VILLAGE MORPHOLOGY

The Distribution of Structures and Activities in Turan Villages

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The thirteen villages of central Turan are small, highly nucleated, and irregular in plan. Beginning from the foothills of Mount Peighambar at the southwest, they lie scattered across the plain as it slopes down to the edge of the sand sea to the north. Viewed from the mountain’s heights, each village is marked by a patchy green island of irrigated fields and cultivated trees in summer—though in winter it is hardly visible at all, the mud roofs and walls blending with the earth from which they were built. Nothing lies between villages except sandy or gravelly pasture and occasional stretches of dry-farmed land.

A single irrigated field system covers as much as 30 hectares, spreading out down-stream from the qanat opening for over a kilometer before the water finally runs out. These fields are the focus of most of a village’s productive activity and, except for the household compound itself, both men and women spend more time there than anywhere else around the village. Why then do people choose to live side by side in dense clusters of houses at the top of the agricultural land rather than among their family fields as is done in many other parts of the world?

In the first place, a family’s holdings are usually scattered throughout the field system rather than concentrated all in one place. To reorganize the fields in order to compensate for the splintering effect of patterns of inheritance and sale would be difficult if not impossible because plots vary considerably in fertility. In fact, the present system results in a more equitable distribution of land, with holdings likely to include both favorable and unfavorable locations. Moreover, many villagers own and work fields that are part of more distant qanat systems, either attached to other villages or at the sites of abandoned settlements.

In the second place, people want a convenient supply of fresh water for themselves and their animals. In these systems, water does not flow continuously through the whole system, but is diverted in rotation so that any particular plot is watered only once every 12 to 14 days. A household living near its field lets could be far removed from a daily source of water for domestic use and for watering livestock. Private wells would overcome this problem, but they are so rare in Turan villages that it is difficult to judge their general feasibility. They require considerable effort to dig using traditional technology, and it is likely that they would be salty. Even some qanats whose water comes from higher, more mineral-free sources are slightly brackish. Because of the local hydrology, wells could not be dug at all at many village locations.

Finally, insecurity has been a long-standing problem in Turan, affecting not only the distribution and size of settlements, but also the shape that they take. Up until the 1960’s, local brigands as well as Turkmen raiders from the north were a serious threat to people and their property, and
multi-household, fortified dwellings (qal`a) were an essential feature of the landscape. Qal`a had to be near water, both to protect the water source and for fast and therefore safe access. Some contained wells or cisterns in case of siege. Qal`a were built even at small outlying settlements, because isolated fields had to be occupied and protected if they were to be exploited at all. Many are known to be at least several hundred years old. Because of the thickness of their walls, they are still standing ruins, while simpler, more recent houses have long since disappeared, so it is difficult to know whether qal`a were the only type of settlement possible at any given period.

Though defense is no longer critical, the memory of those days is still very much alive, and people do not like being alone. Men are often away from their families shepherding or at other tasks, and women and children like to have neighbors and relatives close by. Beyond this apprehension, there is a strongly expressed need for the socializing and mutual aid possible among close neighbors, who are usually kin of one sort or another. Life in a Tauran village is a web of social and economic relationships.

Though settlement is nucleated rather than dispersed, villages are not unusually densely occupied relative to what is sometimes reported from elsewhere in the Middle East. Rainfall agriculture in Tauran is occasional and risky, so that dry-farmed land next to villages is not especially valuable and can be appropriated for ex-


ding populations. Because settlements are no longer fortified and there are no walls restricting residential areas, there are no tangible barriers which circumscribe villages. Qal`a, once the dominating feature of all agricultural settlements, are falling into disrepair and are often only empty ruins, adding to the amount of unoccupied space within villages. In Tauran there are few second stories; in spite of occasional upper summer rooms,


to build out instead of up. The layout of all these villages is unplanned and represents the accumulation of several generations of individual decisions. The two villages on the plain which do exhibit a regular grid-like layout do so not because of a preconceived plan; rather, they are expanding onto abandoned fields whose rectangular ditches define the shape of the new building lots.

While villages do not appear “planned”

neither are they haphazard. New compounds are located according to existing social, especially kin, relationships and oriented with respect to environmental factors, especially sun and wind. Because they are so small, minimizing distance from the qanat outlet (where domestic water is drawn) or the fields is not important within these villages, especially since being nearer one may mean being farther from the other. And there is no association between wealth or status and compound location.

