

Original Research Article

The Mythological-Functional Role of Cheshmeh Ali in Damghan Throughout History

Seyed Amir Mansouri^{1*}, Farnoosh Mokhles²

1. Assistant Professor, Department of Architecture, College of Fine Arts, University of Tehran, Iran.
2. Ph.D. in Urban Landscape, University Paris 8, Farnce/NAZAR Research Center, Tehran, Iran.

Received: 02/06/2022

Accepted: 05/07/2022

Available online: 23/07/2022

Abstract | The desirability, sacredness, and beauty of built spaces in Iran depend on the presence of three elements: water, trees, and mountains (or *chahartaq*). These three elements play a key role in giving Iranian places identity and meaning in cities, villages, and architectural buildings. This connection is a factor playing a role in the creation of place as the starting point of a concept, the source of life, and a goal explored by a community to create other events. An objective stimulus and aspects contribute to understanding the meaning in a natural setting. In this process, the space is identified with its elements and provides the ground for the emergence of meaning in the place. Cheshmeh Ali in Damghan is one of the ancient instances of the trilogy of Persian space formed based on the three abovementioned elements, which gave the rich concepts of people's beliefs and identity in objective aspects. The ritual and sacred concepts of Cheshma Ali act as a medium to express the value of meaning with factors such as events, rituals, social behaviors, and spatial arrangement and determine the value and semantic limits of the place. The discussed meaning in this place refers to the production of a conceptual place created by people as a natural result of interaction with their built environment. The preservation of the three sacred concepts in this place aims to protect and maintain a relationship based on the people's experience of their environment, through which the concept of meaning emerges. This study seeks to answer the following question: What is the reason for the significance and sacredness of Cheshmeh Ali in Damghan throughout history? And today, with what concept is the semantic role of this place read? To read the semantic system of Cheshmeh Ali in Damghan throughout history, various narratives of this place in numerous historical sources are read. In addition to physical and functional instances, the signs and concepts of Cheshmeh Ali are also examined in the definitions and mythological narratives of world travelers and geographers. To complete and read the concepts of this place, the significance of Cheshmeh Ali is interpreted and explained semantically and historically in two categories: visual and physical values and mythological values.

Keywords | *Cheshmeh Ali in Damghan, Trilogy of Persian space, Visual values, Semantic and mythological values.*

Introduction | The production of space is a cultural activity that takes a special form in each civilization and period, depending on the structure of the ruling ideology and the cultural characteristics of the era. Civilizations with a long history create fixed features in architecture and space production that form the essence of that civilization's architecture in a recognizable continuity and coherence

in accordance with the temporal and spatial conditions (Mansouri & Javadi, 2018). There are various views of the nature of space, and experts have interpreted the types of space in different and sometimes conflicting ways. In these views, the rituals and spiritual beliefs of societies have been the main pillars in the formation of living space. A place is a part of space with meaning within it. Space becomes a place as it becomes significant for an individual (Tuan,

*Corresponding author: amansoor@ut.ac.ir, +989123342986

2001) and places are “an important source of shared social and individual identities; they are centers of human existence, with which people have strong emotional and psychological ties” (Relph, 1976, 141). Places are centers where the communities experience meaningful events, which are the basis for identification and reading the essence of space over time. It is an inevitable phenomenon that is embodied in meaning and cannot be isolated from human existence and experiences. That is, people relate themselves closely to the places they experience. Therefore, this connection makes the place the starting point of a concept, the source of life, and a goal explored by a community to create other events. Natural elements are the factors of perception of place in the human mind and have formed the main core of ritual places, architecture, and urbanism. In Iran, the three natural elements of water, trees, and mountains (or *chahartaq*) are considered in an interactive relationship and interpreted in relation to each other. These three natural elements, in a meaningful system, define the fundamental structures in Iranian places and continue to exist in human life with various symbols. In Cheshmeh Ali, as a nature-based place, meaning first comes from the water as a moving component in the objective aspects. In the process of understanding this meaning, space is first identified with its elements and provides the ground for the emergence of meaning in the next steps. Then, cognitive interpretation of the constituent elements of the place is done by the community experiencing it. Finally, cultural events, emotions, social characteristics, ceremonies and rituals, mythological meanings, and legendary narratives play a role in understanding and promoting the functional aspect of the natural element to a symbolic aspect in relation to the community. Consequently, the meaning of this place is understood by identifying, perceiving, and evaluating its constituent elements in accordance with the governing events in it, all of which form the associative system of meaning. Therefore, to read the semantic system of Cheshmeh Ali as a place, it is necessary to first discuss the historical narrative of the role of water in the civilizational structure of the Damghan region and the significance of this region. Next, by interpreting historical narratives about the functional, mythological, and semantic aspects and physical and visual values of Cheshmeh Ali in the region, one can understand why and how this place was important, its original semantic aspect in Iranian culture, and its role in the structural foundation of the Damghan region.

Reserch method

The present study is qualitative research carried out by studying historical sources on Cheshmeh Ali in the

Damghan region. It aimed to examine and interpret the factors effective in reading the semantic landscape of Cheshmeh Ali by reviewing and interpreting relevant historical narratives from the pre-Islamic era to the present. Cheshmeh Ali is a legacy of a culturally living place. It includes a set of semantic instances and elements in both functional and mythological aspects, which have been interpreted in an interactive and semantic relationship throughout its ancient history and have formed a semantic system called the sanctity of Cheshmeh Ali through their interactive relationship with natural elements, rituals, and beliefs.

