

The Road Landscape in Iran

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Abstract | In Iran the concept of road has always been different from its corresponding concepts and interpretations in other inhabited parts of the world because of: the specific geographical diversity and strategic location of the country, its long history of human habitation, nomadic life, necessity of interaction among Iranian tribes and relations between settlement centers. Roads were built upon the natural morphology in order to protect people from various threats while maintaining a cultural approach. From this point of view, roads were not regarded as simple tracks but as destinations embracing elements and signs related to various events. As a matter of fact, traveling through some of these routes was considered as realizing a spiritual intention. For example Khorasan Road not only links many human settlements but also has been turned into the main cultural and pilgrimage route within the area under the influence of Iranian culture so that all of its roadside inhabitation centers and their related elements are regarded as being privileged and sacred just because they are so-called “blessed” to be located on Khorasan Road. Icons and installations affiliated to the road and the cultural phenomena created with the passage of time also became attractive for travelers. From this point of view, a study of Iranian roads can expand the concept and meaning of cultural road brought up by ICOMOS during the recent decade; also it can prove that the Iranian version is well-deserved to be inscribed on the world heritage list.

Present report not only addresses the concept and definitions of the cultural road in the world but also pays attention to the significance of the approach, the road landscape in Iran as well as its various genres in different periods of time.

Keywords | Landscape, Cultural road, Iran.

Introduction | The concept of “road” and/or cultural routes was initially brought up at a specialized meeting held in 1994 discussing “routes as part of our cultural heritage”¹ (WHO, 1994). Later in the next specialized meeting of the international scientific committee of ICOMOS in 2003 concerning cultural routes², relevant theoretical discussions were developed and road was considered as a miscellaneous combination reflecting tangible and intangible heritage. Finally, based on its theoretical development, the following definition was given to the cultural route: cultural routes are terrains, water bodies, combinations or other kinds of routes which have been specified and delineated according to their unique historical dynamics and potentials. They are manifestations of interactive movements of individuals accompanied by mutual, consistent and multi-dimensional transactions of commodities, ideas, knowledge and values within or among countries and regions during considerable periods of time. This will eventually result in the emergence of a rich assortment of cultures which has been simultaneously reflected in tangible and intangible heritage (ICOMOS, 2003).

In fact, after the world war and especially since 1972, various issues including the subject of inscription and conservation of cultural and natural heritage have gained more significance. During the recent decade, cultural landscape as well as urban historical landscape particularly cultural routes have been given more importance and several countries have been successful in registering many routes in the world heritage list jointly.

The New Concept of Cultural Roads

In 2008, ICOMOS brought up various topics i.e. the cultural route must be a reflection of cultural movements of people and an exchange of values must have taken place. Roads are not merely physical platforms but are historical phenomena revealing cultural identities and values. Actually a route in Rome, Incas Route and the Silk Road all bear the same specifications. In fact, roads are defined as miscellaneous combinations of cultures in space and time reflecting both intangible and tangible heritage while highlighting the issue of dynamism in cultural relations. Essentially all land and sea routes have unique, historic and dynamic capacities contributing to the realization of certain goals. They must have the following characteristics:

- A cultural route is the end result of the interactions of people materialized in the exchange of goods, values, ideas and knowledge. This takes place gradually in a multidimensional and consistent manner among various nations, regions and continents. By manifesting itself in the tangible and intangible heritage of cultures under its influence, a cultural route contributes to the increased productivity of these cultures.
- A cultural route must blend with dynamic systems, historic events and cultural attributes relative to its existence.

Therefore cultural routes are not simple communication and transportation ways potentially containing cultural properties and linking various nations together; instead they are specific historic phenomena. Moreover, they act as strong tools for the exaltation, propagation and protection of various cultural values.

Sometimes cultural routes have been intentionally created in order to achieve specific purposes (i.e. governmental routes such as routes constructed by Incas or by the Roman Empire); but in some cases they were the result of a long developmental process in which collective and simultaneous interventions of various human factors worked toward a common goal (i.e. commercial and pilgrimage routes such as the Santiago route, African caravan trade routes and/or the Silk Road).

In both cases, processes resulting from the human will in order to reach a certain goal are involved.

Characteristic Elements of Cultural Routes

A cultural route must necessarily be supported by those tangible elements which act as testimonies for its cultural heritage and confirm its physical existence:

- A route designed to serve as a device for helping people in realizing certain goals
 - Heritage elements which depend on the road and its function as a historical and cultural path
1. Tangible heritage elements (roadside stations, landmarks, towers, certain natural views, caravansaries, defensive fortifications, depots, medical centers, inns, markets, ports, custom offices, communication and transportation facilities, mining and industrial installations as well as production and commercial facilities) reflecting social, scientific and technical functions which depict advances in various eras.
 2. Intangible heritage elements which act as a testimony to the process of interaction and transaction among people along a certain route.

