with their capital at Isfahan. Some scholars believe that the Seljuk era saw the zenith of Iran's caravan trade.

A century later catastrophe struck. Bursting out of their remote grasslands in 1217 CE, the savage horsemen of Ghengis Khan and his sons devastated Central Asia, Iran and Anatolia, and punched deep into eastern Europe and the Arab lands. The Mongols were ferocious and bloodthirsty beyond anything the settled realm of Islam had ever experienced before; and nothing could stop their advance. The Mongols wanted pasture for their ponies, not fields and orchards; and so, between 1220 and 1260, cities were burnt to the ground, their inhabitants slaughtered and the cultivated land laid waste. Balkh, Bukhara, Samarkand, Merv, Tus, Nishapur, Rayy, Hamadan, Qazvin and Baghdad all shared the calamity, which lives in the Iranian psyche to this day. It took a generation for the Mongol khans to realize that pasture and ruin paid no taxes, and they began to promote revival. The empire of Qubilai Khan, in the last quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, stretched from Hungary to China, and was wide open to commerce in goods and ideas. It was a golden age of travel, and the time when explorers and merchants from Europe first discovered the fabulous realm of Inner Asia.

The Mongol khans who ruled Iran from approximately 1260 to 1400, known as the Ilkhans, left a surprisingly rich legacy of art and architecture (the 14<sup>th</sup> century is when glazed tiles first became common), suggesting that cities were reviving and economic life was flourishing again. The ancient network of caravan tracks was not substantially altered, but its focus shifted from Baghdad (which had been pillaged in 1258 CE) to northwestern Iran. The Ilkhans chose to make their capital in Maragheh, and later in the large city of Tabriz. The high road then ran through Erzerum, and the chief port was the Greek city of Trebizond on the Black Sea.

Marco Polo was a lad of 17 when, in 1271, he accompanied his father Nicolo and uncle Maffeo on their second voyage to the court of the Great Khan at Khanbaliq, today's Beijing. They carried a letter from the Pope and a phial of sacred oil,

but the two friars that had been deputed to convert the heathen bailed out early on. The Polos were made of sterner stuff. From Layas, a Mediterranean port near today's Adana, they journeyed north to Erzincan through country inhabited largely by Kurds ("an unprincipled people, whose occupation is to rob the merchants"). The Polos probably intended to make for Khanbaliq by way of the steppes of Central Asia, but a local war barred the way. So they traveled eastward to Tabriz, which they found to be "a large and very noble city ... so advantageously situated for trade that merchants from India, Baudas [Baghdad], Mosul ... as well as from different parts of Europe resort thither to purchase and to sell ... precious stones, pearls etc." Regrettably, "The Mahometan inhabitants are treacherous and unprincipled." From Tabriz the Polos apparently struck diagonally across Iran for Hormuz. Their route is not specified, but we pick up their trail at the desert city of Yazd (cloth of silk and gold), and again at Kerman (turquoise, embroidered cloth, hunting falcons and all sorts of arms and equipment). They intended to take ship at Hormuz, but judged the vessels on offer to be unseaworthy. So north they went again, through the deserts of Seistan and Khorasan, and eventually made their way to Balkh and across the Pamirs. By the time the three Venetians bowed down before Qubilai Khan, they had been on the road for three and a half years. Is Marco's tale true? Skeptics have questioned his veracity from the beginning, and not without reason. Polo's account of Iran has odd gaps, but it also includes much specific detail; it reads to me like the imperfect recollection of firsthand experience.

Marco Polo the merchant tells of trade and manufactures; subsequent travelers had wider interests. An outstanding description of Iran is that of Thomas Herbert, who was all of 21 when he was attached to a mission that King Charles I sent to the court of Shah Abbas in 1627. By then the caravan road to Central Asia was long past its heyday, and foreign trade was conducted by sea; but Iran was orderly and prosperous, and regional trade flourished. Herbert was fascinated and impressed by what he saw, notwithstanding the fact that he fell deathly ill near the end and barely lived to tell of his adventures. Landing near Bandar Abbas ("the most valuable port the King of Persia hast")

they rode to Shiraz ("pleasantest of Asiatic cities"), visited Persepolis and continued on to Isfahan — a journey of three months. Herbert, like later travelers, was enchanted by Isfahan: "most pleasant in its situation, elegant as to building, populous for inhabitants, rich in trade, and noble by being the usual residence of the court." It is also blessed with "air pure and quick." The Shah had decamped to the Caspian Sea, and the embassy followed him there. Politically, the mission was a failure, but it inspired an engaging and informative account of the country and its people, which became a bestseller in England. And Herbert noticed something that would become important later: there was not a fortress or a regiment in the King's domain that would stand up to an English force, and no navy to speak of.