Location of Damghan; Integration of road and water

The Qumis province is located on the slopes of the Alborz mountains and in a narrow land between the Alborz mountains in the north and the Lut desert (*Dasht-e Lut*) in the south, and the Great Khurasan Road, which started from Ray in the mountain climate and led to Nishapur in Khorasan, passed across this state. The capital of Qumis province was “Damghan” (Le Strange, 2013). Connection routes played a significant role in the formation of Damghan city as well as other cities in the central margin of the Qumis province. Damghan was located on a highway, which had been the main trade road since ancient times and was considered the only natural and suitable passage for most of the emigrants, camping trips, and the commuting of caravans and tourists. The special political-economic importance of this main west-east road, which was a branch of the famous Silk Road during the Sassanid period, continued after the arrival of Islam (Jafarpour et al., 1989, 22). Damghan is one of the oldest Iranian cities and has long been of special importance. During its prosperity, especially in the pre-Islam era, it was the most important city on the Silk Road, and during the most prosperous period of this road, i.e., the Parthian era, this city was considered the central capital of the Parthian Empire (Kiani, 1987). It should be said that its wealth and fame made it a strategic place, politically and geographically, and caused it to experience numerous attacks and suffer great destruction. According to Yaghmaei (1947, 12), in political narratives, the oldest story is related to the murder of Dariush III in this region, and the book “History of the Prophets and Kings” (Tabari, 1973) also narrates the victory of the Islamic army in the 22nd year of the Hijra (Tabari, 2012). Among the various sources interpreting the spatial value of Cheshmeh Ali, there are scattered and similar narratives of the significance and value of the water source in Damghan plain that springs from the heart of the mountain. Certainly, Damghan was in a much more suitable position than Semnan in terms of

water and cultivation, and it served as the grain store for this area. In “Catherine Trinkos”’s study of Damghan plain, it was mentioned that this plain had been a settlement throughout the Parthian and Sasanian eras. The economy of the settlements of this era was based on agriculture (Kiani, 1987, 337). In addition to being an important factor for living in the region, Cheshmeh Ali attracted the attention of the Sultans in terms of its visual value. As the origin of the civilizational habitat of Damghan, this water flow, which is the symbol of myths and social beliefs, has been praised and respected by people for a long time. As in various eras, many mythological and ritual traditions have been attributed to it to protect it, and the result has been the induction of a symbolic and ritual aspect to this place. Sanctifying and symbolizing a natural-based place is a strategy to protect it. Due to the importance of water and its vital-value role in this region, most existing narratives represent the sacredness and sublimity of the natural element of water. This protective strategy is well interpreted in the theory of the trilogy of Persian space.

According to this theory, the roles of symbols, based on the meanings attributed to them, in the construction of space and the production of the architecture of each civilization are different and specific to the same culture. As long as the symbols of civilization are valid for its people, they play a role in the construction of space. However, the validity of symbols can change from simple and deterministic meanings to a set of new aesthetic meanings and concepts throughout history. According to the authors of the book “The Trilogy of Persian Space”, the Iranian landscape creates a special type of space with the three elements of water, trees, and chahartaq, which gives a unique identity to the whole architecture- in different types and related to different periods. The constant and permanent presence of these three elements, in different combinations, forms the spirit of Persian space in Iranian architecture. Although the logic of applying the trilogy of Persian space has evolved from honoring symbols and symbolic architecture to respecting the Iranian aesthetic system in different eras, their constant presence has been a factor in identifying Iranian architecture (Mansouri & Javadi, 2018, 10-11). Damghan’s historical narratives can be categorized into three geographical, political, and geographical-natural categories, each of which emphasizes its spatial, natural, and economic values. In the geographical description of the region, the emphasis is on its flourishing condition, vastness, and fruitfulness in the fields of horticulture and agriculture, implying its rich water supply infrastructure and the prosperity of the agricultural economy. In the historical sources of different historical periods, such as “Ahsan Al-taqasim Fi Ma’rifat Al-aqalim (The Best Divisions for Knowledge

of the Regions)”, “Hudud Al Alam (The Regions of the World)”, “Travel Account of Nasir Khusraw Qobâdiâni”, and “A Sketch of the Countries”, the flourishing status, vastness, and importance of Damghan are mentioned. Some other historical sources mention the natural and political events and the strategic location of Damghan on the routes connecting it to other regions (Yaghmaei, 1947; Al-Maqdisi, 2006; Khandmir, 2001; Nasir Khusraw, 1961). The matching of the connection structure of the road and the relationships governing it in Damghan with its water-supply infrastructure shows that there is a mutual relationship between these structures, and the multifaceted (objective and subjective) relationships between them throughout history are a reason for the identifying role of these infrastructures in the definition of Damghan as a civilizational place. Therefore, according to the historical narratives of Damghan’s spatial characteristics and its political, economic, and geographical positions, the emergence of this city was due to two important factors: “road” and “water”. The city was established and developed at the point where the water flow intersected with the road. The Silk Road was an important economic, relational, and political factor in this place, and water was a factor in the continuity of living in it. Therefore, being on the connection road was the main reason for the formation of the city, and water was a factor making the continuity of living in the city possible and giving identity to it (Fig. 1).

