

HATJE
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Chasing Water Issue 1 Autumn 2024

DELUS

Journal for Landscape and Urban Studies



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Urban Studies

DELUS is an annual publication (digital and print) founded in 2022 by the Institute for Landscape and Urban Studies (LUS) at ETH Zürich that explores emerging themes, topics and methods from landscape and urban studies. It brings academic knowledge to a broader audience and fosters exchange among designers, artists, scientists, scholars and students.

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On Thirst: Anecdotes on Chasing Hidden Waters

Elanz Najjar Najafi and Negar Sanaan Bensi delve into the historical and cultural perceptions of thirst and its impact on settlements and cultivation within the deserts of the Iranian Plateau. By challenging the negative connotations associated with thirst and exploring the innovative water management techniques of inhabitants, they reveal how thirst has been a positive driving force for imagination, care and the nurturing of life in arid environments.

In the view of the French colonizers, the Saharan desert was “a land of thirst and fear, from which all life was reputedly absent.”¹ Thirst was understood as a negative polydipsic condition with quantitative features, associated with an absence of life and with fear, that determined survival in the barren environment of the desert. This essay questions the negative connotations of ‘thirst’ by drawing on the act of chasing hidden waters in the *biābān* [Persian for desert]. Presented through a selection of anecdotes, reflections on poems, historical reports, engravings and photographs, this chase reveals the spatialization and materialization of ‘thirst’ in the landscape and territories of the Iranian Plateau.

Geographically, much of the Middle East lies within the arid belt, characterized by low precipitation and limited accessible bodies of water such as lakes and rivers. As a result, the region – and its life – largely depends on underground aquifers. Most prosperous cities in the Iranian Plateau have been built in deserts near underground water reservoirs. Here, inhabitants cultivated the land through specific techniques of chasing

hidden waters,² grafting and water-sharing systems. Despite limitations, they created gardens and expanded cities upon and towards gardens. They even built ice-storage facilities to enjoy cool water and syrups in the summer. How were all these remarkable achievements possible?

Arguably, the inhabitants of this territory did not perceive and treat issues around water quantifiably as ‘lacks’ and ‘emptiness.’ In other words, their effort to inhabit the desert was not focused on exploiting large amounts of water. Instead, what made life in the desert possible was ‘becoming thirsty’ and chasing the water – in other words, reaching the very essence of life, through thirst.

In Avestan, *taršna* [thirst] is an etymological transformation of *ters* [dry, to dry] and *terra* [earth, dry land]; it indicates the ‘territory’ in the urge to actualize the invisibilities of a desert, directly relating it to the very idea of the *biābān* as being somewhere that requires ‘care’ and ‘nourishment’ for it to be inhabited [*Ābād*].³ While thirst may evoke discomfort, it in fact guarantees our survival: if we did not become thirsty, we

Elanz Najjar Najafi,
Negar Sanaan Bensi

1 Samia Henni, ed., *Deserts Are Not Empty* (New York, NY: Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2022), 1.

2 Abū Bakr ibn Muhammad ibn al Husayn Al-Karajī, *Kitāb Inbāt al-miyāh al-khafīyah* (1674), Rare Book & Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania, Lawrence J. Schoenberg Collection, LJS 399.

3 *Ābād* is a Persian term (*āpāt* in Middle Persian and *ā-pāta* in Old Persian) derived from the Indo-European word *Pā(y)*, meaning to take care, protect and educate. Mohammad Hassandoust, *An Etymological Dictionary of Persian Language* (Tehran: Academy of Persian Language and Literature, 2016), 3–4.

4 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The World of the Imagination and the Concept of Space in Persian Miniatures,” *Islamic Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (July 1969): 131.

5 Patrick Healy, *The Model and its Architecture* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2008), 165.

6 George Nathaniel Curzon (1st Marquess Curzon of Kedleston), *Persia and the Persian Question*, vol. 2 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1892), 93.

7 آب کم جو تشنگی آورده دست / تا
بجو شد آب از بالا و پست,
Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (1207–1273).

would not endure. Often, one is better able to perceive water’s taste and freshness after long being thirsty. In the desert, where the most important sources of water are hidden from view, the notion of ‘thirst’ becomes a historical and collective state rather than a short-term personal sensation. In such an environment, thirst indicates that water – a valuable and vital entity – should not be used except to create something more valuable and vital than water itself.

