

Original Research Article

A Landscape Reading of Urban Bazaars in Relation to Rivers (The Case of Dezful and Shush)*

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Abstract | In river-based cities, urban spaces like bazaars often transcend their physical and economic roles, becoming meaningful places shaped by their natural surroundings and users' lived experiences. However, the specific mechanisms through which rivers influence the spatial, functional, and semantic dimensions of bazaars—and their subsequent impact on social and cultural structure remain underexplored. This study aims to analyze the place-based characteristics of the bazaars in Dezful and Shush, situated along the Dez and Shavur rivers, by examining how their interaction with these waterways has contributed to their socio-cultural and spatial identity. Using a descriptive-analytical approach, the study integrates field observations, historical documentation, and geographical data to identify the spatial, functional, and semantic factors of the bazaars. The analysis focuses on their relationship with rivers and their role in shaping social vitality and cultural meaning. The findings reveal that in Dezful, the bazaar's historical and vernacular architecture has fostered a dynamic space with economic, social, and cultural functions, deeply tied to the Dez River. In Shush, the bazaar's proximity to the Shavur River and the shrine of Daniel the Prophet has imbued it with a religious-commercial identity, elevating its role beyond mere commerce. In both cases, rivers serve as active agents in meaning-making, spatial experience, and identity formation. The study underscores the importance of recognizing bazaars as "places" socially vibrant and culturally significant spaces that, through their riverine context, strengthen the connection between people and their urban environment.

Keywords | *River-city, Khuzestan, Bazaar, Place-based, Development.*

Introduction | Khuzestan, as one of the strategic provinces of Iran, has long been at the center of political, economic, and social attention. Its location near the Persian Gulf and its proximity to Arab countries—particularly from a commercial perspective—has granted it a special status in the historical context of Iran. With its numerous water resources, including the Dez and Karkheh rivers, the province has provided a suitable foundation for the emergence of civilizations and the formation of various cities. Among these, cities such as Dezful and Shush, which developed alongside these rivers, have played a significant role in the commercial

and trade history of Iran. The bazaars of these two cities, as social and commercial spaces, from the past until today, have demonstrated distinct social and economic dynamics through their interaction with the natural environment, especially with the rivers.

This study, with an emphasis on landscape-based analysis, explores the impact of rivers on the formation and structure of the bazaars in Dezful and Shush, and it investigates how these elements have influenced the identity of these cities.

Urban bazaars, as one of the essential pillars of urban structure, play multiple roles that go beyond purely economic activities. These spaces are also recognized as centers of social, cultural, and religious interaction. In river-based cities, the complex relationship between place and identity is shaped by specific natural and

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social factors, which, alongside cultural and economic processes, lead to the creation of unique identities. In this regard, the present study analyzes the role of rivers in the formation and evolution of the urban bazaars of Dezful and Shush in Khuzestan Province. This research particularly emphasizes the interaction between the natural environment—especially the rivers—and the physical and social structures of the bazaars.

The present study assumes that rivers, as landscape elements influencing the spatial and functional structure of these bazaars, have not only contributed to the formation of urban identities but also played a decisive role in the social and economic processes in these two cities.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How have the Dez and Shavur rivers influenced the formation and development of the urban bazaars of Dezful and Shush?
2. How do these bazaars, as identity-generating elements, reflect the social, economic, and cultural characteristics of these regions?
3. Can the bazaars of Dezful and Shush be considered place-based spaces in which lived experience, historical identity, and riverine connection lead to the creation of meaning?

Research Hypothesis

It is assumed that the bazaars of Dezful and Shush, due to their close relationship with the Dez and Shavur rivers, have transcended into a purely spatial condition and have transformed into places characterized by historical, social, and identity-related features. These bazaars not only fulfill economic needs, but, due to their presence within the natural landscape, have been established in the collective memory of the people and have become symbols of urban place-based identity.

