HOSPITALS IN SAFAVID AND QAJAR IRAN: AN ENQUIRY INTO THEIR NUMBER, GROWTH AND IMPORTANCE

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Introduction: What Size Population Did Hospitals Serve?

The common wisdom is that the continuation of the institution of the Sasanian hospitals “was one of the most remarkable achievements in the Islamic East.” However remarkable the potential of the dār al-šifā was they did not deliver on their promise. For seen within the context of the size of the problem, neither the traditional dār al-šifā nor the nineteenth century modern European hospitals constituted an adequate response to the public health problem in Iran in view of their limited impact. To obtain a better understanding of the relative importance of hospitals I discuss their occurrence and activities in Iran. Given the scope of this publication, I have limited my remarks to the Safavid (1501–1722) and Qajar periods (1794–1925), but these remarks also apply to earlier periods. First, I raise the question as to the significance of hospitals given their number in relation to the size of the population. Second, I discuss the introduction and development of European hospitals and dispensaries and what conclusions one may draw from that experience.

Until recent times Iran had always been an agrarian subsistence economy. During the Safavid period its population probably was never higher than 9 million during the seventeenth century, a number likely to be lower in the sixteenth century due to the many wars that were fought. Most of the population (85–90%) was rural in nature, while the pastoral population was never more than one-third of the total population. There were about 70, mostly small provincial towns in Safavid Iran. Isfahan may have had 500,000 inhabitants, while Tabriz had more than 100,000, may be even more than 200,000, but Qazvin had many less inhabitants, even when it was the capital. The urban population, therefore, oscillated around 1 million during the Safavid period. No population data are available on the eighteenth century, but, given the wars and oppression that characterized that period, it is likely

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1 Sajjadi 1990, pp. 257–259.
2 Floor 2000, pp. 2–8.
that the urban population decreased. By 1900, Iran had an estimated population of about 9.8 million. The majority of that population was still rural and engaged in agriculture.\(^3\) The urban population doubled between 1850 (9%) and 1910 (18%), with three towns having more than 100,000 inhabitants: Tehran with about 280,000, Tabriz with 200,000 and Isfahan with 100,000. Four other towns each had 50,000 inhabitants or more.\(^4\)

What the above means is that between 1500 and 1925, even in the best of times, 85% of the population was rural, and only by 1910 did this figure drop to 82%. These figures imply that the vast majority of the population, therefore, had no access to hospitals at all. Because hospitals were only to be found in large cities, they thus did not serve most of the rural population (whether sedentary or nomadic), who hardly visited the large cities. That leaves still 1 to 1.8 million people in urban areas, where hospitals are located, but most of these never saw the inside of a hospital either, because of their small number, their limited staff and means as well as the nature of their function, but above all their lack of appeal to the public at large.

**How Many Hospitals Were There in Safavid Iran?**

The number of traditional hospitals or *dār al-šīfā* had never been large, despite their alleged importance during the period before the fourteenth century. It is, of course, likely that there were many more hospitals than the few indicated by the existing sources, but even if we assume a tenfold increase of the known ones their total number would probably still not exceed 100. Most scholars agree that the number of hospitals greatly decreased after the Ilkhanid period, although there is no evidence for that. This alleged decline took place despite the fact that Timur had given orders that there should be at least one hospital in every city in his realm.\(^5\) There is no proof, however, that these actually were functioning let alone built.

The situation under the Safavids did not differ that much from the preceding centuries in terms of the nature of medical services offered to the public. However, there is no evidence that the number of *dār al-šīfā* was less than in the preceding centuries. Allegedly one or two hospitals existed in every city, according to Du Mans. Unfortunately, we only have

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\(^1\) Floor 2003, p. 45.  
\(^2\) Gilbar 1976, pp. 147–149.  
\(^3\) Sajjadi 1990, pp. 257–259.