The vital value of Cheshmeh Ali in Damghan

A civilization may include a set of different infrastructures, but the most important infrastructure and foundation for the continuation of civilizations is the presence of water. This is of great importance in Damghan, and it is a factor defining and developing the economy, politics, culture, and rituals of Damghan. There are various historical narratives mentioning the origination of the water in the Damghan

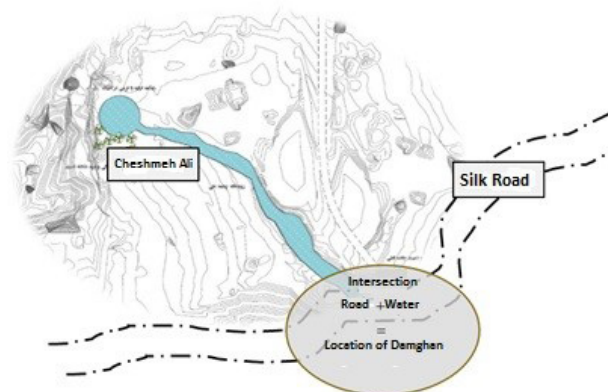


Fig. 1. According to historical documents, the location of Damghan was influenced by two important factors, water and road, and the city was formed and developed at the intersection of these two factors. Source: Authors.

region from the heart of the mountain. However, this spring was called “Cheshmeh Ali” since the Islamic period, and a few historical sources mention it with the same name, and it was mentioned with other names. One cannot mention a given date for Cheshmeh Ali. However, the presence of a Sassanid dam near the spring indicates its antiquity. The presence of Tepe Hessar, as the first settlement in the Damghan plain with a history of about 5900 years, strengthens the probability of the presence of this spring and river as the reason for the settlement of people on the edge of the desert and also as the main reason for the construction of the city of Sad Darvazeh (Damghan, today) (Ghazanfari & Javadi, 2016). Cheshmeh Ali and its branches undoubtedly played an important role in the emergence and development of Damghan, and many sources mentioned its advanced irrigation system. In the fourth century, Abu Delf, a historian who lived in the fourth century, mentioned the ancient dam constructed on the Cheshmeh Ali River: “There is a strange dam in Damghan to divide water, which dates back to the Sassanid period.” Its water comes out of a cave in the heart of the mountain and after reaching this dam, through which it is divided into 120 streams to irrigate 120 villages. The amount of water in any of these streams is not increased in the favor of its owner, and it is not possible for two streams to mix. The dam has a strange structure, and I have not seen anything better than it or like it in other cities” (Minorsky, 1975, 82). In the 7th century, Yaqut Hamavi confirmed this description of water supply. Chashmeh Ali water has about 136 shares, of which eight and three quarters are for drinking: Astana, Baba Hafez Farm, Ahvanoo Farm, Alam Shir Farm, and the remaining is divided into three parts in the delta, two of which flow towards the settlements around the city, and one flows next to the city (Taheria, 1968). In some historical sources describing the functional aspect of this spring’s water in the Damghan region, a real place with evaluable characteristics was mentioned. However, in most of the sources that have described the geographical location of Damghan, its mythological aspect was emphasized, and what is common in all of them is the purpose of these myths, which was to try to maintain the cleanliness of the spring water, as it played a vital role in this region. These narratives are mentioned with different names, such as “Baadkhan” in many sources.

Baadkhan, the mythological narrative of Cheshmeh Ali

“Water” is sacred, and human beings call a phenomenon sacred if it plays an effective role in their lives, and what becomes sacred is protected. Beliefs emerge based on people’s worldviews and biological needs, and in every

culture and every land, they become a means to clean and keep the living space, including the social living space and the natural environment, healthy. Water, as one of the most important natural elements playing an effective role in human life, was preserved for a long time according to such beliefs, remained clean, and became sacred (Mirshokraei, 2003, 3). The basis of beliefs and myths is ignorance and, as a result, mystery, and the relationship between culture and nature is among the special manifestations throughout history. According to Yaghmaei, to make the historical and geographical contents seem interesting, anecdotes and legends often have a moral aspect, or strangeness and surprise are usually added to them to create excitement in the reader’s mind, and to remove the boredom and fatigue from reading the contents (Yaghmaei, 1947). Zakaria Qazvini, quoting from “Tuhfat al-Gharab”, said: “There is a village called Kohan near Damghan, and there are ten springs in it, which are called Baadkhani.” Because people want the wind to put polluted silk in the water, the air will move, and whoever drinks water from it will have a swollen stomach, and whoever takes something from that water will turn to stone after leaving it” (Qazvini, 2013). Hamdallah Mustawfi confirmed Zakaria’s statements (Hamavi, 2001), and this narrative was also quoted in the book “Abu Delf’s Travelogue” in the 4th century. Interestingly, to make his book interesting, “Fazoni Astarabadi”, the author of the book “Bohira”, instead of providing a detailed description of the geography of the spring, claimed to have personally seen it and experienced its properties (Yaghmaei, 1947). In the 9th century of the Hijri, “Mirkhand”, in “Rowza al-Safa”, wrote that Baadkhan is near Damghan and when a huge wind emerges, it means that a contaminated object has fallen into the water of the spring and, because of this, the storm has started; he attributed its authenticity to frequent news in this regard (Mirkhand, 1994). In the 10th century, the author of “Habib al-Sir” confirmed the above definition of Baadkhan, and to validate his narrative, he mentioned a similar spring in Ghazna and another spring named “Ain al-Hajar” in Damghan, which also had the same attribute. To scrutinize his narrative, he cited a similar narrative by Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi in the 5th century when he conquered India (Khandmir, 2001). This mythical narrative and the transcendental power of the water of the Baadkhan spring have been repeated in other historical periods and in works such as “Tazkere-Ye Haft Eqlim” (Chronicles of the Seven Climates) and “Maather Rahimi”. During the Qajar era, these narratives were also mentioned in the interpretation of courtiers such as Farhad Mirza Motamed al-Dowlah (1233–1305 A.H.), the son of Abbas Mirza Nayeb Saltaneh, and in travelogues such as George Curzon’s travelogue (Taheria, 1968). In this period, the narrative of spring water was recorded in two dimensions. On the other

