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Philip G. Kreyenbroek

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Sarah Stewart

Voices from Zoroastrian Iran

Oral Texts and Testimony

Vol. 2: Urban and Rural Centres:
Yazd and Outlying Villages

in collaboration with
Mandana Moavenat

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Dedicated to the memory of
Zoroastrians in Iran who lost their lives to the Covid-19 pandemic
2019–2020

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Voices from Zoroastrian Iran, Oral Texts and Testimony, Volume 2, covers the city of Yazd and the villages where Zoroastrians still live. It is a continuation of Volume 1 in which Chapter 1 (Religion) and Chapter 3 (Society) provide background and context for both volumes.

I remain indebted to all those who shared their knowledge with me thereby making *Voices from Zoroastrian Iran* a viable project. My thanks go to the Moāvenat family in particular. I thank Professor Philip Kreyenbroek for his continued support in reading through the chapters and providing translations for the passages and verses in Persian.

This volume contains some of the Group A interviews, which cover the history of each of the villages and village life. Information obtained by Ms Shahzādi in conversation with residents of the villages is summarised in Appendices A, B and C. The interviews are divided into charts according to the Table of Interviewees provided in Volume 1 pp. 386–90. They take the form of a verbal questionnaire and do not contain the detail, stories and narratives provided in Group B interviews. I would like to thank Ārmān Kamāl for his translation work on the charts and Flora Campbell-Tiech for her help in editing them. I am grateful to Kerman Daruwalla for completing the scans of Mary Boyce's Notebooks held in the Ancient India and Iran Trust, Cambridge.

Alexandra Buhler transformed the sketches provided by Mr Rashid Shohrat of the Zoroastrian *Mahalleh* of Yazd into excellent maps of that part of the city as it was in 2007. My thanks go to her and also to Mehrbod Khānizadeh for transcribing the names of streets and alleyways.

Dr Mandana Seyfeddinpur encouraged me to digitise the entire audio collection of interviews in the Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR). I am grateful to her and also to Sophie Salffner and Stephanie Petit for their work on digitising the collection. The interviews in this volume are mainly in the Dari language that is rapidly dying out as villagers leave the rural areas for the cities. They can be accessed online at: <https://elar.soas.ac.uk/Collection/MPI1089462>.

Special thanks to Andy Platts for her exemplary copy-editing of this volume with good humour, patience and a meticulous eye for detail. I would also like to thank Judith Peña and Michelle Tilling for compiling the indexes for Volumes 1 and 2 respectively. Harrassowitz publishers have been a pleasure to work with throughout the publication process and I am particularly grateful to Mr Jens Fetkenheuer for his engagement with this volume.

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Chapter 1

Yazd

1.1 Introduction

*The Yazdis of the present day retain their sterling qualities of old. They are strongly religious, whether their faith be Islam or the 'Good Religion' of ancient Persia. In the industrial field they practise carpet-weaving, silk-weaving, shawl-making, the manufacture of the shoes known as givehs and the making of abas or cloaks. Many are engaged in agriculture, the noblest of all employments according to the Avesta. In the making of qanats the Yazdis excel all other Persians, and the services of their highly skilled muqannis or qanat-makers are often in demand in other parts of the country.*¹

L. Lockhart, *Persian Cities*

The above description of the city of Yazd and its citizens accords with accounts written by travellers and chroniclers from at least as early as the thirteenth century when Marco Polo recorded his visit to what was then a town, referring to the fine date-palm plantations, abundant game and the flourishing silk trade. Situated in a long narrow valley on the edge of the *Dasht-e Kavir*, or Great Salt desert, that extends from the Alborz mountains in the north-west of Iran to the *Dasht-e Lut* desert in the south-east, the city lies at 1,200 metres above sea level. Traditionally, it derived its water supply via a network of *qanāts*, or underground channels – constructed as a series of well-like vertical shafts, connected by gently sloping tunnels, sometimes as much as fifty kilometres in length – that linked the city to the Shir Kuh range of mountains that lie to the south-west. The *qanāts* began to be replaced by electric pumps from the 1960s onwards.²

There are various legends associated with the origins of Yazd. For example, the heroes Rustam and Zāl were said to have stopped there en route from Sistan to Fars. The soldiers of Darius IV, captured by Alexander, were supposed to have been imprisoned by him, on the whim of Aristotle, in a building that has long retained its

1 Lockhart (1960): 110–11.

2 Ibid.: 107. The deep boreholes and rapid extraction of water by electric pumps have had a detrimental effect on the water supply in Yazd, causing many *qanāts* to dry up. The age-old system of *qanāt*-sharing has ceased to be efficient and farmers increasingly apply for deep well permits, which further disrupt irrigation systems. Climate change has also contributed to this situation. See Nasiri and Mafakheri (2015). See also Chapter 3 n. 36.

name, the *Zendān-e Eskandar* or Alexander's prison.³ Yazd was a religious centre for Zoroastrians in Sasanian times, for there was a major fire temple there, which was turned into a mosque in 642 CE⁴ and the *Masjed-e Jāmeḥ* was later built on this site in 1119 CE.⁵

Scholars and travellers to Yazd have commented on the isolation of the area, which made it an ideal location for Zoroastrians seeking refuge from persecution far away from the seat of government:

... the region was hardly one to attract Arab settlers, for the climate is harsh, with burning summers and searingly cold winters; and since the rainfall is scanty, the plain is partly desert – in some places glittering white with salt, in others covered by shifting, engulfing sands.⁶

Sometime during the twelfth century, tradition holds that the Dastur Dasturān moved residence from Pārs to Yazd province, taking with him two of the three great Sasanian *Vahrām* fires, Ādur Farroḡbay and Ādur Anāhid, that had survived the destruction of their fire temples and been carefully maintained by priests ever since. The Dastur made the village of Turkābād, in the north-western part of the Yazdi plain, his abode and the fires were installed in the nearby village of Sharifābād in simple mud-brick rooms adjoining an *Ātashgāh*, or place of fire.⁷ Evidence of the high priest's presence in Turkābād is recorded in one of the *rivāyats*, letters in correspondence between the Parsis, who were seeking authority on religious matters, and priests in Iran. Messengers from India who came to the two villages subsequently recognised them as the ecclesiastical centre of priestly authority in Iran. Signatures on letters show that there were a great number of priests living there, at least until 1681 – the date of the last letter to be signed by priests from Turkābād. Sometime during the eighteenth century, the Dastur Dasturān moved into Yazd city and established what became the priestly centre for the region, the *Mahalleh-ye Dasturān*.⁸

The isolation of Yazd, and to a great extent Kermān, meant they were largely spared from the atrocities of the Mongol armies invading Iran in the thirteenth century. Unlike Kermān, Yazd city held out against an attack by Ghalzai Afghans in 1722.⁹ The city was not so robust against various outbreaks of cholera recorded

3 Fischer (1973): 2, who says that according to legend the site was selected by Aristotle and that there was a tunnel that ran from inside the prison under the city walls to the town of Taft, some twenty-two kilometres distant. For other myths about the origin of Yazd and its various pseudonyms, see Modarres (2006): 8–9.

4 Lockhart (1960): 107.

5 Choksy (2006): 330. The *Masjed-e Jāmeḥ* remains on the same site today following major restoration in the fourteenth century.

6 Boyce (1989): 1–2. See also, Malcolm (1908): 36–43.

7 Choksy (2015): 400, who references Boyce (1989): 2–6 regarding dates.

8 Boyce (1977): 4–5 with notes.

9 See Lockhart (1960): 110. For the Afghan attacks on Kermān see *Zoroastrian Voices*, Part 1, pp. 101–2.

from time to time – and in living memory – given the makeshift *dakhmehs* that were constructed perforce to deal with the large numbers of dead.¹⁰

During the early Qajar period, the fortunes of Zoroastrians in Yazd – and in Iran generally – were at their lowest ebb. The combined pressures of the payment of *jizya* extracted from religious minorities, restrictions on travel and trade and general harassment by Muslims had reduced the Zoroastrian population to around 10,000 individuals, living mainly in the towns of Kermān and Yazd and surrounding villages.¹¹ With the establishment of the ‘Society for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Zoroastrians in Persia’ and the arrival of Maneckji Limji Hataria from India in 1854, the situation began to change:

Many Parsis from India visited Iran, saw personally the plight of the Zoroastrians there and with the British Resident they tried to improve the prevailing conditions. They promised the British Resident that they would pay all the expenses necessary for improving the conditions of their coreligionists.¹²

A period of modernisation followed on the heels of the Iran-wide famine of 1871, from which citizens of Yazd suffered badly. The plight of Zoroastrians was reported in the *Times of India* and by Hataria, who was in Iran at the time on behalf of the Society. The result was an increase in activity on the part of the Parsis to help their co-religionists in Iran. Many Irani Zoroastrian families were assisted to relocate to Bombay. Meanwhile, an increasing number of Parsis contributed financially to improving the infrastructure and community facilities in Iran. Yazd benefited from much of this philanthropy, not least because Nāser al-Din Shāh had eased trading restrictions for Zoroastrians, which allowed them to trade with the Parsis in India. Mary Boyce describes the camel trains that took three months to get from the port of Bandar Abbas to Yazd, travelling at night during the summer months and in daylight hours during the winter. Every twelfth camel would carry a deep-sounding bell that let the drover know that all was well in the camel train. When the caravan reached the Yazdi suburb of Rahmatābād (see below p. 130), he would deck the leading camel with bells, flowers and a plume on its head to make the grand procession into town. Calves that had been born en route would be carried on their mothers’ backs.¹³

10 One of the worst outbreaks was in 1846, when between 7,000 and 8,000 citizens died. Lockhart (1960): 110. For a more recent outbreak of cholera referred to in our Kermāni interviews, see *Zoroastrian Voices*, Part 1, p. 108.

11 For a good overview of Zoroastrians under the Qajars, see Choksy (2006): 141–53.

12 From ‘Travels in Iran 5: Support from the Sethias’, *Parsiana* (December 1990), p. 32. The British Resident refers to the person in charge of the British Residency in Bushehr who looked after the interests of Britain in Persia and the wider Persian Gulf region. As colonial subjects, the Parsis communicated with British rather than Iranian authorities in Iran. For Hataria in Iran see *Zoroastrian Voices*, Part 1, pp. 55–6.

13 See Boyce, Notebook, *Yazd – General II*: 15, where she describes the camel trains as being divided into strings of twelve camels, each with a driver (*sārebān*). Every sixth camel would carry food both for the other five and for the driver. Sugar, dates, flour to make bread – which