The late nineteenth century was when the going really got good, especially for British travelers who could contemplate adding Iran to their vast holdings. Indeed, Colonels Charles M. MacGregor and Charles E. Yate, traveling in the border regions of Seistan and Khorasan in 1875/6 and 1893 – 1898, respectively, seem to be reconnoitering the country with a view to a future campaign. The most impressive contribution to that literature is Lord Curzon's magisterial opus, *Persia and the Persian Question* (1892). With the security of India at stake, the Great Game is never far from his mind (the eastern countries are "pieces on a chessboard upon which is being played out a game for the dominion of the world"), but Curzon's account of Persia's geography and current realities has never been surpassed. Less lofty but more in sympathy with Iran's long-suffering people is Edward G. Browne's account of his *Year amongst the Persians* (1893). Here is a traveler with a curious and wide-open mind, ready to immerse himself in the literary and religious culture of a country that he came to love, and willing to put up cheerfully with its hazards and discomforts.

The contemporary adventurer, apt to blanch in horror at the thought of brigands and bedbugs alike, can only admire the fortitude of our predecessors of a century ago. They all got their lumps — from the execrable roads, the decrepit and verminous caravanserais, the broken-backed horses and the thieving muleteers. Even sympathetic observers, such as Browne and the American scholar Williams Jackson (1906),

describe a country of dirt-poor people dwelling in half-ruined towns huddled within crumbling walls ("ruin added to ruin"; Browne). Corrupt guards and officials fleece everyone, and bandits skulk in the passes and the dark. The Khorasan Road between Mashad and Tehran was especially at risk from slave raiders, until the Russians crushed the Turkomans in 1881. Fanatical and bigoted mullahs, often flagrantly deceitful (especially in the matter of liquor) stir up ignorant folk to violence against native minorities such as Zoroastrians and Ba'bis (Bahai), and foreigners are their favorite prey. You set foot inside a mosque or shrine at the risk of your life. As to the romance of the journey, "no greater misery can be conceived than that of travelling with a caravan, the de'sagre'mens of which are many and various" (Ferrier, 1857).

Lord Curzon, who knew the state of the Shah's governance intimately, wrote scathingly of the rapacity of a system based largely on corruption, intrigue, extortion and embezzlement (his terms). The results were plain to see in the total absence of public works, and in the dilapidated state of all buildings, from caravanserais to mosques, except in the major cities. To be sure, we are reading European travelers whose critical perceptions were sharpened by the certitude that their own civilization was both materially and morally superior. But they do not mislead us: the latter nineteenth century was a low point in Iran's fortunes, which ultimately spawned the upheavals that would roil Iran in the next century, and spill over into our own time.

### Travelers' notebook

The modernization of Iran during the past century has swept away that world of medieval commerce. You may still see an occasional camel, but caravans are no more. Goods go by lorry, pilgrims travel by bus or 'plane and lodge in hotels, not caravanserais. The city walls have all been demolished, because improved security made them redundant and they got in the way of automobile traffic. Even in the thirty years that lay between our yearlong residence in Iran (1969/70) and our return as visitors, the ambience changed quite noticeably. Villages once accessible only by mule track are now linked to the wider world by asphalted road.





*Fig. 7. The citadel of Bam before the earthquake.*

Muddy streets have been paved, crumbling edifices spruced up, things are tidier and more salubrious. The bazaars continue to function but the craftsmen have gone, and the shops sell cheap mass-produced stuff. Better goods are increasingly found in standard walk-in stores, lining streets choked with traffic. The Islamic Republic takes a distinctly non-Western view of liberty and has a reputation for hard-fisted politics and corruption, but seems also to have done much good. It all looks a lot less like the middle ages, and while the antiquarian in me deplores change, it would be churlish to grumble at what must, by all reasonable standards, count as progress.

This is not to imply that there is nothing left to see in Iran! The country is extraordinarily rich in monuments of the past, and the caravan trade itself has left many traces. Caravanserais are not uncommon by the roadside and in the towns, where they have been converted into workshops, warehouses and occasionally restaurants. Here and there an ancient bridge still spans its stream. Some of the castles that once stood guard over the trade routes still stand. Until recently, the mud-brick fortress of Bam in southeastern Iran was the most spectacular [Fig. 7], but in 2003 a monstrous earthquake snuffed out 26,000 lives in the town and brought the walls tumbling down. The vaulted bazaars are still evocative and photogenic, and the carpets and block-printed cloth as tempting as ever. But what chiefly draws travelers to Iran is the lavish architectural

heritage in brick, stucco and glazed tile. Only in the Iranian world (including its periphery, Iraq and Central Asia) do you find architecture in color. Iran's many mosques and shrines include some of the most glorious buildings ever erected; their tiled domes and minarets glow like jewels amidst the dull duns and browns of their surroundings. And unlike the situation a century

ago, most of them admit non-Muslim visitors.

Individual buildings are like plums in a porridge; what we cherish most are those towns that have managed to retain something of the appearance and the feel of earlier times. Places like this are not common anywhere (Bruges, Salamanca, Bikaner in Rajasthan and Islamic Cairo come to mind), and are especially rare in Iran where earthquakes are frequent, a change of ruler was often an occasion for mass destruction, and preservation of the past was never a high priority. The warren of alleys behind Isfahan's Friday Mosque qualifies, and I recall another in Kerman. The outstanding example of an ancient place that still looks like one is the desert city of Yazd (which we described in an earlier article in these pages; Fig 8), and to a lesser degree the nearby town of Na'in. Yazd boasts narrow mud-brick alleys shored up with arches, a lively old bazaar and one of the finest Friday Mosques in all of Iran.