Water in the desert is invisible; it is a ‘latent potentiality’ that requires mediation to become actual and accessible. It is thirst that mediates this process by motivating *khayāl* [imagination]. *Alam al-khayāl* is an intermediate world with its own space, passage of time, colours and forms, where events occur in a real, but not necessarily actual, manner. It is an isthmus that Persian Muslim philosophers called the *mundus imaginalis* [imaginal world] – not the creation of humankind’s whims and fancies but a world that possesses an ontological reality of its own.⁴ This isthmian bordering space “is the medium through which the delivery of world from potentiality to act is effected.”⁵

In his poems, the fourteenth-century Iranian poet Hafez grandly and gracefully praises the stream of Ruknābād, so much so that centuries later, British journalist and politician Lord Curzon (1859–1925), travelling in Shiraz, chose to visit this stream. Curzon was bitterly surprised when he saw Ruknābād’s “slender” water, writing:

It is after crossing the subsequent ridge of the Kūh-e-Bamū that we notice, by the roadside, a tiny channel filled with running water that accompanies us for some distance on our march. Lest none should guess it, let me say that this slender rivulet is no less a stream than the Ruknābād, which, rising in the hills twelve miles away, races gaily down to Shiraz, and

is celebrated by the patriotic Hafiz in terms that would lead one to expect some less insignificant channel.⁶

Curzon’s misunderstanding of Hafez’s descriptions of Ruknābād reveals something important: for Hafez, the *khayāl* of Ruknābād is greater than its actual size. If a large river had flowed through Shiraz, Hafez would probably not have written a poem to glorify it. But the British Curzon is alien to the grandeur of the *khayāl* of precious water, having come to Iran from a lush landscape with vast rivers. In the same way, the *khayāl* of water is greater than its quantity for someone who is thirsty. Throughout Persian literature, thirst is praised in a similar way. One verse that has become an allegory in everyday language invites people to be thirsty instead of looking for a large amount of water.⁷ It considers thirst to be the key to chasing water. Similar verses describe not only the thirsty pursuer in search of water but also the water in search of a true thirsty seeker.⁸

In the desert, the scant water that reaches the ground during short rainfalls has three possible destinies: it flows on the surface as floods and streams; it wets the shallow depth of the soil, mostly evaporating when the sun heats the ground; or it penetrates to the depth of the ground and reaches underground aquifers. Thirst motivates inhabitants of deserts to seek the smallest signs, presences and absences in the landscape, air and sky, to carefully measure every drop of this water in any form or state and to employ complex techniques to extract these waters. Of these, one of the most widespread is the *qanāt*, a subterranean system that allows hidden water to gradually emerge over the ground.⁹

ON ‘THIRST’ AND MEASURING EACH DROP OF WATER

One morning King Nāser al-Dīn Shāh Qājār¹⁰ woke up and saw a good rain coming. It was one of the last days of summer and

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8 تشنگان گر آب جویند از جهان /
آب هم جوید به عالم تشنگان
Ibid.

9 The *qanāt* comprises vertical shafts of successively increasing depth connected by a *dehliz* [horizontal underground tunnel], which directs the water from subterranean sources down a slight incline to gardens, farms and settlements.

10 Naser al-Din Shah was the fourth king of the Qajar Dynasty in Iran. He reigned from 1848 until 1896, when he was assassinated.

11 The *ashrafi* is a gold coin that originated in Mamluk Egypt and was later widely adopted in regions under Muslim rule in the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia (Wikipedia).

12 Nāser al-Dīn Shāh, *Rūznāmeḥ-ye Khāterāt-e Nāser al-Dīn Shāh Qājār, Diary of Naser-al-Din Shah of October 1890 to September 1891*, ed. Majid Abde Amin and Nasrin Khalili (Tehran: Research Institute for Cultural Heritage and Tourism, 2015), 44.

A

LEFT

Tabas deserts, Iran, view towards a *qanāt* with palms planted in the furnaces of the vertical shafts, photograph by authors.

he rejoiced, saying: “each drop of this rain is worth an *ashrafi*¹¹ [a gold coin].”¹² This statement carries more than mere emotion. In the Iranian Plateau, water was measured and distributed according to the scale of a *fenjān* [cup],¹³ akin to goldsmiths who measure their precious metals with units of weight like *mithqāl* [4.2 grams] and ounces. It was through these small gauges that water droplets were measured, valued, divided and distributed in the cities, villages, houses and farms. The *qanāt* itself is in fact the result of gathering droplets of water. The drops that seep and trickle from its shafts gather to form a stream of water that eventually flows into horizontal tunnels towards a city or farm.

