

Zarch Qanat breathes new life into Yazd’s water heritage



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Qanats have long been a vital solution for accessing water in Iran’s dry and desert regions, and they are also an inseparable part of the country’s culture and civilization. Among them, the Zarch Qanat holds a special place as the longest qanat in the world. Stretching approximately 90 kilometers with over two thousand wells, it originates from Fahraj village and after passing through the historic districts of Yazd, reaches the city of Zarch. Its inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List affirms its global significance. Ebrahim Kazemnajand, the director of Zarch, Hasanabad Moshir, and Dehnow Qanats World Heritage Site, explained in an interview with ISNA that the Zarch Qanat project started in 2016, aligned with the goals of the global registration of the Iranian qanat. The aim is the restoration and renovation of structures related to the qanat from

the area of the Grand Mosque of Yazd to the Vazir Mill in the Kushkno neighborhood of Yazd, and it is still ongoing. This qanat, with a length of 90 kilometers and 2,115 wells, is registered on Iran’s National Heritage List. Zarch Qanat has three branches, of which currently only one is active. It traverses different neighborhoods of the city, including Amir Chakhmaq Square, and after passing the Jaame (Grand) Mosque, it leaves Yazd and heads toward Zarch. Kazemnajand pointed out that more than 30 water outlets (Pay-ab) have been constructed along the Zarch Qanat route in Yazd and most of them are public and dedicated for the use of the people, with some built in religious buildings. The first phase of this project, regarded as the Zarch Qanat tourism route, includes eight water outlets, two water reservoirs, and one mill. A comprehensive project began in 2016 to protect and restore this qanat. Regarding one of the

main challenges in protecting and managing qanats — the issue of multiple management — he noted that various organizations, including the Agricultural Jihad, regional water companies, local councils, and landowners, each have a role to some extent. Among them, the role of Cultural Heritage Organization mainly focuses on the protective, supervisory, and preservation aspects of the qanat’s area, boundaries, and structures. However, in terms of implementation and maintenance, institutions like the Agricultural Jihad, Regional Water Authority, and local councils play a more direct role. This fragmentation of responsibilities is one of the main problems in maintaining qanats. He referred to the Zarch Qanat as a clear example of qanat restoration success and said this qanat is registered as a World Heritage Site, and its structure not only had no clear plan but its usage had practically stopped. “When we took over this qanat,

many wastewater systems were connected to it, and since the 1990s it was in a critical condition, on the verge of complete destruction and even death. However, actions to save it began.” Kazemnajand added, “First, the wastewater connections were identified and cut off from the qanat, then protection-focused operations were pursued along with the restoration of architectural structures related to the qanat, including Payabs and the Vazir Mill in Yazd city. Although there are still some sections along the qanat route where free water flow is not possible due to land subsidence, we are working on providing the necessary infrastructure to resolve this issue. Therefore, qanat restoration is not only possible but, in cases like this example, has led to tangible results.” He continued that, following these actions qanat tourism has become one of the tourist attractions of Yazd, with the Zarch

Qanat hosting 16,000 to 17,000 visitors during the Nowruz (Iranian New Year) holidays. This number has continued in recent years, and the Zarch Qanat has become recognized as one of Yazd’s water-based tourist attractions. This experience demonstrates that qanat restoration requires coordinated management and support from various organizations. In this project, the Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicraft Ministry, in collaboration with organizations such as the Agricultural Jihad, Regional Water Authority, the city health center, and the governor’s office, played an effective role. “From the early years of the project, through measures like freeing the qanat’s boundaries, and other protective activities, we succeeded in winning the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation in 2022,” Kazemnajand noted. He said, “Although our country is facing a serious water shortage crisis, there is still hope in

the capacities of qanats, especially in rural and traditional areas. In regions that still rely on traditional management and the qanat system, the effects of the crisis are less severe. In contrast, in cities, particularly areas dependent on modern water supply technologies, the crisis is more intense.” He said that, for example, the historic city of Yazd was once managed using qanats, but with urban expansion and changes in the water distribution system, more problems have arisen. If industry and universities can update traditional qanat management and align it with today’s needs, part of the crisis might be controlled. Unfortunately, in the 1950s and 1960s, the approach of eliminating the qanat system and replacing it with wells, without consideration of the geological structure, caused serious damage to underground layers and led to a sharp decline in groundwater levels.

Termeh revealing unique beauty in skilled hand weaving

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Termeh is a finely woven, precious cloth featuring traditional Iranian patterns and textures. It is handcrafted using two sets of warp and weft yarns made from pile, wool, and high-quality natural and synthetic silk with long fibers. While some believe that Termeh originated in the heart of Central Asia and the Kashmir highlands, others argue that its weaving began in Iran before spreading to Kashmir. However, Termeh weaving was developed and gained popularity during the early Safavid period in Isfahan. Its most notable advancement occurred under the reign of Shah Abbas Safavid, when it became one of Iran’s prominent export products. The refined taste and creativity of Iranians in delicately weaving Termeh — including material selection and intricate designs — is unique. One of the most important responsibilities for Termeh weavers is the selection and combination of colors. This can involve either harmonious or contrasting colors arranged in a way that achieves a distinct balance and beauty, considered



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a well-guarded secret of the Iranian Termeh weaving tradition. Typically, the colors used in Termeh, especially in its patterns, are derived from natural herbs and materials. These in-

clude shades such as dark red, light red, green, orange, and black. The motifs mainly feature various traditional curved patterns and intricate designs. Historically, this delicate fabric

was used for sewing aristocratic and noble attire, curtains, prayer rugs, and robes, primarily worn by members of noble, aristocratic, and royal classes. Today, Termeh is mainly gifted



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among the upper and middle classes during weddings, celebrations, and official or family occasions. It is also sometimes used as upholstery or tablecloth fabric.

Currently, Termeh weaving is on the verge of extinction and is produced exclusively in Yazd Province, where it is then distributed and sold throughout other regions of Iran.