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The Norm of Mādi: Water Management System in Safavid Isfahan

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Abstract

After about five centuries from the Seljuqs' era, Isfahan was again picked up as the capital by Shah Abbas I Safavid in the early seventeenth century. Ruling an arid land such Iran without a serious attention to water management system was impossible. The water management system was more important for Shah Abbas because of his vision about the new capital of his empire and the important role of water order in it. He had to manage the city's water, both for urban and agricultural uses, so to be proper for the city's explosive growth in expansion and population, and for his vision and power. Reading Safavid Isfahan from its water management system viewpoint is one of the most important ways in understanding the city. In this paper, we do it by an anthropological approach and interpretive-historical method. In the water management system of Safavid Isfahan, they allow the mādis (manmade streams) to pass through the city on the basis of certain rules. They used the streams both for consumptions and in urban spaces, by the two main mādis called Fadan and Farshādi, and then conveyed water to the suburb. Among the mādis in the city, the city itself had share only in the water of Fadan mādi. The other mādis, having no benefit for the city, passed it and flowed into the farmlands nearby. The water distribution system that ruled over Zāyandeh Rood River and the mādis was also valid in the city water system; in summers, the water was reserved for agricultural lands in the suburb and only occasionally flowed through the city streams. Such an achievement was only possible by a considered hydraulic and civil engineering (which its study is not in the scope of this paper), by water rights and distribution system and careful supervision proper to the needs, weather and juridical laws. Such a management had also economical aspects, which were managed by selling and consecrating water according to Islamic jurisprudence. Selling water was among the major income resources of the Safavid court. Depending on the size of all owners' properties, and depending on the number of times that they made use of water in a month, they paid annually. The water management organization was also important. The importance of water system in the city management required a perfect and strict supervision; so the water bailiff (mirāb) was a considerable office in the Safavid court; to the extent that the water bailiff of the Capital Isfahan was once the commander-in-chief of the Khorasan Province, and sometimes the king himself supervised the system. The waning of the Safavids was also along with, or followed by, the propagation of corruption in water system management. For example, the tourists' accounts in the reign of Shah Suleiman testify the propagation of oppression and corruption among water bailiffs, so that the water bailiffs and their assistants usually took huge bribes from the peasants.

Keywords: Urban History, Safavid Isfahan, Traditional Water Management, Water Supply System.