Significance and Objectives of the Research

Khuzestan has long held a unique position in the Iranian territory. The province's special capacities—such as its location at the head of the Persian Gulf, proximity to Arab countries, abundant water resources, fertile soil, distinct agricultural capabilities, vast area, strategic ports, access to waterways, industrial facilities, and oil and gas reserves—grant it high geopolitical significance for the country. As a result, it attracts attention at both regional and transregional levels (Jafari Valdani, 2011).

However, unbalanced development, severe environmental degradation, weak economic and employment functions, and the province's limited capacity to retain population

(سند راهبردی ...، 2019), along with national governance policies, have weakened the quality of life in Khuzestan.

Due to its political, economic, cultural, and agricultural importance, Khuzestan has often been the focus of national development plans. This research seeks to interpret the landscape of Dezful and Shush—two major cities in the province formed alongside two of its principal rivers—and, at a broader level, aims to define place-based components of the bazaar as a structural element in Khuzestan's River cities. At a more localized scale, it explores the relationship between rivers and bazaars in these two cities.

Research Methodology

This research was conducted using a descriptive-analytical approach, based on field studies and library research. To investigate the impact of rivers on the formation and identity of the Dezful and Shush bazaars, methods of direct observation and analysis of collected data were employed.

One of the main stages of the study was a research trip conducted from November 26 to 30, 2024, to Dezful and Shush, coordinated by the Nazar Research Center and carried out by the research team. During this visit, the physical characteristics, location of the bazaars relative to the rivers, and social and economic interactions were documented.

Field data were integrated with library sources to offer a more comprehensive analysis of the role of rivers in the formation of the bazaars. In addition to photographic documentation, the fieldwork utilized targeted observations, recording of spatial features, and informal conversations with local shopkeepers to better understand the experiential and semantic layers of the spaces.

The research employs a qualitative approach, using physical, functional, and semantic indicators to analyze the place-based qualities of the bazaars and to assess the rivers' influence on their spatial and social structures.

Literature Review

Rivers, as key elements in the development of civilizations and cities, have played a significant role in shaping the social, economic, and spatial structures of urban areas. Many urban bazaars have emerged adjacent to rivers and have been influenced by their natural and cultural features. Studies show that rivers are not only sources of natural and economic resources but also play a considerable role in organizing urban spaces, especially marketplaces.

The study by Mavedat et al. (2020) on the city of Dezful indicates that the Dez River has played a critical role in the city's spatial and functional development. The

bazaars of Dezful, through their connection with the river's ecological and landscape features, have evolved into dynamic, multifunctional spaces. The research emphasizes that river interactions with urban spaces can contribute to the creation of sustainable commercial and social environments.

In another study, Hayati & Fardin (2015) examined the mutual influence of rivers and cities in forming sustainable urban landscapes. Their findings show that rivers play a central role in balancing the natural and built elements of cities. In this regard, bazaars, as public spaces interacting with rivers, provide a setting for economic, social, and cultural activities—a phenomenon clearly observable in cities like Shush and Dezful.

This body of research suggests that rivers in river-based cities such as Dezful and Shush have served not only as sources of natural and economic sustenance but also as key elements in the formation and development of social and commercial spaces like bazaars. This interaction reflects the deep connection between natural and cultural elements in Iranian urbanism, and its impact on the identity of urban marketplaces is undeniable.

Theoretical Foundations

This study seeks to revisit the concept of place as a whole and the bazaar as a component within the city's spatial organization.

• Place

In this research, "place" is considered a holistic and qualitative phenomenon in spatial and urban analysis. Norberg-Schulz (1974, 2002) regards place as the element from which space derives its existence. Heidegger (2015) also believes that space derives its being from place. Mansouri (2023) defines place as a living and meaning-making phenomenon that emerges through an interpretive gaze on the environment.