hand, under the influence of narratives by the Damghan people, the transcendent aspect of the spring, called “Baadkhan,” was mentioned. On the other hand, another narrative mentioning its functional and value roles is called “Chashmeh Ali” and a reading of its ritual meaning was provided. As far as in Curzon’s travelogue, in the narrative of the wonders of the Baadkhani Spring, which was called “Cheshmeh Baad” by him, Cheshmeh Ali was mentioned as a holy place (Curzon, 1990). Curzon himself did not visit the Baadkhani Spring and only mentioned it based on historical and social quotes and tried to explain its importance by comparing it with the objective and real example, which was “Cheshmeh Ali”. To interpret a place called Cheshme Ali in Damghan, there are several narratives. However, since it was called Cheshmeh Ali in the Islamic period, it was mentioned with other names such as “Ceshmeh Baadkhan”, “Ceshmeh Baad”, and “Esti Buet” in the narratives related to the pre-Islamic era, and even in relation to the social culture of the Islamic period. It is noteworthy to mention that all these mythological and cultural narratives about this spring were aimed at protecting and keeping it clean throughout history, and in them, its functional and physical aspects were not mentioned at all. Reviewing the documents indicates that a place called “Baadkhan” spring or, as some sources say, a spring called “Ceshmeh Baad” upstream of Cheshmeh Ali does not exist externally. According to the geographical location and the vital role and importance of the spring in this region, all these narratives are different interpretations of reading the importance of the spring in its current location. In fact, the place of Cheshmeh Baadkhani in the narratives is an allegorical and facial one. There is no consensus regarding the location of this spring in different historical narratives and different villages called “Kohan”, “Jamalin”, “Ghanjan”, or “a hill above Cheshmeh Ali” were mentioned as its location, implying the non-existence of a real place called Cheshme Baadkhani (Baadkhani). The Damghan region is exposed to constant winds at high speeds, so the air is often dusty. Undoubtedly, this led to the creation of the legend of Cheshmeh Baadkhan to protect the main and life-giving spring of this region (Cheshmeh Ali). Since in the real world, there are no such legendary narratives, it was interpreted in the form of an important spring called Baadkhan whose characteristics and vital role functionally and semantically match Cheshmeh Ali. As in recent years, legendary narratives have been replaced by mythological-ritual narratives, and the role of supporting this change has changed “narratively” rather than “semantically”.

Signs of sacredness in Cheshmeh Ali

In his narrative of Damghan, “Curzon” mentioned the importance of the functional and semantic aspect of Cheshme Ali, which is attributed to Imam Ali (AS): “There

is a stream flowing in the middle of the city (Damghan) that comes out from a spring called Cheshmeh Ali. There is Shah’s summer settlement and it is also a place of pilgrimage. That is one of the places where the horse of Imam Ali (AS) apparently hit the stone with its hoof so hard that its effect remained forever” (Curzon, 1990, 381 & 382). The historical fact is that Imam Ali (AS) never traveled to Iran. But in most parts of Iran, many springs, stones, mountains, and trees have all been sanctified with the holy name of Ali (A.S.) (MirshOkraei, 2001). Cheshmeh Ali, like other springs in Iran with the same name in cities such as Ray, Qom, Semirom in Shahreza, Fariman Village in Mashhad, Lordegan in Shahrekord and Birjand, is attributed to Imam Ali (AS). The water from all these springs was used to irrigate fields and supply water to settlements such as cities or towns, indicating the functional role and vital importance of water in these areas. Attributing places to an important religious figure refers to the culture of Iran with a few thousand years of cultural history. Iran is a place in all parts of which the layers of beliefs and traditions have been placed on each other based on the true rituals of each period and time. Many of these places are sacred in all religions and have a history that predates the Islamic period. In Iran, everything that has been sacred at all times has been manifested in the presence of the holy face of the Imams. Considering the vital value of Cheshmeh Ali in the Damghan region, it seems normal that an element of specific importance to them had a high status and was considered sacred in their opinion. Around and inside Cheshmeh Ali Lake, there are many springs from which more or less water comes out, and one of them is at the foot of an old tree, and the water comes out with high pressure (Ghazanfari & Javadi, 2016, 71). In the later narratives related to the dynasty of Nasser ad-Din Shah or the late Qajar period, the purity of water and its value was emphasized in other instances, such as the fish in the water or the trees around the spring, which had an objective aspect and were understandable to the people of that period. In his writings, “Etemad al-Saltaneh” clearly mentioned the existence of two large and small pools and emphasized the importance of the natural aspects of the complex, such as its trees (Sani al-Dawlah, 1988). He emphasized the value of water by mentioning the prohibition of catching fish in the pool and the plane trees around the spring with the word “Cheshmeh Moqadas” (Fig. 2).

