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Historical Sources for Studying Urban Morphology in Iran

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Abstract

This article examines historical sources for studying the urban morphology of Iranian cities and villages. It considers travelogues, Persian literature, historical maps, surviving buildings, and contemporary research as complementary forms of evidence for understanding the development and spatial organisation of Iranian settlements. It also discusses architectural features, including bazaars, mosques, sabaats, hashtis, and windcatchers, and their relationships with climatic conditions, cultural practices, and social needs. By bringing these sources together, the article outlines the principal types of evidence available for investigating Iran's urban and rural forms and highlights the importance of interpreting historical texts in conjunction with the surviving built environment.

Keywords: Urban morphology; Iran; historical sources; traditional architecture; Iranian settlements.

1. Introduction

Iranian cities and villages have evolved through the interaction of geographical conditions, climate, culture, and social life. Their distinctive urban forms are reflected in street networks, neighbourhoods, public spaces, and traditional architectural structures.

Understanding this development requires different types of historical evidence, including travelogues, Persian literature, historical maps, surviving buildings, and contemporary studies. These sources offer complementary perspectives on the formation and organisation of Iranian settlements, although the available evidence varies across historical periods.

This article provides an overview of these sources and examines selected features of traditional Iranian architecture to illustrate their relevance to the study of urban morphology.

2. Geographical Conditions of Iran

The present borders of Iran are the result of numerous colonial divisions. The borders of Iran have been changed many times over the centuries, different dynasties have ruled over this country and during their reign, many parts of the country were separated. Even though the country has been facing so many changes in different fields such as beliefs, traditions, art, culture and borders, one thing has been mutual between different eras; the land that we know as "Persia". This district covers various locations with many similarities in their rich history and culture and habits. Iran's (Persia) land is located between three important cultural districts: the Mesopotamian civilization in the West and the Chinese and Indian civilizations in the East(Pakzad, Ebrahimnia, Besharatizaadeh, Ayedi, & Kaveh, 2017).

The country is characterized by high mountainous areas near the borders and dry, infertile desert areas in the center. The Dasht-e Kavir and the Dasht-e Lut, are located in the central part of Iran's current boundaries. incomparable in drought and infertility, surround several drainage basins that act as a pit at the end of a seasonal inland river. Usually, Waters that originate from the surrounding tall mountains flow down areas and drain into the deserts.

3. The Appearance of Villages and Cities

there is a dearth of reliable information regarding the inception of early villages in Iran, and no comprehensive studies have been conducted on this subject (Mahdavi, 2019). The earliest villages uncovered in Iran were small, scattered sites that were inhabited for thousands of years before the common era. Over time, the inhabitants of these villages learned to make pottery, domesticate animals, and forge metal tools from metals such as gold, silver, copper, iron, and lead. Prior to the arrival of the Aryans, these villages were inhabited by local tribes, such as the Tapur and Amardi in the region of present-day Mazandaran province and other tribes that lived throughout the country. The origins of these tribes have not been thoroughly researched (Pakzad et al, 2017), making it difficult to establish with certainty the origins of these villages.

4. Earlier Sources and Studies

To discover and understand Iranian urban space in ancient times, it is not enough to rely only on the idea of urban space introduced by Western theorists. The research should begin with the analysis of urban spaces in ancient Iran and, at the same time, be based on the understanding of people (Mirzakochak Khosnovis, 2006).

If we look for the oldest documents about the emergence of cities and Iranian architecture, we can probably find the oldest documents in Iranian poems and travelogues.

Overall, these sources suggest that studying Iranian urban space in ancient times requires a multidisciplinary approach that combines the analysis of buildings and sites with literary and historical texts. Although the available evidence is limited, poems and travelogues can offer useful insights into early architecture and the origins of cities.