This understanding helps us better grasp the place-based nature of urban spaces, especially in relation to bazaars and rivers. According to Marc Augé (2008), a place has three characteristics: identity, relations, and history. These qualities are used to analyze the place-based nature of spaces in physical, functional, and semantic dimensions. In this research, the place-based nature of bazaars is analyzed in connection with rivers, focusing on how they contribute to shaping urban identity.

• Urban landscape

Urban landscape refers not only to the physical and functional dimensions of space but also to its meanings and associated social and cultural identities. Mansouri (2010) introduces urban landscape as a historical process shaped through people's interaction with their environment. These interactions not only affect the

physical features of cities but also directly influence the organization of urban spaces, including bazaars.

Therefore, in this study, the urban landscape of the Dezful and Shush bazaars—especially in relation to rivers—is analyzed. Naturally, this leads to the examination of place-based meanings and their influence on the city's spatial organization.

• Urban spatial organization

The city, as a complex and goal-oriented system, consists of various elements whose interrelations function in a coordinated manner (Mansouri et al., 2019). This spatial system affects how different urban spaces are organized, and bazaars, as key elements, have a special role in shaping urban structure.

Historically, bazaars—alongside other elements such as streets and squares—have served as central structures in organizing urban spaces. Analyzing the link between spatial organization and natural elements such as rivers is crucial to understanding the role of bazaars and their influence on the structure of the Dezful and Shush marketplaces.

• Bazaar

Finally, the bazaar, as one of the key structural components of the city, is not only a place for the exchange of goods but also recognized as a space for social, cultural, and religious interaction (Pirnia, 2001). Throughout history, bazaars have been known as the economic and social cores of cities, hosting not only commercial but also cultural and social interactions.

In this regard, the bazaars of Dezful and Shush are considered examples of urban markets adjacent to rivers that—through their riverine connection—have performed multiple economic, social, and cultural functions.

Therefore, examining their connection with rivers contributes to a better understanding of the place-based qualities of these spaces and their influence on urban identity. To analyze the place-based nature of bazaars in connection with rivers, several key Components are used (Table 1).

Physical-Semantic Components: These include the spatial location of bazaars relative to rivers, the spatial pattern and organization of streets and shops, the use of local materials, and architectural design adapted to the regional climate. These elements reflect the influence of rivers on the spatial structure of bazaars and their integration with the surrounding natural environment.

Functional-Semantic Components: These involve the impact of rivers on the transportation of goods, support for agricultural and industrial activities, and the creation of multifunctional opportunities, including social and cultural interactions within the market.

Table 1. Components of bazaar place-basedness in connection with rivers. Source: Authors.

Indicator	Physical-Semantic Components	Functional-Semantic Components
Spatial Location	Relationship of the bazaar to rivers and its orientation towards them	Influence of rivers on the functional patterns of the bazaar
Spatial Pattern	Organization of pathways and stalls in relation to rivers	Bazaar features and capacities in conjunction with river proximity
Use of Local Materials	Architectural design adapted to the local climate and environment	Rivers' role in supporting the sustainable development of bazaars
Connectivity Network	Connection of the bazaar to other parts of the city and the river	Rivers' role in fostering social and cultural interactions

Identifying the Instances

• Khuzestan: Land of rivers and ancient civilizations

Khuzestan, with its unique geographical position and proximity to the Dez and Karkheh rivers, has long been one of the most important centers of civilization in Iran. This province has played a major role in the formation of ancient civilizations and the development of trade markets. Rivers in this region have not only served as water sources but also as communication and trade routes, playing a key role in the economic prosperity of the cities. Cities like Dezful and Shush are examples of the interaction between bazaars and their natural environments.

• Dezful: The city of river and brick

Dezful is one of the oldest cities in Khuzestan, located beside the Dez River and a fertile plain. Historically, it has been known as one of Iran's agricultural and commercial hubs (Montazeri, 2008). Historical records indicate that the Dez River has played a key role in the formation and development of Dezful, providing water resources and serving as a route for the transportation of goods and communication with other cities (Darkatanian, 2019).