Roads in Iran

Construction of roads and its affiliated elements has a long history in Iran. Many of the present roads and routes in Iran are more or less old paths with minor changes. As a matter of fact construction of ancient routes conformed to local topography, terrain and geographical system dating back to the first days of human settling in the Iranian plateau.

Maxim Siroux has given three reasons for the presence of regular and fixed roads in prehistoric times (Siroux, 1983):

1. Remains of ancient sites near existing roads or large villages (such as: Tappe-hesar of Damghan, Cheshme-ali of Rey, Tappe-silk of Kashan, Tappe-gian of Nahavand, Tappe-bakun near Persepolis, etc...): objects and monuments discovered in these areas show that these villages were not remote and isolated communities, instead roads linked them together from old times. In fact these roads were frequently used by caravans that carried various goods and adopted or transferred art styles.

2. Traces of domesticated animals were found. They were used for traveling, carrying merchandise and military expeditions on certain routes.
3. Routes used for mass immigration; such as the immigration of Aryan tribes into the Iranian Plateau through specific paths.

Table 1: Types of ways in the historical periods of Iran, Source: Authors.

| Road Kinds | |
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| Nomadic Tribes roads which have a long history in most parts of Iran and are still in use today | |
| some main cultural, historical and commercial roads | The Royal Road was the first important and integrated highway built under the rule of the Achaemenian dynasty. Its main section covered the distance between Pasargadae and Susa along which several towns and villages were established beside pre-Achaemenian settlements |
| | Silk Road was the most important commercial highway of Iran during historical times including in times of Parthian and Sassanid dynasties. It passed through the northern half of Iran and could be taken as a commercial-cultural route linking together three main civilizations of the ancient world namely the Persian, Roman and Chinese empires. The Silk Road was not only used for commercial and trading purposes but also served as a channel for cultural, lingual and inter-civilization communications |
| | The SPice Route on which perfumes and sPices were transferred from India to Africa and Arabic-speaking countries; it passed through Kerman, Sistan and Baluchistan situated in the southern part of Iran |
| Pilgrimage Roads among which are the Hajj route which goes to one of the greatest civilization centers of the world, the Atabat-e Aliat route and the Mashhad pilgrimage road | |
| Immigration Routes which are valuable from a historic point of view; such as the mass immigration routes of people including the immigration route of Aryan tribes into the Iranian Plateau | |

All historical sites had specific roads linking them together (such as Susa to Shushtar or Karkheh, Dez and Karun rivers or Dur Untash and ChoqaZanbil). TyPically people could identify the route leading to their destination simply from their names and shapes because they conformed to local terrains (Peernia & Afsar,

1991). Additionally, gates of historical cities leading to main centers of the country had specific names, icons and identities namely the Royal Road which linked Pasargadae and Persepolis as far as Susa together. It went through Tang-e Bolaqi, the natural site of Sivand and alongside Sivand River to Estakhr and



Pic1: Parsa plain (city of Persepolis). Source: Foundation of Parse, Pasargadea.

Persepolis. Further on by linking several historical settlements on its way, it passed through southern regions of Fars and Khuzestan ending in Susa. As a matter of fact, it is about one hundred kilometers shorter than the modern road between Susa and Pasargadae reflecting a precise knowledge about the natural terrain at the time. The route was also used by various nomadic tribes for their summer and winter migrations (Kleiss, 1982). The Parse-Pasargadae geographical domain contains a huge number of settlements including Tappe Jafar-abad in the middle of the road. Additionally pre-historical sites in Tang-e Boloqi of Sivand amount to more than 130 sites or spots dating back to just before the Islamic conquest. Also there are several other sites in Pasargadae Plain such as Tal-e Bakun near Persepolis which are regarded as important settlements in ancient times. The above-mentioned points show the importance of the Royal Road serving as an integrated cultural route. The names of more than four hundred major towns and places have been engraved

on only a handful of earthen tablets discovered in Achaemenian fortifications designating the stopovers of caravans. Among cases indicating the significance of the cultural road well into the Islamic era, mention can be made of: a small Pasargadae dwelling-place near the Cyrus Mausoleum, the Mozaffari Caravansary, the 4th-century mosque, the ancient site of Jafar-abad, the Sassanid city of Estakhr, Naqsh-e Rostam, Persepolis, Zarqan and several major towns and places on the road leading to ancient Susa. The meaning of the cultural route serving as a destination is also conveyed by the variety and multiplicity of sacred and cultural symbols and elements, manmade facilities such as dykes, dams, bridges, production centers and installations set up in plains as well as pastures, farmlands, natural resources and the scenery along the road. All of these prove the fact that main roads of Iran such as the Royal Road (Rah-e Shahi) not only had communicative purposes but also served other goals with the road landscape different from a simple route.