4.1 Travelogues

The travel literature of Arabs, Europeans and others who visited Iran since the Mongol period contains valuable information about Iranian villages. One of its most famous pioneers is Marco Polo, who lived from 1254 to 1324. Ibn Battuta (1304-1369), the owner of "Tahfah al-Nozza", "Ibn Khaldun" (1332-1406) and the owner of the famous "Introduction" written about the history of al-Ebar must also be mentioned. In the books and travel literature of Safavid tourists, useful content regarding village lore and rural architecture can still be found. Some of the popular tourists who wrote about these topics are Tavernie, Charden, Peter Delawaliye, Karzon, and Sykes (Zargar, 1997).

For example, Naser Khosrow, a writer, poet, philosopher, and tourist born in Iran in 1004 CE, was not an architect by the modern definition of the word. However, his itinerary places notable emphasis on architecture and the form of cities. He traveled to Hijaz due after a dream he had. This journey lasted for seven years. In his journey, he recorded everything regarding some cities and villages' foundations and defensive systems. This collection includes information about architecture and urbanism in that era and the most complete gathered knowledge on fieldwork techniques. His method can be summarized as follows; Whenever he entered a new city or place, he exactly observed that place, questioned, measured, and wrote down about it. Therefore, we currently have information about cities like Diyarbakir, Jerusalem, Mecca, and Cairo thousand years ago (Hoseinyzade, Mehrjardi, & Zabihnia, 2012).

European tourist John Chardin from France traveled to Iran and the Middle East twice and wrote one of the most important historical sources about Iran, a ten-volume book covering various topics such as medicine, music, ethics, mathematics, philosophy, education, and

geography. The book also includes paintings and sketches from cities across Iran, making it a valuable source for morphology studies.

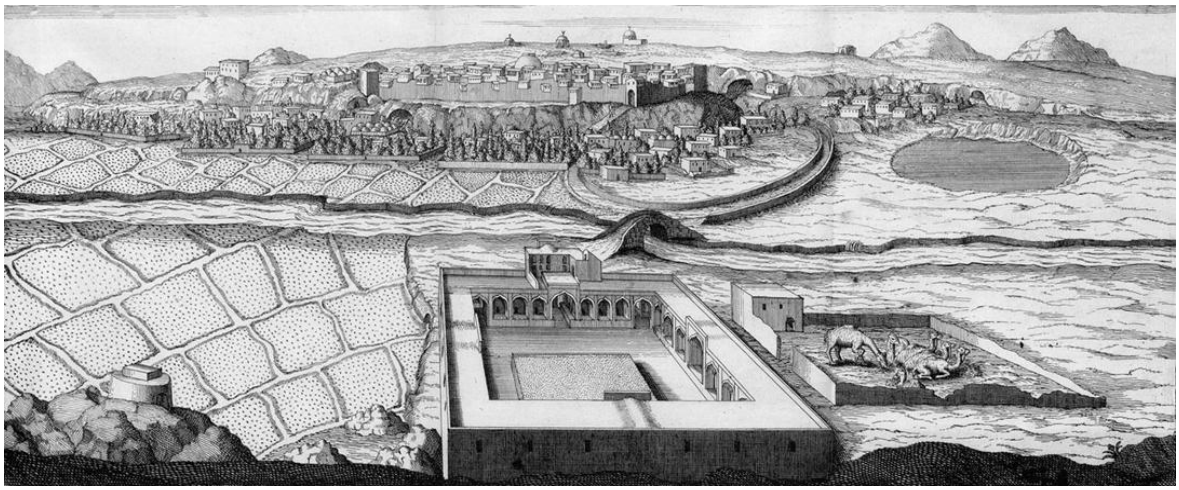


Figure 1. Sketch of Izad Khast by Jean Chardin (1670s).



Figure 2. Photograph of Izad Khast (2018). Photograph by the author.

Another notable figure is Maxime Siroux (October 25, 1907 – January 26, 1975), an architect hailing from France. He played a significant role as one of the earliest professors at Tehran University's Faculty of Fine Arts. Siroux's initial visit to Iran was as part of a delegation from the French Louvre Museum, assigned with the task of identifying and preserving historical monuments. During this period, he closely collaborated with Andre Godard, the head of Iran's antiquities department. Their collaboration resulted in the book "Artifacts of Iran." Recognizing Siroux's talent and expertise, the Minister of Education, upon Andre Godard's recommendation, hired him to design and oversee construction projects at Tehran University and the Museum of Ancient Art of Iran. Additionally, Siroux authored several books focusing on Iran's architecture and cities, his works were useful for the research as he visited some of the case studies. Siroux's works were valuable for this research as he visited some of the selected case studies. This firsthand experience allowed him to provide detailed insights and observations about the architecture and urban spaces in Iran.