In the past, Dezful served as a strategic connector between the two major settlements of Susa and Gundeshapur. The city was initially developed to fulfill military functions, provide services, and control the communication routes between these two centers (ibid.). While military and defensive factors played a primary role in its foundation, the city's expansion and settlement patterns were also shaped by natural and environmental conditions.

During the Sassanid era, Dezful expanded significantly following the construction of a bridge over the Dez River ordered by Shapur I. Given the city's service-oriented nature at that time, the first bazaar and trading square were formed near the Qupi-e Morteza Ali Gate (Fig. 1).

Following the advent of Islam and due to Khuzestan being the first region through which Muslims entered Iran, Dezful came under the control of Kufa and Basra. During this period, the city saw the construction

of its Jameh Mosque, the definition of four city gates, and the formation of the old bazaar's urban fabric (Darkatanian, 2019) (Fig. 2).

In the Qajar period, the city's fortification expanded in three directions, and six new gates were defined. In the Pahlavi era, however, the fortification walls were demolished as part of modernization efforts, and the introduction of grid-pattern street networks disrupted the city's organic structure. This led to the emergence of new commercial centers along the newly constructed streets (ibid.).

Although the Dezful bazaar served as a key local trading area, historical documents and travel accounts suggest that it lacked the prosperity seen in major Iranian markets. Najm al-Mulk, a 19th-century official during the Qajar period, noted that the city had no well-established bazaar and that most transactions took place in small courtyards or open squares (Latifpour, 2008) (Fig. 2).

Historical reports also indicate that Dezful lacked prominent caravanserais, and trade mainly occurred in open-air markets where rural and nomadic groups sold their products. Among these, the "Grand Sar Meydan" was the most notable. These trading locations were not confined to a single square but operated around the city's four main gates, particularly in the northwest and southern parts (Masoudi Nejad, 2022).

The Dezful bazaar had an economy rooted in agriculture but was also home to diverse industrial activities, including indigo dyeing (Latifpour, 2008), woodturning, blacksmithing, felt-making, waterskin production, and metal engraving (Montazeri, 2008). Handicraft workshops were arranged along the market's corridors in parallel rows, forming a link between commercial and residential zones (Masoudi Nejad, 2022).

One of the notable features of this market is the coexistence of handicraft workshops with commercial spaces, which has contributed to creating a unique atmosphere in the bazaar's corridors. This combination, which includes the sounds of blacksmithing, the smell of leather, and