When people see a built environment beyond a structure, they give meaning to it. This semantic relation can have different meanings depending on social preferences and experiences. “Meaning” is a familiar word due to its common usage in our daily lives. However, it is a concept much deeper than its literal definition. In recent years,



Fig. 2. Tying a faith ribbon around the root of the tree at the foot of the spring and taking water from the spring as a sign of blessing, implying the historical and ritual importance of this place from the past to the present day. Source: The Archive of Nazar Research Center, 2015.

this semantic aspect of the spring has brought a ritual perception for people, and special religious ceremonies have been held around it, especially during Muharram (Table 1). Near Cheshmeh Ali spring and on its eastern side is the village of “Astaneh” or “Astaneh Cheshmeh Ali”. The road connecting Astaneh village and Cheshmeh Ali is called “Salawati Passage”, the name derives from the villagers’ belief in the sacredness of Cheshmeh Ali (Ghazanfari, 2007). The people of the village walk a distance of 3 km between the village and Cheshmeh Ali on foot on the night of Ashura while chanting and beating their chests. They mourn next to Cheshmeh Ali until the

call to prayer at noon. Also, in the evening of Ashura, they circle around the spring and light candles, and this ritual is still in place today. In various religious ceremonies during Muharram, the ritual of sacrificing has also been held next to the spring. The tradition of sacrificing a sheep on various occasions is carried out by the people, and its meat is distributed among the people, especially the poor, in the form of offerings. In the distant past, there has been a stone under the old plane tree next to the spring, and people referred to it as the hoof trace of the horse of Imam Ali (AS), and it was visited as a sacred element. During Muharram ceremonies, they pour spring water on the stone and place the coffins next to it. They light a candle around this stone and under the tree and tie a faith ribbon around the root of the tree. The ancients had very strong beliefs about the sacredness of Cheshmeh Ali. Among them, swimming in the northern part of the lake was not considered good practice, and they believed that fishing in this part would cause adverse events to happen, and this was observed a lot in the past (Tahernejad, 2022).

Visual and physical values of the location of Cheshmeh Ali according to historical narratives

Cheshme Ali is a very pleasant place that has been the gathering place of the army since ancient times during the campaigns of the sultans and rulers. Alexander camped there for a while when he left Damghan for Gorgan, and Antiochus camped there during the war with the Parthian army. According to Greek historians such as “Diodorus”,

Table 1. The semantic role of Cheshmeh Ali in Damghan throughout history based on historical sources; From the third millennium BC to the Qajar period. Source: Authors.

No.	Author	Book	Year (AH)	Spring name	Semantic role
1	Antiochus III	the Seleucid Empire	3rd century BC	Esti Buet	Residential-recreational place
2	Abu Delf	Abu Delf’s Travelogue	4th century		
3	Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi	Included in “Habib al-Sir”	5th century		
4	Muhammad ibn Ayyub	Tohfa al-Qarayeb	5th century		
5	Zakaria Qazvini	Ajayib al-Makhloqat va Qaraib al-Mowjodat	7th century		
6	Hamdallah Mustawfi	Nezhat al-Qolub	8th century	Baadkhan	Myth - transcendental power
7	Mirkhand	Rowza al-Safa	9th century		
8	Ghiyas al-Din Khandmir,	Habib al-Sir	10th century		
9	Amin Ahmad Razi	Tazkere-Ye Haft Eqlim	11th century		
10	Abdolbaqi Nahavandi	Maather Rahimi	11th century		
11	Farhad Mirza Motamed al-Dowlah	Historical geography of Damghan	13th century		
12	Goerge Curzon	Persian and the Persian Question	13th century	Cheshmeh Baad/ Cheshmeh Ali	Mythological / Ritual

Alexander stayed in Damghan for a few days and then moved to Hirgani (Gorgan). His first residence was located on the mountain slope after passing four farsakhs, where a famous river called “Esti Buet” flowed, which originated from the spring. It flowed almost in a straight line for a distance, then it hit a small mountain. From there it changed its flow and passed through a narrow valley. After it exited the valley and entered the plain, it supplied the Hekatem Polis desert with water” (Kashavarz Damghani, 1991, 30). Another Greek historian, “Polybius”, wrote that in 206 BC, Antiochus III, one of the rulers of the Seleucus Empire, stayed in Hekatem Polis (Qumis) when he was going to Mazandaran to follow Artabanus (Ardavan), the first Parthian king. Then, he reached his first residence on the slopes of Mount Labuta. His second residence was next to the Esti Buet spring, which originated from Mount Labuta, and from there he went to Sirengs (Sari) and defeated Ardavan. The words “Labuta” as the name of the northern mountain of Damghan and “Esti Buet” as the name of Cheshmeh Ali are distorted names that were used for these at that time, or they are Greek words (Ranjabr, 1998, 69). Before the Safavid era, no building was constructed within the limits of Cheshmeh Ali, and the camps were set up temporarily in this place. One of the important reasons for this is the wars and political events in the region. In the historical sources, one can find different accounts of the wars in the Damghan region in the years before Islam (the death of Dariush III), the beginning of Islam (the attack of the Islamic armies on Qumis), and the years 316, 320, 581, 642, 690, 736, 769, 916, 1077, 1100, 1139, and 1142 (during the dynasty of Nader Shah Afshar) (Fig. 3). The mentioned dates have proved that the region was strategic and the center of political trouble. The last