4.2 Persian Literature

Persian literature serves as a historical source for investigating the formation of cities. The genre encompasses a diverse range of topics, including Persian epics and ancient stories, religious and philosophical works, romantic narratives, and ethical treatises. An examination of these works from the relevant historical period offers valuable insights into the realm of urbanism and architecture. For instance, Ferdowsi, widely regarded as one of the greatest Iranian poets (born c. 935 near Ṭūs, Iran, died c. 1020-26 in Ṭūs), is the author of the Shāh-nāmeh ("Book of Kings"), the Persian national epic. The Shāh-nāmeh comprises epic poems and narratives that depict the cultural landscape of Iran before and after the advent of Islam. According to Britannica (2016), Ferdowsi's composition of the Shāh-nāmeh took 25 years, although there are satirical references to the process taking 30 or 35 years (Britannica, 2016). Šāh-nāma can be considered a national masterpiece due to its simplicity and rationality, and still, after one thousand years, the text is understandable and familiar to Iranian people. Moreover, it covers valuable information about the culture and history of Iran before Islam.

For case studies of this research, an attempt was made to utilize this category of sources. However, obtaining information about small villages from Persian literature proved to be challenging. Nonetheless, for the examination of selected case studies, travelogues were employed and proved valuable in uncovering historical information about the villages. Furthermore, considering poetry as a resource, we can glean insights into the various spaces and overall architecture of specific periods in history.

4.3 Contemporary Research

According to Abaee (2022), The study of urban form in Iran has not become a systematic flow of research. The number of publications that rely on the classical repertoire of urban morphological knowledge is very low. Despite this, there have been several studies on cities in Iran.For instance, Russian officers created maps of Iranian cities between 1828 and 1859 to gather military information, resulting in a valuable collection of documents that provide insight into the development of Iranian cities. These maps are useful resources for researchers in various fields, including architecture, urban planning, city-building, sociology, history, geography, demography, anthropology, economics, and even agriculture (Mahyari et al., 2000).

In 1972 Khosrow Khosravi wrote: Studies on the village and rural areas in recent periods about 90 years ago, during the Qajar period was carried out by Etemad al-Saltaneh. He has monographed several northern villages of Iran in a book called Matla-Al-Shams. During the Second World War and after that, especially from 1942 to 1953, some studies on Iranian villagers' lives were carried out by some groups; however, this research was sociologically weak and focused only on its political aspects. Rural research has started at the University of Tehran, Institute of Social Studies and Research, in 1958 from the perspective of sociology or other social research, and from that year on, teaching rural sociology and research, especially rural monographs, started and following that department, rural research of the institute was founded (Khosravi, 1972) . Among the works done in the field of monographs of villages, the collection of monographs published since 1954 by the Institute of Social Studies and Research

of the University of Tehran can also be mentioned. Also, other books on rural studies were published by the same institution, but they did not have the title of the monograph (Zargar, 2003).

In recent years, the government has introduced a type of plan for villages known as "Hadi" (Means Guidance) plans. Hadi plans examine the existing rural structure of an area and set priorities for improving and organizing a region. They establish boundaries for the development and expansion of individual parcels of land and assign them a specific use. Such plans have been implemented in most of rural areas of Iran. This study utilizes data and results from Hadi plans and relevant government research to analyse the selected case studies. Expert interviews were conducted to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the government's current solutions for rural communities and to evaluate the quality of these plans. The goal is to contribute to the discourse on rural development in Iran and identify potential areas for improvement.