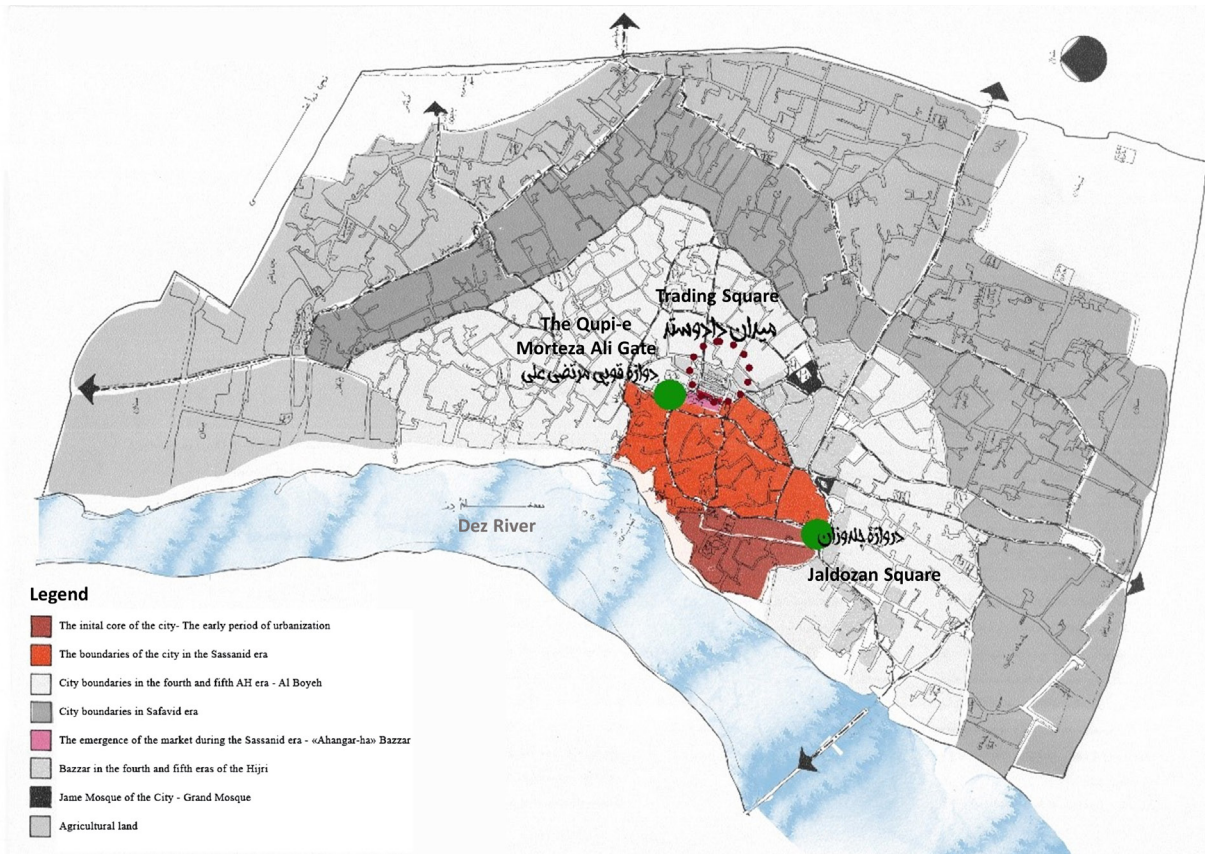


Fig. 1. The formation of the first market (Blacksmiths' Market and Trade Square) during the Sassanid era near the city gate of Dezful, the market on the edge of the city. Source: Authors, based on Rahimiye & Rabubi, 1971.