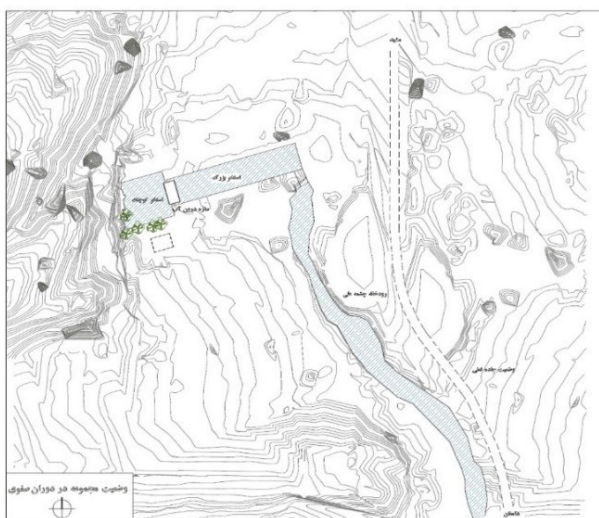


Fig. 3. The location of Cheshmeh Ali and changes in it during the Safavid period. During this period, a pool was built at the source of the spring, and a mansion and a bigger pool were built in the southern part of it. Source: Ghazanfari, 2007.

and most important war occurred during the dynasty of Nader Shah Afshar, and the region has likely experienced peace and security since the Safavid period, as the rulers had found an opportunity to build a recreational place in the Cheshmeh Ali area.

Since the Safavid period, when the Cheshmeh Ali area became the formal property of the kings and some buildings were constructed in it, this complex was defined into two parts, and this became stronger in the Qajar period. The recreation part, which was at the disposal of the kings and is located on the south side of the spring, and the ritual part, which had public use and found a governmental-social position, are located on the north side of the spring, around its manifestation. In this period, with the changes in the awareness of community and the development of cities, the society’s view of the concepts changed from the mythological dimension to the ritual dimension, meaning that they gave a symbolic and ritual value to the transcendental power of spring water by attributing it to imams, and in this way, they supported it against spatial changes and the development of cities. The greatest attention of the sultans to Cheshmeh Ali and the major changes in it took place during the Qajar period. During this period, this place was officially owned by the Qajar kings, and thus they made changes to the place. For example, one can refer to the construction of service buildings such as a bathhouse and a mosque in the northern part of Cheshmeh Ali; the construction of two mansions and a castle-like building in the western part of the complex on the top of the hill; and the creation of a fence around the Cheshmeh Ali garden.

In his “Travelogue: Khorasan”, he mentioned the buildings constructed during the dynasty of Fath Ali Shah and the beauty of the garden; and in his description of the pleasant atmosphere of the garden, he mentioned the large pool in the southern part of the spring (Nasser al-Din Shah, 1983). In his writings, Etemad al-Saltaneh clearly mentioned the existence of two large and small pools and the service buildings of the mosque and the bathhouse and emphasized the importance of the natural components of the complex, such as its hundred-year-old plane trees (Sani al-Dawlah, 1988). In some of the narratives of the Qajar period, in addition to the description of the physical and visual values of the complex, the mythological aspects and ritual importance of water in this place have been mentioned.

The significant integration of architectural elements in the Cheshmeh Ali complex and their relationships in expressing the semantic values of natural elements that make up the concept of Cheshmeh Ali can be a consistent relationship with the concepts. In most of the travelogues and historical sources that generally go back to the Qajar

period, the recreational aspect of the garden was discussed, for instance, the large pool on the south side of the complex and the regular arrangement of willow and poplar trees. This is while people's perception of the complex is manifested in behaviors and rituals that are concentrated in the northern part of the garden and around Cheshmeh Ali and old plane trees. The garden in this complex is an emerging phenomenon related to the Qajar period, and what has been narrated about Cheshmeh Ali garden refers to its new part that the Qajar kings built with the purpose of the provision of a resort. Then, Fath Ali Shah Qajar built a mosque in the northern part of the lake in the heart of a pleasing resort, and from the views of the people and pilgrims, it became the third and complementary sacred element in the Cheshmeh Ali ritual complex, after the sacred elements of water and old plane trees (Fig. 4). Therefore, the division of the complex into two recreational and ritual parts is a significant aspect of reading its identity. In the identity of the northern part, the dominant semantic component includes the natural elements of trees and water. In this spatial arrangement, various ceremonies and rituals take place throughout the year in the cultural context of this land. Throughout history, these rituals have become people's beliefs, and people guard them and read the semantic aspect of Chashmeh Ali, based on different symbols. In the southern part, architectural buildings are dominant elements of the garden, which emphasizes the "nature" of the place rather than its identity. Recreating a pleasant atmosphere is the main factor of this section's reading. Based on the fact that these buildings have no specific activity or function, they are considered a legacy and act as neutral factors in giving identity and meaning to the complex in its current life.



Fig. 4. The changes and development of the constructions in Cheshmeh Ali Damghan in the Qajar period. Source: Ghazanfari, 2007.