Pic2: The new west to east road from Marvdasht to Persepolis constructed on the occasion of the 2500th anniversary of monarchy in Iran; widespread interventions led to the destruction of several natural and historical structures of Parse Plain. Source: Foundation of Parse, Pasargadae.

Natural and historical formations of Parse Plain show that the entire route of caravans has been shaped according to natural terrains. In contrast, recent documents indicate that all the roads built for festivals of the 2500th anniversary of kingdom in Iran were not compatible with natural contours of land. As a matter of fact, the triple fences of Persepolis, Persian gardens, historical gardens, the irrigation system of plains including historic qanats and water-supplying canals between Estakhr and Persepolis are entirely north to south constructions but widespread interventions and new east to west constructions such as the Marvdasht-Persepolis road have inadvertently damaged many of these major historical evidence like the Persian garden of Darius so that only meager traces of them are identifiable today based on geophysical surveys. Consequently, these are of high importance: paying more attention to historical experience during the construction of new structures including the construction of urban streets in accordance with natural topography; also presentation of historical perspectives to the audience for a better understanding of the historical atmosphere and space as well as the cultural

landscape of the plain.

As mentioned earlier, road is not merely a surface for easier transportation but consists of a combination of affiliated icons and buildings whose evolution and transformation has had an eminent place in the history of civilization. Bridges, caravansaries, tea-houses, pools, depots, castles, distance bars and occasionally graveyards, shrines and sacred places on them together constitute the concept of roads. Also these physical entities beside the road landscape have not always acted as a linkage between settlements instead they have shaped them, boosted them and simultaneous with their destruction, settlements existing along the road have also began to decline.

Historical experiences have shown that previous achievements and values have been preserved and incremented in later periods. In fact, new structures have been the continuance of former experiments and linkage to past roots has made them even stronger. For this reason, different monuments standing along historical roads are available in Iran as its architectural heritage whose identification can be fruitful for understanding the concept of road.

Table 2: Road-related Architectural Heritage in Historical Periods. Source: Authors.

| Road-related Architectural Heritage in Historical Periods |
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| <u>Achamenian</u> : establishment of courier-houses (Chapar Khaneh); construction of defensive structures and guard castles aimed at protecting major roads |
| <u>Seleucids</u> : maintenance of buildings constructed on roads and setting up a network of residences |
| <u>Parthian</u> : usage of more advanced transportation vehicles; paying more attention to road maintenance; construction of custom-houses on borders; creation of a desert cavalry force; initiating a taxing system for the goods carried on roads |
| <u>Sassanians</u> : a more complete system of caravansaries, courier-houses, distance bars, bridges, roadside stations and custom-houses |
| <u>Post-Islamic era</u> : more attention was paid to the security of roads, construction of numerous caravansaries, expansion of land routes, growth of trade and economy |

Conclusion | Considering the cultural richness of roads in Iran, the long history of road construction, natural and cultural attractions, roadside installations, variety in tangible and intangible heritage directly related to the existence of cultural routes; it seems that a more exact investigation on road landscape in Iran is required. The issue of introducing and highlighting road values must include: historical buildings and monuments, historical sites, historical towns and villages, indigenous architecture, modern industrial heritage, public buildings, natural-cultural landscapes, transportation vehicles as well as other examples of using specialized knowledge and technical skills; the intangible and spiritual heritage must also be added to the list. This can be achieved by adopting a multifaceted and interdisciplinary approach and using identification tools for cultural routes. This way it will be possible to build better roads, additionally an increase in the technical, artistic, architectural and cultural knowledge of roads will be realized. Roads of Iran served as channels for demonstrating quality.

As a result their ancillary architecture was turned into opportunities for the interaction of opinions, exchange of customs of different nations and ethnic people and consequently the invigoration and elevation of local societies living in their vicinity generating a chain of life and subsistence. Historical roads and their affiliated elements are regarded as part of the cultural and historical wealth of Iran requiring special attention and consideration. Re-identification of historical routes as well as the cultural, architectural and social heritage related to roads is needed in order to study and compile conservation and improvement policies within the framework of a comprehensive plan for road architecture. Also the following are of utmost importance: documentation of structures remaining from ancient roads; monitoring, surveillance, evaluation and analysis of their cultural landscape using identification methods as well as an effort to understand related elements aimed at preserving the authenticity and integrity of cultural roads.

Endnotes

1. Routes as a Part of our Cultural Heritage (Madrid, Spain, November 1994).
2. ICOMOS-CIIC (ICOMOS international scientific committee on cultural routes).

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