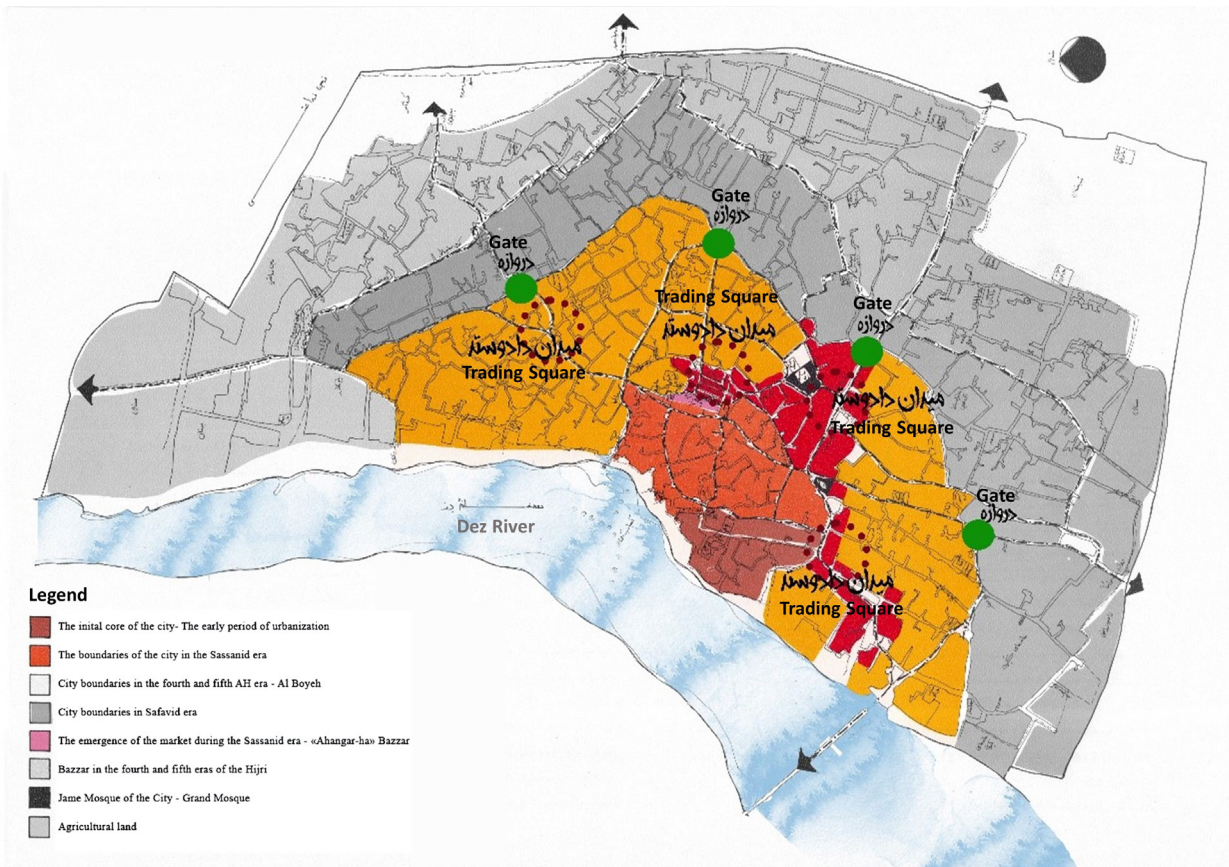


Fig.2. The formation of the bazaar as a structure of the Islamic city and in the continuity of trading squares, and the connection of the service city with the city gates. Source: Authors based on Rahimiye & Rabubi, 1977.

the dust of woodturning, helps imbue the space with meaning and cultural experiences. Moreover, the Dezful bazaar is a blend of commercial and service spaces located near caravanserais, Timches (covered bazaars), baths, and mosques (Darkatanian, 2019) (Fig. 3). This diversity of uses has made the market a collective and multifunctional space, providing opportunities not only for trading goods but also for social and cultural interactions.

The architecture of the Dezful bazaar largely follows the region's indigenous features. The orientation of the corridors is such that it provides natural ventilation and adequate lighting for the shops (Rahaee, 2013; Rahaee et al., 2013). This design, while responding to climatic needs, helps maintain comfort in the commercial spaces. Indigenous materials such as brick and canopies made from fabric and wood, along with galvanized sheets, display a combination of tradition and modernity in the market (Fig. 4).

Based on field observations, despite changes due to modernity, the architectural quality of the Dezful bazaar is deteriorating. However, it remains recognized as a dynamic social and cultural space and has stayed in people's memories as a vibrant and nostalgic place (Fig. 5).



Fig. 3. Old photos of Dezful Bazaar as a cultural document of the eventfulness of Dezful Bazaar. Source: <http://shoplishk.blogfa.com>.



Fig. 4. Native architecture of Dezful Bazaar. Source: <http://shoplishk.blogfa.com>.

• Shush: The ancient Iranian city

Shush, due to its unique geographical position and its location beside the Shavur River, has long been recognized as one of the most important centers of civilization in Iran. This city, especially during the Elamite and Achaemenid periods, played a prominent role in cultural and commercial development (Golestanzadeh, 2000). The settlement history in the Shush plain dates back to around 8000 BC, with the Shavur River playing an important role in agricultural prosperity and the formation of early settlements in this region (Mohammadianfar, 2010; Mansori, 2019).