Most real estate (land and structures) within villages is privately owned and can be transferred by sale or inheritance. Both men and women may be owners, but most often brothers and husbands manage their female relatives’ holdings which have usually been received through inheritance. Except for pastoral stations, which are often rented as units, very little formal leasing of housing occurs, though some “borrowing” takes place. Some land and buildings within villages are not owned or are not considered to belong to the village as a whole—alleys, land under government buildings, religious buildings, community bathhouses, and open space that has not been spoken for within memory. Sometimes the property has been a qan`at, or pious donation.

As mentioned earlier, settlements are not marked out today by walls or other boundaries and there is no gate or obvious entrance into a village. There is no overall spatial pattern that repeats itself from village to village, though particular kinds of activity areas and structures are found in every village. Each household needs shelter and space for both people and livestock, and in some villages shelter for donkeys and oxen has its own quarter.

Generally, though, villages tend to be homogeneous with little clustering of activities, probably in large part because of the small scale and lack of internal differentiation or specialization of most settlements.

In addition to domestic space, which is the domain of private households, there are several kinds of special purpose structures found in many villages. These are mills, stores, religious buildings, schoolhouses, and bath houses. Some part-time specialists, such as the headman or religious practitioners, carry out their tasks in their own homes. Except for the
Living rooms. Though different kinds of structures appear alike from the outside, their interiors vary depending on their use. Living rooms are finished and decorated more elaborately than other types of rooms.

Store room. Here a converted living room is used to store household equipment including an iron pan for boiling milk, a brass tea warmer and goatskins.

Plan of several compounds in the village, showing the distribution of rooms among four households. Letters refer to room types; numbers identify households. As an example, household 15's holdings have been marked in color. All except household 17 own rooms in other parts of the village as well (not shown). Key: A = Animal house, L = Living room, S = Store room.

Grain storage bin. Food is also kept in store rooms, which are sometimes used as kitchens as well.

Animal house. Unlike human dwellings, structures built for oxen and donkeys are unhurried inside and have feed bins and other built-in features. Religious building which is used only for services, there is no formal community meeting place. Groups gather casually at convenient, shady, open areas, especially near stores, mills, the headman's compound or the area where supply vehicles or city transportation stop. Women meet at the qanat stream.

Never compounds tend to be built with walled courtyards; older ones were not. Residents explain them as an urban idea of recent introduction, and there does appear to be an association between villages with predominantly walled compounds and villages having the greatest contact with outsiders and the least degree of isolation. In villages which have both types, the unwalled compounds are usually those in the interior; those on the exposed periphery of the village are walled. The "idea" may have diffused from the city, but the function is privacy from strangers, especially those who come from the city. In many cases this privacy is only a token gesture since the walls themselves do not always reach eye-level, but the intention is clearly understood.

Whether inside or outside compound walls, structures are built for three basic purposes—living space, storage space, and animal housing. While there is often an overlap of activities between rooms, it can generally be said that human activities that require shelter, especially in the winter (cooking, eating, sleeping, entertaining, sewing, crafts, and so on), take place in living rooms. Store rooms are also shelters, but for material goods more than for human activities. There are two kinds. The primary function of the first type, "clean" store rooms, is to store food, domestic equipment and clothing, though they may also be used for cooking and crafts. The second type is used for firewood, agricultural equipment, fertilizer, fodder or straw. Finally, animal houses stable oxen or donkeys and store agricultural equipment. Cattle and sheep sometimes use these buildings too, but are more likely to be sheltered in brush-roofed pens.

Other than a frequent pairing of living rooms and clean store rooms, there is no fixed combination of units that would be identified as a "house." Rooms rarely connect directly with each other, even when they stand side by side and share common walls. Instead, they are entered directly from the outside via the courtyard or alleyway. The basic structural unit is the room rather than the house, especially since not every household has a walled courtyard area to mark off its compound. Because rooms are relatively independent of each other, they may be bought or inherited separately from neighboring structures, although there may have to be some accommodating rearrangements of doorways or walls. Thus, rooms belonging to a single household frequently are scattered across the village, while adjacent rooms, even when they open on a common courtyard, may be owned by several separate households. In an area where household units are small and independent and there is little community action or space, the web of domestic holdings throughout a village reflects and reinforces the social connections that make village residents claim "we are all related here."

The physical arrangement of a village—its houses, walls, paths, shared and private spaces—is a tangible record of the social relationships of its residents. But it is more than just a passive reflection of human activity. It plays an essential and dynamic part in the way the people of Tauran cope with their social and physical environments.