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Cheshme Ali in Damghan and reasons for its sacredness

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Abstract

Due to the role of natural elements in human life, attention to these elements was common in many ancient cultures, including Iran. This consideration was so important that some cultures believed in the sacredness of these natural elements and held ceremonies for them. Water is one of these natural elements. Formation of cities and development of human civilization relies on it and wherever remained urban civilization from ancient times is encountered, footprint of spring and rivers can be found around them. This natural element is doubly important in the geographical area of Iran considering region's warm and dry climate. These factors alongside the longtime water shortage problem in Iran are the underlying reason for many Iranians beliefs being about protecting water and preventing its contamination. Thus, in many parts of Iran, especially in the central plateau, sacred waters can be found. These waters include sacred springs, lakes and canals. Also waters with their origins and existence linked to holy people such as Prophets and Imams are considered as sacred waters. Cheshme Ali in Damghan, as the origin of the only permanent river of the city, is an instance of these sacred places that dates back to the pre-Islamic era. This place is sacred for inhabitants and people consider the root of the 1000 year old nearby tree as holy and sacred. According to evidence and documents in historical books, excavations and observations of the author, the reason for the sacredness of this place is the sacred water originating from the mountain. Perhaps this place was a Mitra temple for worshipping Mitra and Nahid along with water: triad of water, tree, and mountain.

Keywords

Cheshme Ali, Damghan, Mountain, tree, sacred river, Anahita.

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Hypothesis

It seems that the reason for sacredness of this place is the spring which has sacred and healing water and dates back to the pre-Islamic era. As most fire-temples have preserved their location and sacredness by transforming to mosques, this sacred spring has transformed into Cheshme Ali based on religious narratives and consecration in order to continue its existence. What we have seen here is a metamorphosis and adjustment of some part of the ancient ceremonies of people who have preserved them even by the emergence of Islam.

Background

Fortunately, there are credible studies and researches about ancient ceremonies of Iran, mythology and skeletal characteristics of religious places in pre-Islamic era by domestic researcher and western Iran-experts. Among them, we can refer to the researches of Mehrdad Bahar, Mohammad Mirshokraee, Jamshid Sedaghatkish, Suzan Gueri, Greeshman and Henliz. Some studies are conducted as case studies on historical and sacred sites like temples in Niasar and Nashlaj villages in Kashan, Ghadamgah in Neyshaboor, Cheshme Ali in Ray, Bistun in Kermanshah and etc. in order to study the reason for sacredness of these sites. Undoubtedly, the above researches have considerably contributed to the development of this paper.

Most studies about Cheshme Ali in Damghan relate to the historical and skeletal studies of buildings in site (two buildings of Aqa Mohammad Khan & Fathalishah Qajar) which has led to repair it in recent years. Despite sacredness of the spring and the old plane tree, there is not yet any study about the reason for sacredness of this site and stories related to it.

Research methodology

The Research methodology is as follows:

- a. Field studies and environmental information, observation of elements and components in study area;
- b. Historical studies and investigating documents

related to the geographical and historical site of Dashte Moghan.

c. Analysis, adjustment and study of historical and geographical findings and objective documents for answering the research hypothesis.

Introduction

A beautiful and natural lake is located in 30km northwestern of Damghan. The water of this lake originates from the various springs in the bottom of it and its source is Abdeh Mountain in the north of it. This site is Cheshme Ali and it is the origin of the only river of Damghan plain. In the north of the lake and junction of lake with Abdeh Mountain, there are two old plane trees that date back to 1000 years. Number of ribbons tied to the root of this tree show its sacredness and religious beliefs of people of Damghan. They believe that this site and its water are sacred and wash their bodies in the water and tie ribbons to the root of plane tree. People even believe that fish in the spring are sacred and they should not be eaten (Fig. 1, 2, 3, 4).

Citizens of this region believe that the origin of water in this point is hitting the hoof of Doldol, horse of Imam Ali. "One spring originates from the root of an old tree and water thrusts from it, people say that hoof of Doldol has hit here and water erupted and there is a large stone near this spring, which has a figure on it and old plane tree that pilgrims of Cheshme Ali has tied ribbons to it. This is the appellation (Archive of cultural heritage, Damghan, 2007).