In the Achaemenid period, Shush was one of the main capitals of the Achaemenid Empire and a crossroads for the East and West, having an advanced irrigation and agricultural network (ibids.). The Shush bazaar, located beside the Shavur River, is still known as the city's commercial and religious hub. Field observations show that despite some erosion and structural changes, this bazaar still serves as a commercial, social, and identity-building space next to the river and the shrine of Daniel the Prophet (AS). The presence of the Shavur River and the shrine of Daniel the Prophet (AS) has made the Shush bazaar a multifunctional point for cultural, social, and commercial interactions (Fig. 6).



Fig. 5. The dynamism of the Dezful market despite its declining structure. Photo: Negin Rajab Bojani, 2024.



Fig. 6. The market is along both riverbanks and adjacent to the shrine of Prophet Daniel. Photo: Negin Rajab Bojani, 2024.

Discussion: Examining the Place-Based Identity of the Dezful and Shush Bazaars

• Place-based identity of Dezful Bazaar (Physical-Semantic, Functional-Semantic)

The Dezful bazaar, as one of the main components of the urban space in the river-city of Dezful, has been shaped by the geography and the Dez River. The Dez River has not only had physical impacts on the market’s structure but also played a significant role in its social meaning and functionality. This market has functioned as a commercial point in the urban space from its inception, while also becoming a center for social and cultural interactions.

According to field observations, the Dezful bazaar is more of a semi-open space with various sections designed next to each other, directly influenced by the Dez River’s effects on its design. The river has not only influenced the formation of commercial spaces beside it, but it has also fostered the growth of agriculture and traditional industries, which are visible in the market itself. These characteristics have made the Dezful bazaar a place with special significance in relation to the river, not just as a commercial space but also as a social, cultural, and religious one.

From a functional-semantic perspective, the Dezful bazaar, in addition to its commercial function, is also recognized as a space for cultural, social, and even religious exchanges. Handicraft workshops exist alongside commercial shops,

and this combination seems to create a diverse and multifunctional space. This multifunctionality originates from the influence of the Dez River as a functional element in the market’s social and commercial flourishing. The Dezful bazaar, due to its geographical location and the influence of the Dez River, plays a secondary role in the city’s social and cultural dynamics, with the Dez River playing a central role in events and activities (Table 2).

• Place-based identity of Shush Bazaar (physical-semantic, functional-semantic)

The Shush bazaar, like the Dezful bazaar, was formed due to its geographical location near the Shavur River. However, the impact of the Shavur River on the Shush bazaar is primarily seen in economic and agricultural aspects. The Shavur River, as a main water resource, facilitated agricultural growth and local production, which in turn transformed the Shush bazaar into a center for the exchange of agricultural products and local industries.

From a physical-semantic perspective, the Shush bazaar, through its proximity to religious spaces like the shrine of Daniel the Prophet (AS) and its relationship with the Shavur River, has acquired a specific meaning. Field observations show that the bazaar experiences its greatest social vitality near the shrine of Daniel the Prophet (AS), and this religious and spiritual connection with the river has transformed the Shush

Table 2. Analysis of the place-based identity of Dezful Bazaar and its relation to the River. Source: Authors.

Dezful Bazaar Indicators	Physical-Semantic	Functional-Semantic	Place-Based Identity of the Bazaar in Dezful River-City
Formation or Expansion of City	- The bazaar formed at the edge of the city	- Expansion through trade squares and gates	- The river plays a central role in city formation
Relationship between City and Mainland	- Not located on main trade routes	- Provides service and defense functions for the city	- Multiple roles within the mainland dimension
Economic Background	- Agricultural products due to abundant water resources	- Industries based on agriculture and rivers	- River-based economy
Bazaar’s Role in Urban Space	- Market as a trade hub	- Connection between the Sassanid bridge gate and the trade squares	- Market as a structural component
Indigenous Architecture	- Orientation of passages towards the wind for air circulation	- Local materials (bricks)	- Climate-adapted and river-influenced architecture
Diverse Bazaar Functions	- Multifunctional market with cultural and social activities	- Multifunctionality within the city	- Collective functions, connecting trade, culture, and social interaction

bazaar into not just an economic center but also a cultural and spiritual hub.