Semantic damages in Cheshmeh Ali

In the first step, the perception of a place is determined by its nature. Then, according to the behavioral and symbolic patterns in the place, the stage of giving meaning to it from the audience's point of view begins. To realize this perception, there is no need to install signs and tourist guides. Rather, a conceptual structure of place can be introduced by properly managing and preserving signs. This structure places nature and identity in the same semantic domain. Therefore, by assigning meaning to what we see in space and understand, we mean our environment and add our personal preferences and desires to this process. In recent years, restoration measures have been taken to reconstruct and renovate the Cheshmeh Ali complex. The historical sources of the Qajar period put more emphasis on the recreational aspect of Cheshmeh Ali. But since the garden in this complex has two parts with different meanings, it can be concluded that the narratives emphasized the southern part of the garden and not its northern and sacred part. The changes and reconstruction measures were based on the recreational aspect of the garden, and their result was the induction of a "prescriptive meaning" for the perception of this place, which will not represent a function other than recreation. If these interventions were carried out according to the concepts and true identity of Cheshmeh Ali, the actions would be planned and implemented based on semantic patterns, and in this process, its sacred concepts would be represented by relying on their true meanings. In this complex, the placement of the two elements of the resort and the mosque next to each other and their location in a place with a recreational use is a point of reflection. As a religious organ, the mosque was built next to the two sacred elements of water and trees, and people attribute part of the sacredness of the complex to the mosque building, which is far less old than the sacredness of the natural elements next to it, and is considered an emerging building, as the destruction of the mosque in recent years has been followed by protests from people and religious groups. While heritage and historical institutions have not supported this. The important point is that considering the existence of ritual elements and their reading in the trilogy of Persian space, the existence of a sacred place such as the fire temple from the ancient period in this place is not far from expected and it proves the antiquity of the mosque. However, in the restoration of this place, the mosque building was destroyed as it was considered a new building (Fig. 5). This action is the result of a heritage view that only focuses on the body of the building and not on its identity.

The reason for that can be found in the historical narratives and the people's current view of Cheshmeh Ali. In reading the importance of Cheshmeh Ali,



Fig. 5. The mosque constructed in Cheshmeh Ali during the dynasty of Fath Ali Shah was destroyed at the order of the Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization, and this action was faced many protests from people and religious institutions. Source: Documentary archive of Mohammad Taghi Taheranjad.

heritage institutions rely on superficial narratives from travelogues and historical sources of the Qajar period, which generally only focus on the southern part of the complex, which is Cheshmeh Ali Garden. Considering the age of the garden and the buildings in it, their criterion was the architectural buildings, and its Qajar fence was considered its physical instance. On this basis, the ceremonies, spatial arrangement, and historical narratives that were not related to the Qajar garden were ignored, and its identity was replaced with a recreational nature. As a result, despite the presence of ritual and religious symbols and signs of this complex on different days of the year, only the recreational aspect of the southern part of this complex has been considered a criterion for reading the place.

Conclusion

The process of formation of meaning and its importance for the human-space relationship are among the basic aspects defining the place and creating the trilogy of Persian space. Basically, in past religions, nature had a high position for the ancient peoples. With a deeper look at the culture and the lives of the ancients, one can find that individuals had

a religious attitude toward nature before modernity and made their relationship with the surrounding world based on religion. The immediacy of the relationship between natural elements and their semantic values, which has been materialized in the role of functional, symbolic, and ritual values by society throughout history, defines the qualities of the place and the type of elements giving meaning to it in two categories: objective signs and semantic signs. This semantic system in Iranian culture is known as the “trilogy of Persian space.” It is a system reflecting the relationship between sacredness and the protection of natural elements which has protected nature from changes throughout history. The conceptual forms of Cheshmeh Ali, as a trilogy of Persian space in the Damghan region, act as a medium representing the value of meaning with factors such as events, rituals, social behaviors, and spatial arrangement, and determine the value and semantic limits of the place. It should be noted that the meaning discussed in Cheshmeh Ali in Damghan refers to the socio-spatial production of meaning that is created as a natural result of mutual interaction between people and their built environment by people. In the ancient history of Chashmeh Ali, the objective signs of the spring refer to its role as a resort and temporary residence of the sultans, and its semantic aspect was introduced on a larger scale in the socio-cultural context in the form of legend and myth as a transcendental place. Most historical sources have described Cheshmeh Ali in three areas: “attention to the functional and life-giving aspect of the spring”, “its mythological aspect” and “the ritual aspect of the spring water”. But in all three historical narratives, the importance of water and its vital value in this region were emphasized, and their ultimate goal was to preserve the purity of this source of life. In the traditional society of Damghan, the sacredness of water and the continuity of spiritual forms of water culture are significantly consistent with the permanence of material manifestations and the traditional forms in its social rules in different uses. In ritual transformations and the reading of sacred concepts in different places in Iran, the crisis of social structure or the functional transformations of natural elements may be considered the cause of the identity crisis of nature-based ritual spaces. This may lead them to what is called a “non-place”. Social characteristics, environmental functions, cultural effects, and physical environment are the main factors influencing the community’s perception of Cheshme Ali. These give a sacred aspect or a functional and recreational aspect to a specific place. Despite the centrality of the concept of meaning in Cheshmeh Ali, based on historical sources, attribution of it to Imam Ali (AS), and ritual signs in it, it is not easy to fully understand this concept. Because nowadays it has evolved from a tangible concept to an abstract term, and the actions taken in it have strengthened the abstractness of the place.