Near Cheshme Ali, in the east of the road to Mashhad, Astaneh village is located. Agricultural lands of the village are located in the south of Cheshme Ali. Village road is Damghan-Mashhad road and also dirt road which is caused by traffic of people and is named Salavati road. Its appellation is beliefs of people about Cheshme Ali. In Moharram, groups of mourners pass this road which leads to Cheshme Ali. The people of this village stand in respect of seeing Cheshme Ali and pray when they pass this road.

Based on the evidence and documents, Cheshme Ali is sacred and is attributed to Imam Ali, while Imam



Fig.1. Sacred plan tree and ribbons tied to the root of tree.
Source: author.



Fig. 3. springs in the bottom of lake. Source: Damghan news-2015.



Fig.2. Sacred plan tree and ribbons tied to the root of tree.
Source: author.



Fig. 4. spring and mountain near it. Source: author.

Geographical position of Cheshme Ali

Regarding the position of this complex in Damghan and its situation relative to Dashte Moghan, we should say that Cheshme Ali is located in the north part of the province. Soil type and mountains of this region are calcareous. Origin of lime is gaps in mountains and springs that consist the water of Cheshme Ali in Damghan. River reaches to Damghan after passing the turn of mountains. In order to divide the water and prevent wasting water in a region that life in them depends on permanent rivers due to dryness of the desert, Shahid Cheraghi dam is constructed in the last turn of Gerdkooh Mountain.

Ali has never travelled to Iran (Mirshokraee, 2003). Therefore, in order to study the reason for sacredness of this spring, it is necessary to study the historical background of geographical scope of Dashte Moghan and the residents' believes.

This thinking was common among the people of Dashte Moghan dating back to old years because there is a village near this point called Labrood and has the remains of Sassanid era. It seems that the village is also named after this (Adl, 2009, Vol. 4). Abudolaf, historian of the 4th century, has said that there is a strange dam for dividing water in Damghan which belongs to the Sassanid era. Its water flow from the cave inside the mountain and then, divides into 120 parts for irrigating 120 villages. The amount of water in these streams does not increase and two streams did not mix with each other. This dam has strange construction and I don't see a dam like it in other cities (Faza publication, 1989: 23);(Fig. 5).

Review of historical background of Dasht- e Moghan

When moving from Damghan to Cheshme Ali, we enter on a path that can indicate a rich history of Dashte Damghan. In this pass, we encounter historical remains that date back to pre-Islamic era. Forts like Gerdkooh, Mansoorkooh and Mehrnegar from Parthian to Ismaili and after than indicate the strategic importance of this region as a communication path (Fig. 6).

This historical line ends at Hesar Hill- a line that its beginning and end point is Cheshme Ali and Hesar Hill respectively. Based on the excavations and archaeologies by Professor Smith, this hill dates back to 5900 B.C. these points indicate that Dashte Moghan is a fertile and cheerful region between Alborz Mountains and central desert of Iran and due to strategic position, it was the transient road for trade and a natural pass for expedition and passing caravans and tourists. This road is part of the Silk Road in Sassanid era which has political-economic and cultural importance even after Islam such that it connected Sin Kiang state to Baghdad, the religious and the commanding hub of Islam. This region is named in post-Islam era as Ghoms state and Damghan as the capital of it. In "east caliphate territories" written by Estrange, it is argued that Ghoms state is enclosed in Alborz Mountain in a narrow land

between Alborz Mountains in the north and the Loot desert in south and great road of Khorasan that comes from Ray and ends to Neishaboor (Fig. 7). Ibn Vaze' Yaghubi in Al-Boldan wrote "and there are 12 destinations from Ray to Ghoms near that some of them are prosperous and some in deserts and Ghoms is a large city and the name of the city is Damghan and it is the first city of Khorasan. An important source is writings of Tabari, great historian of 3rd century has mentioned to the river of Ghoms which only adjusts with Cheshme-Ali.