5. The Historical Formation of Iranian Cities

Defining the distinction between cities and villages is a complex task, particularly when taking into consideration the fluid nature of the definitions of these two terms in different regions and throughout history. To better understand Iran's villages, it is necessary to have knowledge about the form of old cities and villages in different historical periods. This is particularly true in the case of Iran, where there is a blurred boundary between cities and villages, making it challenging to differentiate between them. In terms of cities' formation and form, most cities have been villages that have expanded over time and became cities; except those that were designed and built with a specific purpose from the beginning.

Building upon the work of Habibi (2011), the forms and structures of cities throughout Iran can be divided into three principal categories: Pre-Islamic, Islamic, and Contemporary. The Pre-Islamic Urbanism period commences in the 9th century BCE and terminates in the 7th century CE with the Arab invasion of Iran. The Islamic Urbanism era begins with the establishment of the first self-governing domestic regimes and persists until 1876 CE and the establishment of the Qajar dynasty. The Contemporary Urbanism era encompasses the duration of the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasty and after Islamic revolution. To maintain a focus on the primary topic of the thesis, only the crucial phases of each era have been analysed in this study.

6. Distinctive Structures in Classical Iranian Architecture

Iranian architecture is a behavioristic style, in which the form of space is heavily influenced by the function (Larijani & Salehi , 2015). To answer to the diverse demands of society different buildings and spaces have been shaped in Iran's cities and villages. knowing these buildings and their function are important for understanding the urban morphology of selected case studies. The buildings and structures explained below are some of the most common spaces in the historic parts of cities and villages in Iran.

6.1 Sabaat

Sabaat (awning) is a roofed route. It is one of the elements of Iranian urban spaces that can be found in many passages in ancient Iranian cities and villages to this day. The Sabaat was constructed to answer the need of some climatical or statical issues and is one of the elements of Iranian urban spaces that can be found in many passages (Azad & Soltanimohamadi, 2018; Pakzad et al, 2017). As Pirnia explains: “The Sabat is sort of a midway structure for passengers brief comforting stop which consisted of a roofed rout surrounded by rooms or platforms on both sides” (Pirnia & Memarian, 2010). Similar to the formation of a bazaar. =



Figure 3. Different sabaats in the three selected case studies. Photograph by the author.

Soltanzadeh, in the book titled “Urban Spaces in Ancient Context”, also describes the Sabat as a roofed room over a passage (Soltanzadeh & Roohbakhsh, 2012).

6.2 Hashti (Dalan-e-voroudi)

The Hashti (Vestibule) is a small, roofed space that connected the opening door facing the alleyway to the inner part of the house with one or two detours. Usually, the entrance used to be located at the back of the house. The Hashti, which had access to the outside space, was designed behind it; So, The Hashti's wall, which was facing the main entrance door, remained closed and untouched. This space limited the visible view from the alleyway to the inner part of the house and kept the privacy of the house unharmed.

Two small platforms used to be built on both sides of the alleyway's opening door, which provided a shelter against the brutal sunlight or a rainstorm for passengers. It also provided a space for neighbors to sit with the owner of the house for a talk (Pakzad, et al, 2017). The Hashti did not function as a dividing space, but more as a waiting space that would glorify the passenger's journey from outside to the inner space of the house. The Hashti was also used as a means to redirect movements (Soltanzadeh, 2017).

6.3 Domes and Their Variations

Elements such as Domes and some types of Arches are structures leading back to the pre-Islamic times. In their origins, Dome is a curved-shaped structure that covers a square. Sometimes octagon-shaped, or in some rare cases, any shape that would fit in a circular or square boundary. Many types of Iranian domes were structured on four individual legs placed in four corners of a room; however, the lower space below the dome could have varied in shape or form. "Chartaqi" was a roofed structure that had a square-shaped plan with four piers in each corner and the structure that connected them with the help of four continuous arches on four sides of the square (Soltanzadeh, 2017).

