

Traces and tales : a journey through Persian landscape

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Out beyond ideas
of wrongdoing and rightdoing
there is a field.
I'll meet you there

—Rumi, 13th century

TRACES AND TALES:
A JOURNEY THROUGH THE PERSIAN LANDSCAPE

Myriam Uzor

An old Persian tale tells the story of a drover who leaves his hometown and sets out to find his fortune. One day, on a ramble between the villages of the desert, he meets a dervish. The dervish enquires about the drover's intentions and eventually promises employment that should bring him endless wealth. As a first condition, the eerie figure invites the drover to follow him home. The two walk the long and arduous path through the desert until they finally reach a small well full of water. The dervish tells the poor merchant to close his eyes and teaches him how to pronounce the name of the Almighty. The drover then utters the key word, upon which the pair descend into the well through the mirror-smooth surface of the water. The drover opens his eyes and finds himself in a garden. Never in his life has he seen a more beautiful place.

The precious element of water was unquestionably the leitmotif of our group's journey to Iran. It accompanied us everywhere we went, even though it was not always explicitly present. There were numerous moments when water was present but hiding behind subtle signs in the dry landscape. Early one morning, on the way to Yazd, we took a detour by bus to the garden of Pahlavanpour.¹ The route towards the garden led straight through the desert. There was nothing but sand, open road and the white-blue morning sky. Now and then we noticed that the sand was piled up in heaps and lined up on the ground next to the road in a regular rhythm. Not only the repetition but also the slightly flattened surface on top of each pile made us look at these strange forms, which in their color and material merged perfectly into the landscape we were passing through.

These piles, traces of infrastructure in the cultural landscape, point to underground galleries of *qanats*,² Iran's ancient water supply system. Thousands of years ago, climatic and geographical conditions led people to develop the technology of the *qanat*, a collective cultural and technological feat in the Iranian central plateau. The Persian *qanat* system plays a substantial role in the

1 A historical garden located outside the small town of Mehriz, Province of Yazd, dating from the Qajarid era.

2 A *qanat* transports groundwater seepage accumulated in a "mother well" out of a hill slope and distributes it into the settlements. Once level

with the surface, the water is used for irrigation as well as for drinking water. Labbaf Khaneiki, Majid: "Qanat and territorial cooperation in Iran. Case Study: Qanat of Hasan Abad, Yazd". In: *Water History*. 11 (2019), pp. 185–206.

history of human civilization in arid and semi-arid regions. The tunnels join a series of shaft wells whose tops appear as small craters on the surface of the land. Water flows through the vein-like underground aqueducts, propelled by gravity alone, into complex regulation systems that distribute the water amongst communities even today.³ The organization and handling of the sparse supply of water led to a steady relationship between nature and the Iranian people. The landscape became the product of a long-standing cooperation which united forces.

When we stopped in front of the Garden of Pahlavanpour, the sandy walls told us nothing about the world that hid behind. But after entering, we first heard and then saw water vigorously spouting out of fountains. The garden was situated at one of the exit points, or *mazhar* (literally “where the water appears”)⁴ of a *qanat*. The water there was very fresh and clear. It gushed lavishly from the stone duct at the garden’s highest point.

In every Persian garden water is treated like precious jewelry. Twinkling and sparkling, it flows through the garden’s carefully manufactured micro-topography. The water’s movement is designed, right down to the smallest detail. It erodes the surface over which it runs or on which it quietly stands. The water itself acquires a specific texture, pattern and sound.

The day after, we visited the Garden of Dolat Abad, located some kilometers outside of Yazd. “In traditional gardens”, a young Iranian landscape architect explained to us, “the watercourses are accompanied by a sequence of trees. Deciduous and coniferous trees are planted alternately. The deciduous tree loses its leaves and blossoms every spring. The conifer does not change in appearance; it remains ever green. This concept unites the notion of alteration with permanence. Change within the never-ending cycle of the four seasons acquires a temporal ambivalence. Besides,” he noted, “the epitome of the conifer, namely the cypress, is not rigid at all, despite its durability. Its peak is always in motion. It tends towards all points of the compass as if it was dancing with the wind.”

³ Ibid.

⁴ Semsar Yazdi, Ali Asghar; Labbaf Khaneiki, Majid:

Qanat Knowledge. Construction and Maintenance, Dordrecht 2017, p. 23.