In the historical treatise of Iranshar provinces translated by Sadegh Hedayat, there are some points to fire-temples. In "Zand Agahi" book it is written that there was a fire-temple in Koomesh which burns by itself (Taheria, 1968: 14). Massodi has written about the famous pre-Islam fire-temples that: "There was a great fire-temple in the Ghoms called Jarish which was not known who has established. When Alexandria dominated to Ghoms province, his manner about the fire-temple was so deferentially and left the fireplace on" (Faza publication, 1989: 37).

According to some researchers, Damghan or its surrounding is the place of establishment of historical city Saddarvazeh or Hectampiles which is referred by old Greek authors as the second capital of Parthians: "as we know, famous capital of Parthian government was Tisiphone" (Haghighat, 1983: 44). This city was the capital of the Parthian government, which has conquered to Euphrates and Tigress. Some consider the Nesa as the primary capital of Parthian government. There is no doubt that Saddarvazeh was the capital city during extended Parthian government from east to west (Faza publication, 1989).

Schindler and Jackson believe that Saddarvazeh City is old Koomesh and should be considered near Damghan (Haghighat, 1983: 44);(Fig. 6,7,8).

Beliefs of inhabitants in Dasht- e Moghan

Historical findings about Damghan indicate inhabitation and urbanization from pre-Islamic era that its golden age coincides with the



Fig. 5. Watershed dam near Labrood that its ruins were remained until previous decades and belong to Sassanid era. Source: Adl, 1999.