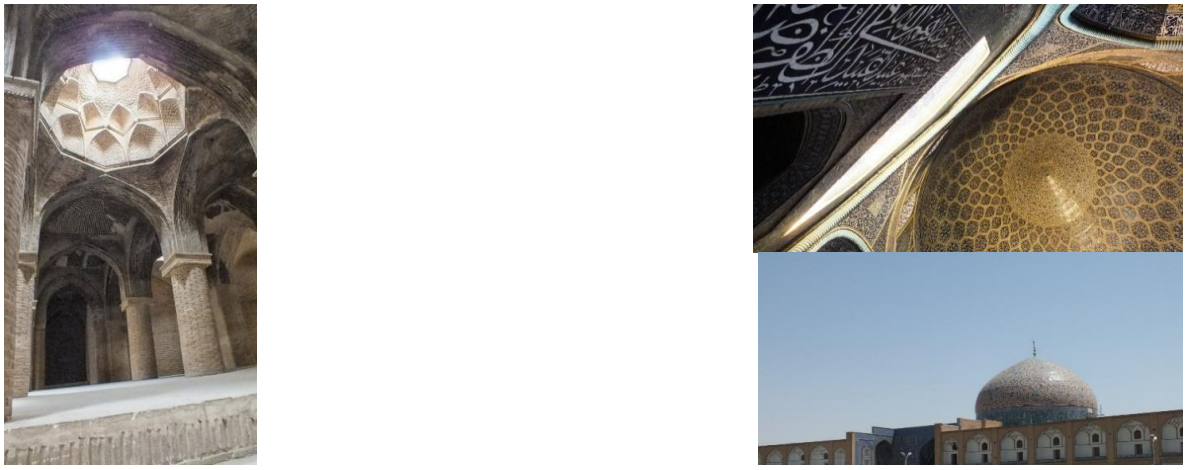


Figure 4. Different domes in mosques in Isfahan. Photographs by the author.

6.4 Ab anbar and Yakhchāl

The ancient Iranians had developed two types of structures to store water and ice: "ab Anbar" and "Yakhchals". "Ab Anbar" were cisterns, underground reservoirs used to store water for families or villages. They were particularly important in areas where water was scarce or not readily available, as they allowed communities to store and conserve water during the wetter seasons for use during dryer periods. But "Yakhchals" were a type of evaporative cooler used to store ice.



Figure 5. Ab anbar roofs with windcatchers. Photograph by the author.

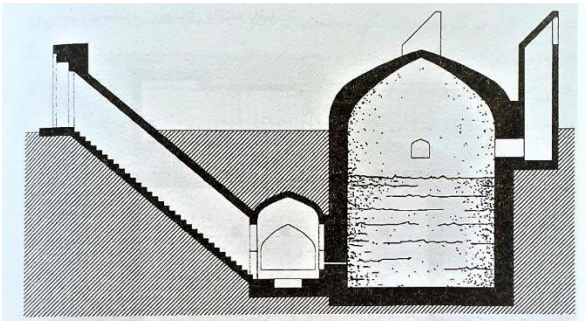


Figure 6. Section of an ab anbar. Source: Pirnia (2009).

These structures have been in use for thousands of years, with the oldest remnants of cisterns dating back to the early days of Iran's first civilization (Ghobadian, 2014). But cisterns were more crucial structures in cities located in warm, dry climates. They were known for their bold and eye-catching designs, featuring tall windcatchers and impressive domes that were visible from miles away.

6.5 Public Baths

In the past, baths were an integral part of Iran's large villages. Except in the tropical areas where bathing in rivers or streams was possible in most seasons of the year, in other villages and cities, this bathing was done in the public baths. for example, In Khuzestan, the heat is such that it is possible to use river water for bathing for about nine months of the year, so the villages are without baths (Zargar, 2003).



Figure 7. Vakil Bath, a historic public bath in Shiraz, Iran, built around 1769. Photograph by Diego Delso; licensed under CC BY-SA.

After the rise of Islam, bathhouses bulked and distanced themselves from their previous luxurious identity. Bathhouses were usually built near important buildings such as mosques or the commanderies. The water used in these bathhouses was provided and gathered by the ditches and wells surrounding the building. They were also built lower than the water supply level so that the water flow would have happened easily. Bathhouses used to split the hours of the day to give service to men and women at different times; in some cases, some days of the week it only for men, and the rest of the days belonged to women. It can be said that the early concepts of the Iranian Bathhouses were inspired by the roman and byzantine prototypes (Pakzad et al, 2017). Nowadays, some of the historic baths have been destroyed and, in some cases, converted into museums or restaurants. Usually, the baths in the villages aren't as big and beautiful as the ones in the cities but they have the same function and mostly similar architectural patterns.