ON ‘THIRST’ AND SEEKING DEEP HIDDEN WATERS

In the *Manṭiq-ut-Tayr* [The Conference of the Birds],¹⁴ among all the birds present it is the hoopoe that becomes the guide to reach the *simurgh* – a mystical bird representing the ultimate spiritual unity. According to an ancient belief, the hoopoe recognizes the signs of hidden waters in the desert, even when it flies high in the sky. The hoopoe can locate underground water tables and determine their depth, type and volume.

Like the hoopoe discerning the location of water sources with uncanny precision, the main challenge in constructing a *qanāt* was not that of excavating numerous deep wells or digging lengthy underground tunnels to connect them, but rather that of attaining the same level of certainty regarding the presence of a substantial and delicious underground water table at an appropriate depth. This highlights the daunting task of detecting the most inconspicuous element of life: a colourless, odourless and formless substance.

Thirst induced the inhabitants of the desert to recognize the presence of deep water through the type of stones, the colour of the soil, the growth of certain types of plants and the presence of some of the

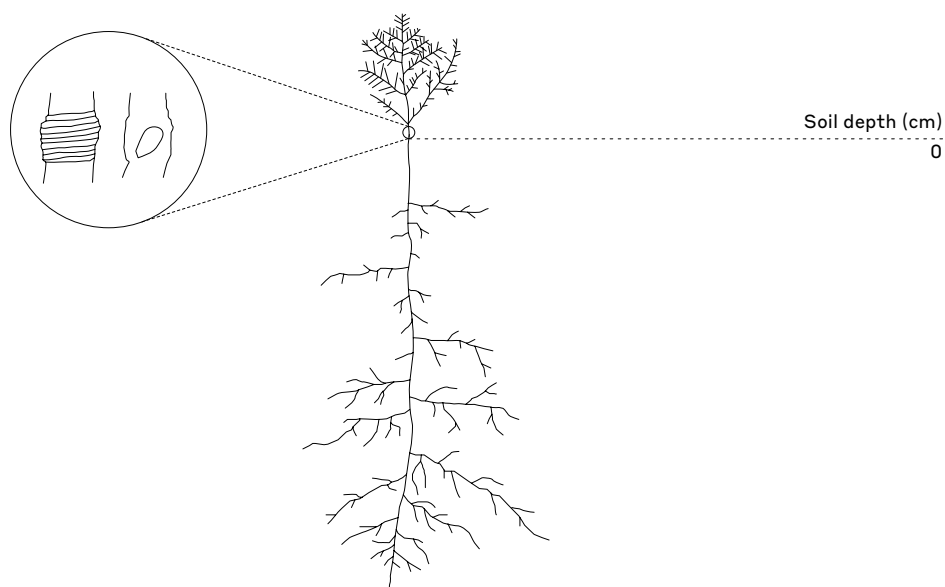
smallest animals and insects. There was little room for trial and error: the initial well had to yield the desired result and provide sufficient water. For that reason, an important and honourable profession emerged: that of the *moqqader* [one who knows the measures and values], known as the master of finding hidden waters.

However, accessing underground water was not solely achieved by digging a *qanāt*. In cases where the underground water basin level was insufficient to justify digging a *qanāt*, alternative methods were employed, such as camelthorn-dependent cultivation.

Camelthorns (genus *Alhagi*) are salt-loving, drought-resistant desert plants that depend on reaching deep, invisible waters for survival. A thousand years ago, in his unique treatise entitled *Inbāt al-miyāh al-khafīyah* [The Extraction of Hidden Waters], Karājī recounts the story of a *qanāt*-digger who, while digging a tunnel, saw the root of a camelthorn growing more than fifty cubits (twenty-five meters) into the ground to reach the water. Building on this, Karājī explains how, in some regions, the optimal yield of melons and watermelons is achieved by embedding their seeds inside the stem of a camelthorn, and there are numerous other plants that can be cultivated in a similar way. This reference is a prelude to an extraordinary method of farming that relies upon chasing water deep within the desert landscape.