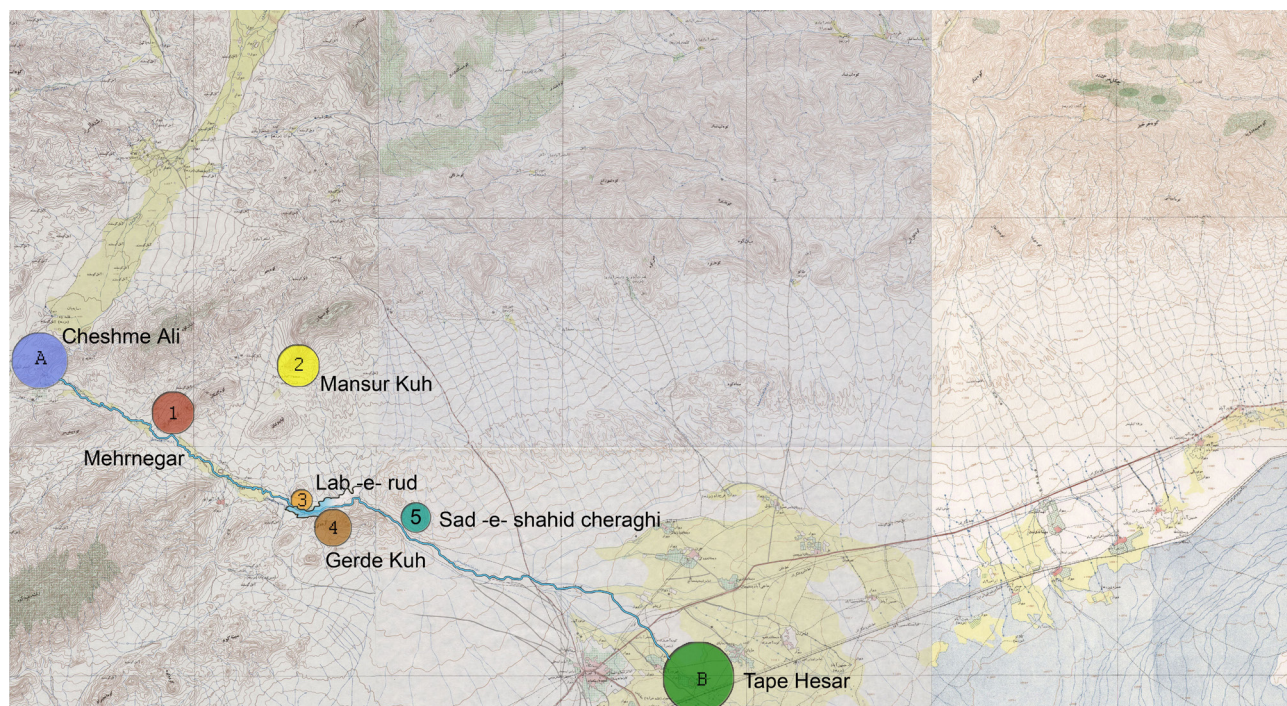


Fig. 6. Historical path of movement from Damghan to Cheshme Ali, historical elements are: 1) Mehrganar fort; 2) Mansoor Kooch Fort; 3) watershed dam; 4) Gerdkooch fort; 5) Shahid Cherghi dam. Source: author.

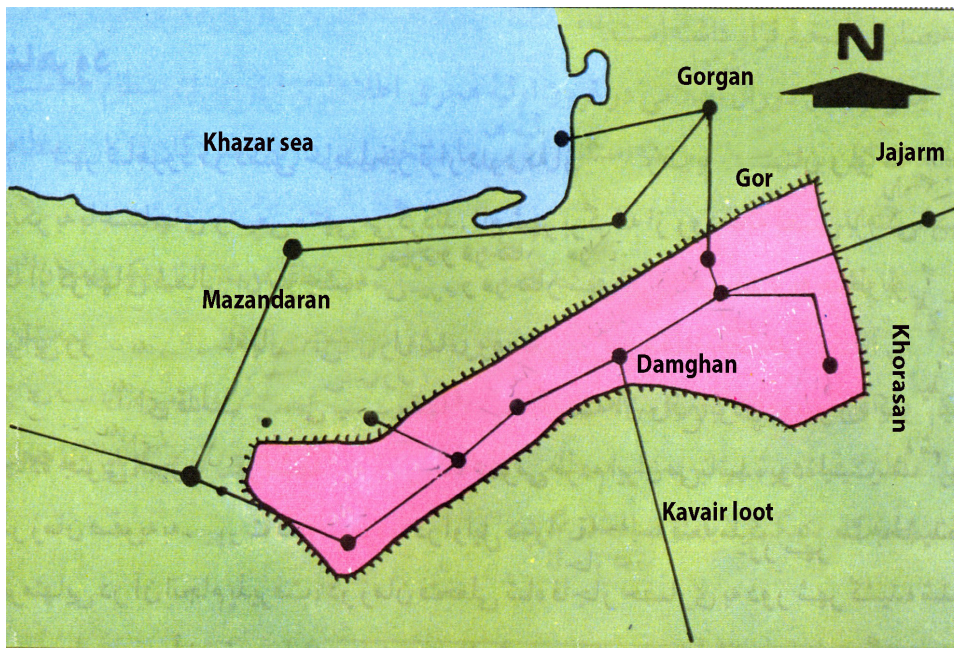


FIG. 7. Map of Qomes provincene in Islamic era.
Source: Bani asadi,1997.



Fig. 8. Position of city relative to Damghan plain and Jam desert
Source: www.earth.google.com

government of Parthian and choosing Saddarvazeh or Damghan as capital. By investigating remained work, we can find beliefs and ceremonies of inhabitants in Damghan:

During excavations at this site some artifacts like pottery, seal and stick which have picture like antelope, bull, cart and image of a woman with her child. Some researchers like Greeshman consider antelope, bull and the moon as demonstrations of goddess mother, which existed with different

names in different eras, although its function has not changes yet. Now, we deal with three symbols found in the Hesar hill.

According to beliefs of old Iranians, antelope and horned animals have eternal forces. Probably, there was at first a relationship between curved horns and crescent. Antelope is a symbol of water. Its image with horns greater than his body as crescent was symbol of rain and the horn is a symbol of fertility and productivity. Antelope needs plants and everywhere

it is seen, it indicates water and plant. Therefore, this horn was effective in rainfall and has been painted on the potteries significantly, as the symbol of water (Ka'bipoor, 2004).