6.6 Windcatcher (Badgir)

Wind catchers, also known as "Badgirs" in Iran, are a traditional architectural feature used in hot and dry climates. They are used to promote indoor comfort and ventilation through passive temperature control (Hosseini et al., 2016). The structure of a wind catcher is designed to capture the wind and direct it into indoor spaces, providing natural ventilation and cooling. The wind catcher works by harnessing the prevailing wind direction and channeling it into a building or indoor space.

In addition to houses, wind catchers were also incorporated into the design of water storages,as explained. This helped to reduce the possibility of water stagnation, by providing a constant flow of air and ensuring that the water remains fresh and clean.

Wind catchers are typically made of local materials, such as adobe, brick, or stone, and their design and construction have been carefully optimized over many generations to ensure maximum efficiency and comfort. In Iran, the use of wind catchers has a long history, and they remain an important part of the country's architectural heritage. Overall, wind catchers serve as a great example of how traditional architectural design can be used to promote sustainable living and to enhance comfort and quality of life in hot and dry climates.



Figure 8. Windcatcher in Iran. Photograph by the author.

6.7 Bazaar

A bazaar is a marketplace for exchange or sell of goods and services. According to Britannica Bazaar is a public market district of a Persian town (Britannica, 2016). The word “bazaar” itself can emphasize the Iranian originality of this urban element because this word has entered the other languages of the world from Persian(Shafaghi, 2005). From Persia, the term spread to Arabia (the Arabic word sūq is synonymous), Turkey, and North Africa. In India it came to be applied to a single shop; In current English usage it is applied both to a single shop or concession selling miscellaneous articles and to a fair at which such miscellany is sold” (Britannica, 2016).

A bazaar is a symbol of Iranian cities and is widely recognized as a main commercial center. This structure features a linear network of spaces that often begins at administrative buildings or governmental squares and extends to the city gates (Abaee, 2022). Traditional bazaars have long been the hub of social interaction in Iranian cities and are melting pots of economic, religious, and political activities. With a rich history of cultural significance, bazaars include ancillary buildings such as schools, mosques, and baths, woven into the fabric of the market (Feizabadi & Kolahchian-Tabrizi, 2013). Throughout their history, bazaars have played vital roles in Iran's economy, acting as lively centers of trade and commerce. Despite the advent of modern shopping centers, bazaars remain integral parts of Iranian life and testaments to the country's rich cultural heritage.



Figure 9. Timche-ye Amin od-Dowleh in the Bazaar of Kashan. Photograph by Jérémie B.; licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International.

The Islamic government's creation of bazaars and squares in conquered territories gave them a significant role as defining elements of Islamic cities. Bazaars evolved over time, just like mosques, starting with a simpler form and eventually becoming a symbol of local and regional government power. In the Sasani era and in Islamic cities, bazaars were located in the center of the city and extended from the main squares towards the city walls, with the bazaar often surrounding the mosque and school (Habibi, 1990). Despite the growth of modern commercial centers in Iranian cities, traditional bazaars continue to thrive and remain a significant part of the country's economy.

Bazaars are both a product of urbanization and a catalyst for its growth. In most Iranian cities, the bazaar is located in the center of the traditional, older part of the city. However, bazaars in villages are smaller and have less impact on the local morphology. These bazaars mainly serve the needs of the local population, while city bazaars served as a hub for trade and distribution throughout the country and beyond.

6.8 Religious Buildings

Religious buildings are a prominent feature of almost all villages in Iran and play a central role in local communities. In many villages, these places of worship are the largest and most

prominent structures, often towering over other buildings and constructed with the most durable materials available. Mosques, Hosseiniyehs, and Imamzadehs (shrines) serve as physical expressions of villagers' religious beliefs and practices. These buildings not only provide a space for worship, but also serve as gathering places for the community and play a significant role in shaping the cultural and social fabric of the village. The importance of religious buildings in rural Iran is a evidence to the strong religious traditions and cultural heritage of the country.

