

'Qanat', the Trace of Life

Living in the central plains of Iran, which is mostly composed of dried deserts with high summer heat during the last millennium, lacks the common reasons for habitation. The water shortage and harsh climate has no attraction for people, whose life depend on land. However, there are large cities such as 'Yazd', 'Kashan', 'Semnan', 'Dameghan', 'Birjand', 'Zabol', 'Bam' and 'Kerman' which have been established around the central deserts of Iran, with hundreds of smaller cities and many dependent villages around them. Some of these villages, which were built on historical roads for security and commercial reasons, became more populated over time and within the last millennium, when the region's climate started to dry up. However, the people's lives in the past, which was much more dependent on nature than today, had no obstacles to migrating and settle down in other pleasant climate areas. The people of these areas were exploiting skills to adapt to the climate change and sustain their lives, that gradually became the main element of their life landscape; In this case, 'Qanat' might be the most significant of them. The history of 'Qanat'/'Kariz' is attributed to the Persian mythology; it applies a technique for transferring the groundwater to the surface without the use of energy. A sloping underground channel, 'Kooreh', are excavated in the basement between the Qanat and the water reservoir, through which water flows outward due to the gentle slope of 'Kooreh'. The lower slope of it relative to the ground, at their connection point, creates the origin of Qanat. The lack of running water in dry climate gives great importance to Qanat presence in a community; All the life's aspect of the around villages and the cities are then dependent on it. Therefore, those jobs related to Qanats, such as 'Moqani' (Qanat diggers) and 'Mirab' (chief water distributor), get benefit of high social status. The protection of water and the Qanat pathway are subjected to the ethical rules that based on them polluting or damaging the water will be considered as an immorality act. The other Qanat's amenities such as standing light located at its origin (portal) and the presence of branched ponds for washing use are among those things will be usually donated by benefactors. The names are associated with Qanat, the 'Moqanizadeh' and 'Qanavati', are given to the related professions which are representing social dignity. The culture of constructing Qanat, is the symbol of 'righteous deeds' and the 'remnants of righteousness' that is common among the rich people and the rulers. All these traditions and cultures arising from Qanat indicate the existence of a «concept set» related to the Qanat in the minds of Iranian people who used to be the desert inhabitants. The «concept» of the Qanat, similar to its reservoir, is full of implications that have emerged over the centuries in connection with its function and vital role in the lives of the central inhabitants of the 'Land of Iran'; Each of these meanings is mirrored in the external environment that today is considered as its «emergence». The sequence of wells that end to its sloping channel (Kooreh) to vacate the excavated soil during the drilling job and bring the air to the Moqani is among the most major emergence of the complex «concept» of Qanat. There are rings, made of the soil of Kooreh which are poured around the wellhead to prevent the surface water from entering to Qanat and destroying it, and to show a 'danger sign' to avoid the others from falling into the well. The portray of Qanat wells is an inseparable element of life concept in the Central Plateau of Iran. An emergent form in the desert that, like a «Trace of Life», tell the story of human's struggle to survive which has lasted for centuries. The cover photo is one of the works of the late «Georg Gerster», which was photographed from above, on the Qanat of Yazd in 1976. He wrote in the caption of his photo: *While I was traveling over Iran, I was thinking that the cultural and natural landscapes of the Persian Land with its salt deserts and heaven gardens were created to be observed from the sky. Its villages with Qanats and underground waterways are a clear example of an architecture without the presence of any architect.*

This photo represents the harmonious intervention of our predecessors in the heart of an apparently empty desert; however, the 'Trace of life' speaks the commotion that lies beneath the earth. This photo has been donated to MANZAR by his honorable generous daughter, Ms. Anya v. Schweinitz-Calonder, who manages the 'Georg Gerster Air Photography Institute', following our request to publish the photo; it has been provided to our journal due to his deep interest to Iran. We do highly appreciate their kindness.

Editor-in-Chief
Seyed Amir Mansouri
amansoor@ut.ac.ir

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