In functional-semantic terms, the Shush bazaar, in addition to its commercial functions, is recognized as a space for social and cultural interactions. This feature, due to the connection with the shrine of Daniel the Prophet (AS) and the river, has made the Shush bazaar more recognized as a social and spiritual space alongside its commercial use. Unlike Dezful, where the Dez River plays a key role in shaping the commercial space, the Shavur River in Shush primarily acts as a water supply resource and an enabler of agricultural activities (Table 3).

Conclusion

The bazaars, as vital elements in the spatial and social structure of cities, have played a prominent role not only in economic processes but also in the formation of cultural and social identities. The study of the Dezful and Shush bazaars reveals that these markets have deep connections with rivers and religious spaces, which have significantly influenced the formation and stabilization of urban identities. These bazaars are not just commercial centers but also identity symbols, playing a role in the social organization and cultural interactions of their cities.

In Dezful, the bazaar has been shaped as a multifunctional space in interaction with the Dez River. The Dez River,

through its provision of water resources and its impact on agriculture, has directly influenced the market's development, and with its indigenous architecture, the market serves as a place for meeting social and economic needs.

In Shush, the bazaar, located next to the Shavur River and religious shrines, serves as both an economic and cultural center. The Shavur River's role in facilitating trade and religious activities has transformed the Shush bazaar into a focal point for the city's dynamics.

Finally, the analysis of the Dezful and Shush bazaars shows that rivers, as key natural elements, have played a crucial role in the formation and place-based identity of these markets. The connection between the bazaars and rivers, along with historical, cultural, and social influences, has led to these bazaars becoming dynamic and lively places. The Dezful and Shush bazaars represent the complex interaction between space, identity, economy, and culture in urban processes and serve as identity and cultural centers with essential roles in the social and economic interactions of their cities (Table 4).

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there was no conflict for them in conducting this research.

Table 3. Analysis of the place-based identity of Shush Bazaar and its relation to the river. Source: Authors.

Shush Bazaar Indicators	Physical-Semantic	Functional-Semantic	Place-Based Identity of the Bazaar in Shush River-City
Formation or Expansion of City	- River as a city formation factor (being)	- Shrine and river as sustaining elements	- Bazaar as an economic and cultural hub
Relationship between City and Mainland	- Located at a crossroads of civilizations	- Adjacent to the river, as an important trade route	- Strong connection between local and transregional cultures
Economic Background	- Trading center based on agriculture and the river	- River-based economy and water trade	- River as a transport route
Bazaar's Role in Urban Space	- Market along the river and the shrine	- Commercial and religious center	- Market as a cultural and economic focal point
Indigenous Architecture	- Use of local materials (bricks) and semi-open spaces	- Architecture influenced by climate and river	- Interaction with the local climate and river environment
Diverse Bazaar Functions	- Combination of religious, social, and commercial spaces	- Multifunctional market with religious and commercial roles	- Religious-commercial center

Table 4. Comparison of the place-based identity of bazaars in Dezful and Shush River Cities. Source: Authors.

Place-Based Identity of Dezful Bazaar	Place-Based Identity of Shush Bazaar	Place-Based Identity of Bazaar in River-Cities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The river plays a central role in shaping the city's structure - Multiple roles in the mainland dimension - Market as a small unit connected to the structure - River-based economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The river plays a central role in shaping the city's structure - The market plays a major role in the region - Market in harmony with the river and shrine - River-based economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Market as a small component of the structure - The river as the central point of the city - Multi-functional nature in the city - River-based economy

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