On the other hand, the moon has related to the rain from ancient times. From ancient times, in Avesta-Vedda texts, growth of plants and development of people, blessing, shortage and abundance of water depends on moon and seeds of plants and growth in the moon. Lumel has showed the roots and interpretations of this idea that cow are the symbol of moon. Moon is origin of life on the earth and monitors it. The moon is the origin of life on the earth and monitors it.

It seems that when the economy was based on the agriculture and life of the people was dependent on the water, using eternal forces for rain, considering gods and goddesses for preservation of water, sacredness of Gods related to the water and sacrifice was common. Although there is not considerable information about the primary eras, but in later periods, i.e. Achaemenes, Parthians and Sassanid, we see them in the inscriptions.

Two gods Mehr and Anahita that were present since the Achaemenes era in pair or separate from each other reach to their zenith in this era and form a triad with Ahouramazda. "Anahita as the goddess of water and fertility become more common in this era" (Rajabi, 202: 190). During the Parthian era, the role of Mehr becomes more transparent (Bahar, 1997: 98). Moghan were the clerics in this era and participated in two advisory parliaments of the Parthians (Bahar, 1999: 103).

According to some authors, appellation of Damghan is related to these clerics. They wrote that about 400 B.C, some clerics inhabited along this river and this village is called Moghan village (Keshavarz, 1991: 3). This belief continued in the next period such that in Sassanid era, Zartosht was the dominant religion. "During the Sassanid era, Zartosht religion had an important role in the religious ceremonies...and the most sacred ceremonies are conducted with the support of Mehr (Hinles, 1989: 126). Mehr temples

were built near water (as sacred places for worshipping Mehr and Anahita, protectors of water, earth and plant (Bahar, 1999: 36)).

Many cases were found in the geographical cope of the study, which can highlight the thoughts and beliefs of people and root of many modern beliefs about them. In addition to discovering artifacts from Hesar hill¹, beliefs about the Fikhar canal² located in the village in 20km of Damghan, beliefs about Badkhan spring, which is likely the origin of Cheshme Ali, Chehel-Dokhtaran dome and its ornaments in the Damghan³ indicate the myths twisted with the life of people in this region.

By studying the pre-Islamic religions in Dashte Moghan, it becomes clear that for those people that their life is twisted with the nature, agriculture and fertility of plain, blessing and development depends on the rain and erupting water from the spring which is the only permanent river of the plain. Findings in the Hesar hill and beliefs of people raise this hypothesis that perhaps this spring has been sacred since the presence of the plain and forming inhabitation and its role in the life of people. There is no doubt about the sacredness of this spring after Islam and narrations verify it.

Writings of Greek historians about Cheshme Ali in Damghan

Regarding attacks of Alexander to Iran and the formation of Salukis government before Parthians, we observe some points to the cities of Iran and their position in the writings of Greek historians.

According to Polyp, Greek historian, in attack of Antious Kous III (3 B.C) speaks of "capturing Hecatom Pil" capital of Parthian near the spring "Stei Boet" which originates from Bogota Mountain. Many believe that this is Cheshme Ali spring.

Dioder, another Greek historian, wrote "Alexandria stayed several days in Damghan and after that he moved to Gorgan, the first destination was at the foot of the mountain where a river called Stei Boet flows into it. Then it reaches to the small mountain and passes the narrow valley and provides water for Hecatom

(adapted from Faza publication, 1989). According to what Deodars Salukis, Alexandria has moved from Hecatom to the place where a spring erupted from the cliff and then went to Hirkania Gorgan). This place is undoubtedly Cheshme Ali which is located in the north of Damghan (Kiani, 1989: 337).

Previous beliefs related to the Cheshme Ali in Damghan

Klavikoy, Spanish historian, who have traveled in the fifteen century to Iran, wrote: in one kilometer to Damghan, although the weather was good, suddenly a strong and cold wind has blown. When we reached to the Damghan, we asked about the reason of this strong wind, they said that there is a large mountain near the city that has a spring and when a contaminated bird or animal falls in it, the wind immediately blows until the contamination become far from the spring. The next day, a group of people with axes and hook went to spring cleaning it and wind has stopped (Haghighat, 1983: 207).