Hakim (2008) outlines the key components that a city should have, including a Mesjid al-jami (Jame Mosque) recognized as the Friday Mosque where the Friday sermon is delivered, a governor and/or Kadi to fulfill their duties within the city's jurisdiction, and a Suq (Bazaar) catering to the needs of the residents and surrounding areas.

7. Characteristics of Iranian Traditional Architecture

Iran is a diverse country in terms of climate, race, languages and so the architecture and forms of cities. Researching the causes and origins of this diversity requires extensive study. This type of architecture and urban form includes a variety of buildings and settlements, and Iran has a distinctive morphology in terms of geographical, climatic, and cultural diversity in each village. The following is an overview of the principles that are visible in the predominant architecture of Iran according to experts.

Pirnia (1922-1997) is one of the significant professors in Traditional Iranian architecture. He is known as the "father of traditional Iranian architecture" and had a large number of academic studies and research in this field. His investigations concluded some characteristics as key principles of Iranian architecture, Also, other researchers provided some principles in architecture and form of villages of Iran; by putting both of them together, we can reach the following characteristics:

7.1 Flexibility and Creativity

In many villages, buildings or houses do not resemble each other, although there are many similarities. Sometimes the houses differ in their position or size. Sometimes the slope and roughness of them differ. The architecture of the village is such that it easily adapts itself to these special conditions. Flexibility is not only in shapes and forms but also in how spaces are combined (Pirnia, 2009).

7.2 Introversion

Introversion is one of the most important characteristics of Iranian architecture.
One of the reasons for introversion in architecture can be religious. Islamic communities have a strong sense of secrecy and personal privacy, which can be seen in their traditional architecture as well as their interior and exterior design. The modesty and secrecy of Muslim houses, as well as the distinct distinction between indoor and outdoor spaces in Islamic cities, are fascinating features of Islamic cities. (Bagheri, 2014). As a result, Iranian religions and beliefs had a large influence on the process of creating different spaces and cities that were formed by these buildings. Introversion is also a good choice for dealing with harsh environments in desert areas.



Figure 10. Introversion in Iranian architecture: a house in Qehi with spaces arranged around a central courtyard and no windows on the façade. Photograph by the author.

7.3 Local Materials and Simplicity

In villages, the basis of the villagers' thinking is to reduce the costs of building and avoid the use of non-native materials. they aim to increase the capability and durability of local construction materials to provide shelter for families (Zargar, 2003). The building is expected to be constructed using materials that are abundant in the surrounding nature for any function. Examples include swamp straw, nearby forest wood, desert clay, and mountain stone. Family members are often involved in rural construction. Neighbors and relatives are sometimes asked to work together temporarily to build a house. However, if the task is complicated, they will enlist the assistance of a professional worker to complete a part of the building (Zargar, 1997 ; Pirnia & Memarian, 2010). Rural houses are built in such a way that they are not difficult to maintain. Repairing or replacing Mudbrick walls (Khesht) that are adjacent to surface moisture and damaged by moisture, can be done easily by family members or indigenous people.

Although new developments of villages are very similar to urban maps which do not follow traditional rural life and style, the village house still is a simple rural home. There is this simplicity in the house's design and the composition of the spaces in the house. The overall shape of the rural house is as simple as the surrounding nature.

8. Conclusion

Studying the urban morphology of Iranian settlements requires a critical reading of historical documents, travelogues, Persian literature, maps, surviving buildings, and contemporary research. These sources offer different kinds of evidence about how environmental conditions, cultural traditions, and social needs have influenced the development of cities and villages.

The coverage and reliability of these sources vary across historical periods, so no single source can provide a complete account; comparing textual records with architectural and spatial evidence is therefore important. Traditional features such as bazaars, mosques, hashtis, sabaats, and windcatchers help illustrate the connections between built form, climate, and everyday life. Further research can build on this combined approach while acknowledging gaps in the historical record and the need to verify source-specific claims.

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