Two centuries later, Rashid al-Din Hamadāni provided a more detailed explanation of this method: in some areas, a small slit is made at the taproot of the camelthorn and a germinated, soaked watermelon or melon seed is placed within this slit and covered with soil. Due to its permanent access to moisture, the thorn’s root continuously delivers water to the seed, nurturing what results in an exceptionally sweet fruit.¹⁵ This technique represents a grafting method whereby the root becomes the holder of another seed: it cares for and carries the

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13 *Fenjān* is a traditional measuring scale that turns a unit of volume unit into a unit of time, and time into a surface unit. It was a medium through which the land and its productivity were measured based on a qanāt's water capacity and its distribution on land.

14 *The Conference of the Birds*, or *Speech of the Birds* (ریحی طایفه) is Sheikh Farid ad-Din Attār Nishāburi's (1145–1221) most famous work and one of the unique masterpieces of Persian mystical literature.

15 Rashid al-Din Fadl Allah al-Hamadāni, *Āsār wa Ahyā*, ed. Iraj Afshar and Manuchehr Sotudeh (Tehran: McGill University Press, 1989), 177.

16 Michael Marder, "Grafting," in *Graft*, ed. idem (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 15.

17 Sīrjān is a city in Kermān province, southern Iran.

B

B Grafting a melon seed in a camelthorn's taproot.

C

C Grafting melon in camelthorns, Zali village, Esfarāyen, Iran. Photograph by Ahmad Nikgoftar.

'latent potentiality' of giving life to another being. The grafters could thus imagine and recognize in the camelthorn, which is hostile and dry like the desert itself, the possibility of life in the "constitutive capacity for symbiosis."¹⁶

Sīrjāni¹⁷ farmers recognized that the camelthorn's roots pull water up from the depths of the ground like a lamp wick and store it in their stem. Following a longstanding belief, they avoided burning camelthorns, which can be the best fuel for ovens and stoves in the treeless landscape of the deserts. They also believed that all thorns would burn in hell – with the exception of the camelthorn.¹⁸ This prodigious vegetable farming technique has persisted until recently in different areas in Iran, including Kermān, Semnān, Fārs, Khorāsān, Isfahān and Shūshtar.

ON 'THIRST' AND SEEKING TRAPPED MOISTURE

In the easternmost borders of Kāshān lies a place known as Band-e-Rig, characterized by its undulating sand fields. The wind's force has created ridges, hills, large mounds and wide pits.¹⁹ With the slightest rain in the winter, these barren lands become flooded, muddy and impassable; in the summer, as the wind blows, sand and dust arise, disturbing the nearby settlements. Despite such hardships, the inhabitants of these deserts have discovered the presence of trapped moisture underneath the topsoil of the dry and wavy sand.

In this barren area, where the annual rainfall rarely exceeds eighty millimetres, it is enough to remove seventy centimetres of the surface sand to feel the soil's moisture. "At the beginning of the spring, the farmers carve the sand with a spade,"²⁰ and in each hole, they plant several soaked watermelon seeds with a little fertilizer and leave them for a while.²¹ The seeds grow with the presence of moisture and their roots reach the water underneath. In the event of rain and hardened ground, farmers count on the collective

force of multiple sprouts, which eventually break through the soil and emerge.²² When six leaves appear, the farmers leave only one plant in each hole and remove the rest; doing so allows the remaining plant to thrive with the moisture of the soil.²³

Since the sand dunes are extremely fluid, the farmers twist the long vines and curly tendrils of the sprouted watermelons around the stalks of camelthorns, ensuring that they remain stable.²⁴ "Saline soil is hotter than non-salty soil, which helps melons and watermelons mature more gradually."²⁵ In the desert, temperature fluctuations are extreme, and the salinity of the soil retains heat, making products sweeter. Despite this scorching sun, fresh and sweet watermelons and melons provide a refreshing remedy. Watermelons grown with no watering effort offer cool and pleasant juice, providing respite from the heat.

ON 'THIRST' AND SEEKING FLOOD STREAMS

The Qazvīn Plain is an alluvial fan located on the southern slopes of the Alborz mountain range. The difference in height between the mountain slopes and the low plains in the Qazvīn region causes seasonal flash floods, often in spring and autumn. At times, it can rain for dozens of days, followed by devastating floods that engulf the whole plain. Over time, inhabitants of the plain came to understand the nature of these waters: they consist of a small volume of water flowing at high speed from steep mountain passes. The destructive power of these floods is not so much related to the quantity of the flowing water but rather to its velocity.