Also, Greek historian has spoken about the capturing Hecatom Pil, capital of Persia, near the Stei Boet spring in Bogota Mountain during attack of Antious Kos. The term Bogota originated from the Bog and indicates the sacredness of this mountain and spring before Islam for the people in this region.

Studying sacred triad spring, mountain and tree in Cheshme Ali

As said before, in pre-Islamic era, gods of earth and sky or water and sun, i.e. Mehr and Anahita were sacred after Ahuramazda and there were temples for them. In the Parthian era, Mehr and Anahita became so important that they formed a triad with Ahuramazda. According to Mehrdad Bahar, the temples were constructed near water or canals as a temple for sun and Venus. Most temples were constructed near water

or springs and since, according to the myths, Mehr has born from the mountain, everywhere there is a mountain with running water is called a temple and they went there to worship in certain times and asked their demands (Shahrzadi, 2006). In other words, our ancestors by resorting to the Mehr and Venus and even sacrificing cow, sheep and horse along with healing springs, want children, healing of patients and rain. They also respected the sacred tree³ near the spring and tied the ribbons to it and ask their wants. These ceremonies last for today (Javadi, 2007). It seems that the reason for sacredness of Cheshme Ali is the healing water which is the origin of life and fertility of Moghan plain. In other words, due to the special role of nature in the life of ancient Iranians, these natural elements are sacred and they considered gods and goddesses for protecting them. This is because where they saw a spring, tree or mountain that has water, considered it sacred and protected it during month and year. It seems that this hypothesis is not far from the mind that Cheshme Ali in Damghan is one of the temples. Although proving this hypothesis needs archeological studies on the site, but presence of spring, mountain and tree along with its sacredness and everything in it including fish and sacrifices in this complex and religious ceremony enhances this probability.

Another reason which is superior to this hypothesis is attributing the name Ali to the spring. As mentioned before, Imam Ali has never traveled to Iran. Sacredness of water in pre-Islamic Iran⁴ has preserved many sacred functions of them in the minds of people and since it had no conflict with Islamic ceremonies, it should coordinate itself with the new form. In this condition, although the spring and water were not sacred by themselves, but they tries to keep its sacredness with some Islamic believes in this era.

Conclusion

From evidences and documents, it is inferred that conceptions about stories of Cheshme Ali are not deep and the reason of sacredness for this spring should be traced in the sub-beliefs which is rooted in the old beliefs of people. Here is a place in which beliefs are layered based on the religions in each era and it is an intersection for sacredness of this place. It seems that sacredness of this site is due to the water that life of people depends on it. Perhaps this place was a temple of the sun or Anahita that although it has lost their function by passing time and the emergence of Islam, but it preserved the sacredness with metamorphosis and adjustment with Islam. This place, in the last step of transformation and by accepting Islam, and attributing it to Imam Ali has changed to Cheshme Ali in order to survive.

An important thing is that Cheshme Ali or places like this will remain sacred and clean. Although their functions changes from one generation to other, but its origin remains.

Endnote

1. One canal is Fikhar and when there was no rain and water of canal reduced, women called each other and determined one day to give food on the canal. This ceremony is exactly like the rural marriage with local music but here, groom is canal. Two foods Shilan and Hesso would be prepared. Before preparing the food, an old woman who is popular in the village, is selected and one pious woman, marries her to the groom and the old woman, swims in the canal (Sedaghatkish, 2003: 36).
2. This building is in Damghan city. The name Chehel-Dokhtaran for this building and Soatisca and ornaments in tower shows the Mehr beliefs.
3. Avesta speaks about the trees which grow near the spring and have guards.
4. It is clear that it is not the sacredness of spring and tree but it is beliefs of people. Therefore, cleaning the water clean and fertility and trees are related to the life of people and their needs. Water and sacred tree were attributed to a god in order that people respect them and try to keep the water clean (Javadi, 2007).

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