*Fig. 8. The desert city of Yazd.*

UNESCO has declared Yazd a World-Heritage site. Na'in [Fig. 9] is similar but smaller, and claims one of Iran's most ancient mosques, built in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, let me mention Khiva and Bukhara, out on the fringes of the Persian world. Bukhara is older and has the finer buildings, but no atmosphere. Khiva is much more recent; its buildings date to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the city grew fat on the profits of its slave market, kept stocked with Persian and Russian captives by Turkoman raiders. The Russians at last put a stop to it in 1873, and the life went out of the town. Khiva was heavily restored in Soviet times and turned into a museum. Hardly anyone lives within the walls, but the ramparts are imposing and the buildings gleam with blue tiles. There is about Khiva a touch of fakery. And yet, standing on the palace walls at sundown, you gaze out over a purely Persian cityscape of flat roofs overtopped by domes, eywans and tall minarets [Fig. 10]. I know of no more evocative vision of the Khorasan Road in caravan days.



Fig. 9. An alley in Na'in.

A very different facet of Old Persia lives on at the many shrines where pilgrims gather. They no longer travel by caravan but they continue to come, an enduring feature of life in Iran as it was in the European middle ages. Since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, thousands of Iranians have made the hazardous journey to Shiism's holiest shrines at Najaf and Kerbala, undeterred by the risk of stampedes and suicide bombers. Pilgrims flock to Shah Cheragh in Shiraz [Fig. 11, facing page], and find their way to the tombs of the Safavid Shaikhs in Ardebil, up in northwestern Iran [Figs. 12, facing page; 13, 14 p. 28]. The hereditary chief of a militant Sufi brotherhood and endowed with irresistible charisma, Shaikh Ismail was all of twelve years old when he led forth his Turkoman warriors to conquer Iran for Shiism (1499 CE). As the founder of the Safavid dynasty, Shah Ismail is still a potent force and intercessor.

Blessed above all the others is the pilgrimage to the tomb of the Imam Reza, eighth in the line of divinely guided and infallible Imams descended from the Caliph Ali. The Imam died in 817 CE (of poison, Shiites believe), and was buried at Mashad in northeastern Iran; of all the many shrines in the country, his is the most sacred. For most of its history the shrine has been off-limits to foreigners; we were privileged to enter it in 1970, during a brief period when Shah Mohammed Reza ordered it opened (the present status is not clear to me). Nowhere in Iran will you find glazed tiles more lustrous than in the Mosque of Gowhar Shad and the adjoining courtyards. And even the most hardened rationalist cannot fail to be moved by the passionate devotion of the swarms of pilgrims, who have come from all corners of this huge country to bask for a little while in the grace of a long-dead martyr.



Fig. 10. The rooftops of Khiva, Uzbekistan.

## About the authors

Frequent contributors to this journal, **Frank** and **Ruth Harold** are scientists by profession and travelers by avocation. Frank was born in Germany, grew up in the Middle East and studied at City College, New York, and the University of California at Berkeley. Now retired from forty





Fig. 11. The shrine of Shah Cheragh, Shiraz.

years of research and teaching, he is Professor Emeritus of biochemistry at Colorado State University, and Affiliate Professor of microbiology at the University of Washington. Ruth is a microbiologist who studied at the University of Arizona and the University of California at Berkeley; now retired, she is an aspiring watercolor painter. The Harold family lived in Iran in 1969/70, while Frank served as Fulbright lecturer at the University of Tehran. This experience kindled a passion for adventure travel, which has since taken them to Afghanistan and back to Iran, across the Middle East, into the Himalayas and Tibet, up and down the Indian subcontinent and along the Silk Road between China and Turkey. They can be reached at <frankharold@earthlink.net>.

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Fig. 12. Shrine of Shaikh Safi, Ardebil.

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[silkroad/cities/iran/mashad.html](http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/cities/iran/mashad.html)>. The map is based on several sources, especially *An Historical Atlas of Islam*, William C. Brice, ed (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981); and the *Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients* (Wiesbaden: Dr Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1994).

Quotations: "The whispers of the desert wind" etc, from *The Kasidah of Haji Abdu el Yezdi*, by Richard Burton (1880). Others were taken from the sources cited.



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Fig. 13. The "Ardebil Carpet," one of a pair commissioned by Safavid Shah Tahmasp for the Ardebil family shrine, AH 946/CE 1539-40. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Inv. no. 272-1893. For more information: <[http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/asia/object\\_stories/ardabil/index.html](http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/asia/object_stories/ardabil/index.html)>.



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Fig. 14. A Ming Dynasty Jigdezhen kilns blue-and-white porcelain plate, 1403-1424, donated in 1611 by Safavid Shah Abbas I to the Ardebil family shrine, which housed one of the largest collections anywhere of Chinese porcelain. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.