

Shahr-e Sukhteh; ancient capital of peace, innovation



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Across the ancient world, cities are often remembered for their wars, conquests, and empires. Yet some civilizations followed a different path — one shaped not by violence, but by cooperation, creativity, and long-term stability. Archaeological discoveries in southeastern Iran point to such a society, one that flourished thousands of years ago through innovation, social organization, and sustained peace. At the heart of this story lies Shahr-e Sukhteh (Burned City), a city whose silent ruins conceal a remarkably advanced urban culture. Far from being a simple relic of the past, it offers fresh insight into how early societies could thrive through knowledge, planning, and equality — challenging long-held assumptions about the foundations of civilization itself. Iran's 17th site inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List is far more than a remnant of distant antiquity. Archaeological evidence shows it was home to a highly advanced, peaceful, and innovative society that, some 5,000 years ago, practiced principles comparable to modern urban planning, advanced medicine, and social equality. Spread across 270 hectares, the site today lies in profound

silence. Yet beneath the soil is a city that defies conventional narratives of the ancient world. In a recent interview with chtn.ir, Mobarakeh Mollahshahi, an archaeologist at the Shahr-e Sukhteh World Heritage Site, said that the settlement deserves to be known as the "ancient capital of peace." She noted that despite more than 50 years of systematic excavation, archaeologists have not discovered a single spear, sword, shield, or defensive structure — elements considered standard in cities of the same era. "This is in sharp contrast to civilizations in Mesopotamia or Egypt, where fortification walls and arsenals were integral to urban life," she said. According to Mollahshahi, this enduring peace — maintained for at least 800 years of dense urban occupation — created exceptional conditions for growth. Freed from the threat of invasion, the city's inhabitants were able to devote their energies to science, industry, and the arts. At the Shahr-e Sukhteh Archaeological Museum, each display case reveals a groundbreaking discovery. Vida Kazempour, head of the museum's research department, highlighted several of the most remarkable finds. Among them is what scholars

describe as the world's earliest cinema: a painted ceramic bowl depicting an ibex in five sequential frames. When rotated, the images show the animal leaping toward a tree and climbing it, demonstrating an advanced understanding of motion and visual continuity rather than simple ornamentation. Equally significant are wooden combs decorated with intricate geometric inlays. These artifacts have reshaped assumptions about the origins of marquetry art, once believed to have originated in ancient China. Evidence now suggests the technique emerged a millennium earlier in the workshops of Shahr-e Sukhteh. Clay tablets uncovered at the site further attest to the city's sophistication. Kazempour explained that these tablets functioned as commercial contracts, complete with designated spaces for official or mercantile cylinder seals. The discovery of standardized rulers with millimetric precision points to a unified system of measurement. The city's international connections during the Bronze Age have also drawn attention. Archaeologists discovered the complete skeleton of a macaque monkey buried with ceremonial rites similar to those reserved for high-status humans. Native

to the Indus Valley — in present-day Pakistan — the animal's presence indicates commercial or diplomatic ties with that civilization as early as 2800 BCE. Shahr-e Sukhteh's social structure remains one of its most debated features. Mollahshahi said the identification of ten distinct burial practices suggests a complex and stratified society. Particularly striking are subterranean chamber graves — pits with side rooms — most of which belonged to women. "These graves, associated with the affluent and possibly the ruling class, contain women buried with exquisite jewelry, painted vessels, and fine textiles," she explained. At the same time, large-scale bead-making and textile workshops found in the city's industrial districts appear to have been managed by women. Combined with the absence of weapons, the evidence raises the possibility that Shahr-e Sukhteh functioned as a matriarchal society in which women played a central role in managing the economy and trade. The city was also a pioneer in medical science. Archaeologists have identified the world's earliest known brain surgery at the site: the skull of a 13-year-old girl shows clear evidence of trepanation, and analysis indi-

cates she survived for at least six months after the operation.

Urban infrastructure at Shahr-e Sukhteh was equally advanced.

Another archaeologist at the site noted that it was one of the earliest cities in the Middle East known to have a covered sewage collection and disposal system. Clay pipes carried wastewater from homes into main channels and out of the city, while the cemetery was located entirely outside residential areas — reflecting a sophisticated understanding of public health.