Notwithstanding, for the rest of the year, only limited underground water can be used via qanāts. Such 'thirsty' conditions have compelled inhabitants of this plain not only to search for ways to halt and control the flash floods, but also to harness their potential as a valuable source, as a precious gift; they have



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18 Morteza Farhadi, "Camelthorn Bush-oriented Cultivation: A Forgotten Cultivation," *Jahad Journal* 134 (October 1990): 22–29 [in Persian].

19 Abdu'l-Rahim Kalantar Zarrabi, *Tārīkh-e Kāshān*, ed. Iraj Afshar (Teheran: Amir Kabir Press, 1999), 106.

20 Zarrabi, *Tārīkh-e Kāshān* (see note 19), 162.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Javad Safi-Nejad, *Kāriz dar Iran wa Shīve-haye Sonnat-e Bahrebadāri Az Ān* [Qanāt in Iran and the Traditional Ways of Employing It] (Tehran: Pouye Mehr Eshraq, 2016), 718.

25 al-Hamadāni, *Asār wa Ahyā* (see note 15), 177.

creatively constructed productive gardens all around the city of Qazvīn. The gardens of Qazvīn, especially those in the northern flood-prone areas, act as a horizontal damming system. They gradually reduce the speed and destructive force of the water, allowing it to inundate the land and facilitating water absorption into underground aquifers.

The gardens of Qazvīn were built on a dry plain, drawing on water brought by annual floods rather than on water from qanāts. Although irrigated only once a year, the gardens were fruitful and boasted various trees. These gardens lacked fences or walls, so that water could flow unimpeded from one garden to another. As a result, specific social relations and ownership mechanisms based on collective and collaborative decision-making were implemented to ensure the security of these gardens, the city and the whole plain.

CONCLUSION

More than one-fifth of Earth's land area is covered by deserts – the surface of which is increasing as an aftermath of climate change. In this context, reimagining the desert, reconsidering modes of inhabitation and revisiting the techniques of chasing hidden waters is

not only necessary but also urgent. Such processes should enable us to envision alternatives to ongoing extractivist and technocratic tendencies that have caused irreversible damage to the fragile ecosystem of the desert landscape over the last two centuries. There is a need to shift from historically dominant colonial perspectives, in which the desert is seen as a place that has been excluded and abandoned, a land of fear, thirst and emptiness. In fact, as this essay has argued, thirst is what motivates khayāl to chase, care for and reveal any trace of hidden waters, moisture and vapor in a desert. Rethinking the desert through the notion of thirst permits access to a world of 'latent potentialities' and mediates their delivery to actuality. In such a reading, thirst is not a negative polydipsic condition approaching death but rather a necessary state of being and becoming in the desert. Thirst shifts the concern of the water seeker from quantity to quality, elevating the grandeur of their imagination. The idiosyncrasy and beauty of cities like Tabas, Kāshān and Yazd did not lie in their access to large amounts of water, but rather in the sophistication of their inhabitants in chasing these hidden waters by amplifying their khayāl. •

D

LEFT

Chale-sonbak,
Band-e-Rig, Kāshān,
Iran. Photographs
courtesy of @Injairanas.

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DELUS Issue 1 adopts a water-centric lens through the notion of 'Chasing Water.' In this anthology, nine essays delve into various bodies of water, inviting us to explore their diverse manifestations. Using the term 'chasing,' DELUS seeks to highlight water's role in shaping and sustaining landscapes and urban environments, as well as the continuous efforts to influence its course. From the transformation of England's Fens to intricate irrigation systems in the Mediterranean and the environmental consequences of water harvesting infrastructures in Chile and Australia, each contribution explores the ways in which water may be pursued or repelled. Seemingly contradictory, 'Chasing Water' reflects on the challenge of capturing, storing and distributing water in a world where it can be abundant yet inaccessible.

DELUS is an annual publication that explores emerging themes, topics and methods from landscape and urban studies. Founded in 2022 by the Institute for Landscape and Urban Studies (LUS) at ETH Zürich, it brings academic knowledge to a broader audience and fosters exchange among designers, artists, scientists, scholars and students.