Acknowledgment

In the study of the rituals and beliefs of today's people regarding Cheshmeh Ali in Damghan, as well as documents regarding the public reaction to the destruction of the mosque of this complex,

the cooperation of Mohammadtaghi Taheranjad, one of the trustees of Cheshmeh Ali, was useful in analyzing and investigating the ritual role of Cheshmeh Ali in this article.

References list

- Abulfeda. (2013). *A Sketch of the Countries* (A.M. Birjandi, Trans.). Tehran: Library and Documents Center of the Parliament of Iran.
- Al-Maqdisi. (2006). *Ahsan al-Taqasim fi Marifat al-Aqalim* [The best divisions for knowledge of the regions] (A. Monzavi, Trans.). Tehran: Koomesh.
- Curzon, G. N. (1990). *Persian and the Persian Question* (Gh. Vahidmazandarani, Trans.). Vol.1. Tehran: Elmi Farhangi.
- Ghazanfari, S.P. (2007). *Landscape Design of Cheshmeh Ali Complex in Damghan* (Unpublished Master Thesis in Landscape Architecture). Faculty of Architecture, College of Fine Arts, University of Tehran, Iran.
- Ghazanfari, S.P. & Javadi, Sh. (2016). Cheshmeh Ali in Damghan and the reasons for its sacredness. *Bagh-e Nazar*, 13 (42), 57-66.
- Hamavi, Y.I.A. (2001). *Mojam-ol- Boldan* (A. Monzavi, Trans.). Tehran: Iran's Cultural Heritage, Tourist, and Handcrafts Organization, General Directorate of Education, Publishing and Cultural Production.
- Jafarpour, E. et al. (1989). *Bana-ha va shahr-e Damghan* [Buildings and the city of Damghan]. Tehran: Faza.
- Keshavarz Damghani, A.A. (1991). *Tarikh va joghrafia-ye Damghan* [History and geography of Damghan]. Tehran: Hirmand.
- Khandmir, Gh.A.H. (2001). *Habib al-Sir fi al-Akhabar Afrad al-Bashar* (M. Dabirsiaqi, Ed.). Tehran: Khayyam.
- Kiani, Y. (1987). *Shahr-ha-ye Iran* [Cities of Iran]. Tehran: Ershad Eslami.
- Le Strange, G. (2013). *The Lands of the Eastern Caliphate* (M. Erfan, Trans.). Tehran: Elmi Farhangi.
- Mansouri, S.A. & Javadi, Sh. (2018). *Trilogy of Iranian Space*. Tehran: Nazar Research Center.
- Minorsky, V. (1975). *Abu Delf's travelogue in Iran (341 AH)* (S.A. Tabatabaei, Trans.). Tehran: Zavar.
- Mirshokraei, M. (2001). Ali. (AS) dar farhang-e mardom-e Iran [Ali (AS) in the culture of Iranian people]. *Ketab-e Mah-e Honar*, (31 & 32).
- Mirshokraei, M. (2003). Farhang va ab [Culture and water]. *Ketab-e Mah-e Honar*, (57 & 58), 3.
- Muhammad ibn Khawandshah Balkhi (Mirkhand). (1994). *Rawzat as-şafā* (A. Zaryab, Ed.). Tehran: Elmi.
- Mustawfi, H.A.H. (2010). *Nuzhat al-Qulub*. Tehran: Asatir.
- Nahavandi, A. (2003). *Maather Rahimi* (A. Navaei, Ed.). Tehran: Association of Cultural Artifacts and Honors.
- Nasir Khusraw. (1961). *Book of Traveles*. Berlin: Kaviani.
- Nasser al-Din Shah. (1983). *Safanama-ye Khorasan* [Travelogue: Khorasan]. Tehran: Babak.
- Qazvini, Z.I.M. (2013). *Ajayib al-Makhloqat va Qaraib al-Mowjodot* (Y. Beigbabapour & M. Gholamieh, Ed.). Tehran: Islamic Reserves Assembly.
- Ranjbar, M. (1998). *The sanctity of water (from past to today)* (Unpublished Master thesis in Architecture). Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Tehran, Iran.
- Relph, E. (1976). *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion.
- Sani al-Dawlah. (1988). *Merat Al-Baladan* (A. Nawaei & M. Mohaddes, Ed.). Vol.4. Tehran: University of Tehran.
- Tabari, M.I.J. (1973). *History of the Prophets and Kings* (A. Payandeh). Tehran: Asatir.
- Tabari, M.I.A. (2012). *Tohfāt-al-Qarayeb*. Tehran: Library and Documents Center of the Parliament of Iran.
- Taheria, M.A. (1968). *Joghrafia-ye tarikhi-ye Damghan-e 6 hezar sale* [The historical geography of Damghan of six thousand years]. Mashhad: Central Council of Iranian Imperial Festival.
- Tahernejad, M. (02/06/2022). *Personal Interview*.
- Tuan, Y. (2001). *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. London: University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Yaghmaei, E. (1947). *Joghrafia-ye tarikhi-ye Damghan* [Historical Geography of Damghan]. Tehran: Aftab.

COPYRIGHTS

Copyright for this article is retained by the authors with publication rights granted to Tourism of Culture journal. This is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).



HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

mansouri, S.A. & Mokhles, F. (2022). The Mythological-Functional Role of Cheshmeh Ali in Damghan Throughout History. *Tourism of Culture*, 3(9), 55-64.

DOI:10.22034/TOC.2022.353111.1090

URL: http://www.toc-sj.com/article_154202_en.html