Describing the city's layout, archaeologist Abulfazl Mirzandeh said Shahr-e Sukhteh did not develop haphazardly. Instead, it followed a pre-designed plan that included a central residential area with orderly mudbrick houses, an eastern industrial zone with pottery, metalworking, and stone-carving workshops, a northwestern district for jewelry production, and a vast cemetery set at a defined distance. This functional zoning predates modern urban planning concepts by thousands of years.

Despite decades of research, only a fraction of the city has been explored. Archaeologists estimate that just two percent of the site — around three hectares — has been excavated after 50

years and 30 excavation seasons. The remaining 98 percent, including streets, homes, squares, and archives, remains untouched beneath the soil.

At the current pace, a complete scientific excavation would take between 300 and 400 years. Yet nearly every excavation season has produced a landmark discovery, from the world's first artificial eye — made of bitumen and gold and implanted in the skull of a young woman — to the earliest known backgammon board.

Today, Shahr-e Sukhteh stands as more than a historical monument. It offers a living model of how a society can reach remarkable scientific, artistic, and social heights through sustained peace. The site demonstrates that 5,000 years ago, inhabitants of the Iranian Plateau not only rivaled their great contemporaries, but in many fields — from urban governance to women's rights — surpassed them.

Preserving this unique heritage from the region's fierce 120-day winds, illegal excavations, and chronic underfunding will require a strong national commitment. Shahr-e Sukhteh belongs not only to Iran, but to all humanity, with each new discovery adding a vital piece to the puzzle of human history.

Historic Safavid bathhouse in Asadabad awaits new life

Iranica Desk

The historic Golestan Bathhouse of Asadabad, located in the heart of the old urban fabric of Asadabad, Hamedan Province, is one of the region's notable heritage structures and a fine example of Safavid-era bathhouse architecture. Featuring a domed structure, the building is also known locally as the Khan Bathhouse, Niloofar Bathhouse, and the Old Bazaar Bathhouse.

The historic bathhouse has been closed for more than 30 years due to its age and severe deterioration. Restoration work has been carried out intermittently over the years with limited funding, leaving the project unfinished. For more than three decades, heritage enthusiasts have eagerly awaited the reopening of the site, hoping to revisit a tangible piece of the region's past, according to ISNA.

No inscription or historical document has been found to precisely date the bathhouse, but based on the age of the city's water reservoir and Grand Mosque,



experts believe its foundations date back to the Safavid period. Questions remain as to whether the doors of this historic structure will finally reopen after more than 30 years of closure and restoration.

Asadabad Governor Soleiman Nazaridoust said the city welcomes private-sector investors interested in establishing a traditional restaurant or handicrafts market within the bathhouse. He added that the governor's office is fully prepared to cooperate in issuing the necessary permits

for tourism-related projects. Nazaridoust noted that Golestan Bathhouse has undergone slow, piecemeal restoration for decades, keeping it closed despite strong public demand for its reopening. He expressed hope that, with the attraction of an investor, the site could be opened to visitors by mid-March. Head of the Asadabad Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization, Kamran Akbari-Shayegan, said the building has been temporarily put into use and, since last week, has been operating as a "Qur'an Café" under a joint initiative by



route and was registered on Iran's National Heritage List in 2001. Since restoration efforts began in 2009, around 80 percent of the work has been completed, with the remaining 20 percent to be finalized through cooperation between the Cultural Heritage Department and the municipality.

Akbari-Shayegan said the building has been temporarily put into use and, since last week, has been operating as a "Qur'an Café" under a joint initiative by

the municipality and the office of the Friday prayer leader. He stressed, however, that the bathhouse requires a permanent and appropriate new function.

The bathhouse — owned by the municipality and restored by the city's Cultural Heritage Department — is well suited for conversion into a traditional restaurant, marketplace, bathhouse museum, or another related cultural use through private-sector involvement.

Restoration measures already carried out include structural

lightening and vault stabilization, replacement of worn bricks, interior repairs, installation of lighting, improvements to the sewage disposal system, and restoration of the entrance.

Shayegan emphasized that historic monuments are key drivers of tourism development, expressing hope that an appropriate change of use for the bathhouse will significantly boost tourism in Asadabad.

Architecturally, the bathhouse consists of several interconnected sections, including the entrance forecourt, vestibule, changing hall, and water reservoir. Visitors entered via a 1.55-meter-wide staircase leading to a hexagonal domed space with a diameter of 2.67 meters, which opened into an octagonal changing hall featuring six arched platforms for changing clothes. A narrow corridor then led to the hot chamber, composed of three domed sections, with the hot-water reservoir located on the western side of the central space.