The story of the timeless tree lingered in our heads. The cypress⁵ has great significance in Persian culture. Its significance has spread all over the world in various contexts. It is, for example, considered to be the original inspiration for the Scottish Paisley⁶ pattern, which is originally derived from the Persian *boteh* pattern. The characteristically curved tip of the cypress symbol in this pattern can be interpreted in many ways, e.g. as a flame (in connection with the fire cult of the Persian Zoroastrians), as an eye, as a drop (e.g. the Swiss “Glarnertüechli”), as a bud, or as a flower—or generally as a symbol of fertility. Textiles show the pattern in different styles and colors, and almost every oriental carpet is decorated with the floral ornament.⁷ In a playful way, the cover of this Pamphlet depicts the variation of the symbol of the cypress in a new pattern, capturing the impermanence of the wind, the four-part division of the garden and the emptiness of the desert that surrounds it.

A Persian garden is surrounded by walls, for the simple but indispensable reason of providing shade and protecting the plants. Moreover, the walls clearly delimit a specific place in the vastness of the landscape.⁸ The characteristic feature of the enclosure leads to a spatial ambiguity: being exclusive implies to *exclude* as well as to *be excluded*. As in many stories, there is a downside to paradise: it is not easy to enter. Temptation lurks in it. There is always an obstacle, a condition, or expulsion. On the other hand, the enclosure is a precondition for experiencing infinity. Within the walls, the spirit moves freely and the senses unfold.

Built about three thousand years ago between the two deserts of Dascht-e Kawir (the Great Salt Desert) and Dascht-e Lut (the Lut Desert), Yazd is one of Iran’s oldest cities and still the center of Zoroastrian culture. In the sacred Zoroastrian fire temples, the element of fire is worshipped as a symbol of divinity and perfect purity. The eternal

5 See Richter, Dunja: “The Cypress as a Bridge between the Orient and the Occident”. In: Pamphlet. *Lost in Paradise: A Journey Through the Persian Landscape*, 24 (2020).

6 Named after the small town of Paisley, near Glasgow, that became famous for its textile production.

7 The carpet is originally meant to be the two-

dimensional representative of the garden and thus a chic substitute for the garden experience in the winter months.

8 Arjomand Kermani Azadeh; de Wit, Saskia: “Defining place: the garden of Bagh-e Shazdeh”. In: Pamphlet. *Lost in Paradise: A Journey Through the Persian Landscape*, 24 (2020).

flames are constantly guarded and nourished with almond wood so that they never burn out.

Heralded by the Persian New Year festival Nowruz, our stay in Yazd coincided with the beginning of early spring. In the days before the celebration, a series of rituals take place to see off the past twelve months. The city-wide Yazd feast of fire jumping happens on the last Wednesday of the year. Friends and families gather outside, and one after another they jump over the flames of small fires. Persian songs are sung with lines such as “my weaknesses to you, your strengths to me”!

We didn't quite know how to imagine the fire jumping ritual, but knew we didn't want to miss taking part. At dusk, the bus driver steered our group out of the city, driving a few kilometers between the edges of monotonous dunes. It was already dark when the bus suddenly slowed down and joined an endless caravan of cars that were obviously headed towards the same place. After a seemingly endless ride in this column through the desert, the scene that finally appeared before our eyes was not as we expected: surrounded by monumental hills of sand, we looked down on a festival-like scene. There was a stage and numerous small huts and stalls where snacks and drinks were sold. The bus stopped at an improvised parking lot and our group mingled into the festive crowd. On many small fires, tea was continuously boiled and infused. People ate, sang and young men danced to Persian pop music that boomed from an enormous sound system. Spotlights wandered along the bottom of the sky and were lost in the blackness of the night. Only from time to time, they touched the slopes of the dunes and occasionally lit up quad-bikes that silently ran down the sand. The entire evening was a surreal experience, almost like a dream. We were jumping through the dunes and over the fires, and let ourselves be strengthened by its power. Yet again the feeling arose that time didn't really matter. That it was somehow lost or that it permanently seeped away into that cycle stream of renewal.

The story of the drover and the dervish says a lot about the understanding of the Persian landscape and its strong influence on a very old culture. It is fascinating to realize that it is basically the characteristics of the landscape which act as key links for moments of contact between the terrestrial and the transcendent world. On one hand, there is the desert, the boundless field, the burning place, whose harsh

and hostile conditions have to be experienced first-hand. But on the other hand, the most important element is the one that hardly exists: water. It secretly follows paths under the ground. Where it appears on the surface of the earth, one finds the rarest and most sacred of places.

In the story, the fountain forms a gate to the paradisiacal garden. It connects this world with the fantastic microcosm⁹ of the garden as its water enters from out there into the enclosed place, for water determines not only human life but also every other living organism, and hence the emergence and growth of vegetation. The mirror-smooth water surface reflects the face of the sky, referring to something higher. In the story of the drover and the dervish, however, the two figures do not ascend into the sky, but go down through the fountain and into the ground where the water came from. This is where life arises anew.

⁹ Foucault, Michel: "Des Espace Autres". In: *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, 5 (1984), pp. 46–49.