

The legend of the death of Šāh Kāran and the flight of three Maidens

Edward Strack in the Sixth chapter of his travel book came across the legend of the death of Šāh Kāran and the flight of three Maidens¹:

“19th March, Karyun, 2 farsakhs.

Next morning we marched five miles to Harm, and three miles more to Kāryun. We crossed a muddy part of the plain, by the borders of the shallow water, where a few egrets were standing, and some terns were flying overhead. The air was hot and moist, the plain luxuriantly green with grass and herbage, and wild oats. Nothing I ever saw in Persia reminded me so strongly of India. Unfortunately there were other points of resemblance. I had seen a famine in India; I was now, for many days, to see the effects of drought and famine in Persia. Harm is a large village, with extensive date -groves, and perhaps two hundred houses. It was deserted and in ruins; we could find no quarters there. Kāryun is still larger; it must have had a population of 2000 souls, but we could find only three families in the whole place. We rode about nearly half an hour, vainly seeking an inhabitant who might guide us to a house. Sayyid Ali was for putting up in a mosque, but I thought the *mihmānkhāna* or public rest-house, though ruined, would suit us better. I got a fair upper room, without doors, and quarters were found below for all my people. We were now within the district of Lutf Ali Khan, of Bidshahr, the revenue-farmer and governor of Bidshahr and Harm, with their dependencies. His *tufangchis* refused us admission into the mud fort outside Kāryun, on the ground that Lutf Ali's harem was there. Two other forts stand in the plain, a mile east of Kāryun. One is the Mud Fort (Qal‘a-i-Gili), built when Karim Khan was reigning in Shiraz (1780); it is a square earthwork with a side of 120 yards, and had a tower every twelve yards. The other is the fort of the Fire-well, so called from the discovery of naphtha in a well hard by; it is a tower girt with a wall, on a mound. Forts and well are in ruins now. Kāryun stands in the middle of three rocky hills, and these, also, are said to have been fortified. I went up one hill with some men of the village. They stopped at the foot, picked up bones, and said, "These are bones of men," and proceeded to tell me the following story:

¹ . *Six Months in Persia*, I-II, London, 1882, 117-22.

Shah Kâran was besieged here by 12,000 Mussalmans, when the Arabs first invaded Persia. While they were at their prayers he sallied out. They would not leave their prayers, and he slew them all without resistance. In the Mussalman camp were forty virgins, who thus fell into the hands of Shah Kâran. These young women, being of virtuous principles, besought deliverance from Heaven, and accordingly the earth opened and swallowed them all up except three who fled, with Shah Kâran and his men after them. One maiden ran across the plain, and up the northern mountains, and was now on the point of capture, when a cave disclosed itself in the mountain-side; she ran in, and was lost. The cave is called the Ghar Bibi, or Lady's Cave, to this day, and is well known to have no end. The second maiden fled to the mountains of Khunj, far to the south, and died there of exhaustion. Her shrine, called that of the Bibi darmânda, or Tired-out Lady, is a famous place of prayer for childless wives. The third maiden disappeared in some other mountain-side, and water has trickled from the cleft ever since. Word of this catastrophe was brought to Hâjat, who had conquered Kir. He came over with an army to avenge his brother, but could not take the fort. At last Shah Kâran's wife cast eye upon Hâjat, and fell in love with him. He promised to marry her if she would betray the fort. She endeavoured, Delilah-like, to wheedle her husband out of the magic secret which made him unconquerable. He, too, like Samson, seems to have had a plentiful crop of hair, not, however, confined to his head only. He bade her cut hair from his breast, and bound his thumbs and great toes together with it. She did so, and cried: "The Mussalmans be upon thee, Shah Kâran." But he broke his bonds, and the assault failed. Further coaxing persuaded him to tell her that she ought to have poured water on the fastenings, and when she had tied him up again and done so, his strength and soldiership departed, and the fort was taken. Hâjat married Shah Kâran's wife, and immediately cut off her head, remarking that he didn't wish her to betray him, too, on some future occasion. He then began to search for Shah Kâran's buried treasure. Being divinely (or diabolically) informed that the way to find it was to cause blood to flow down the hill-side like water, he conducted the population of Karyun to the top of the hill, and there proceeded to cut their throats. This went on several days, without revealing any treasure, till it came to the turn of an old woman and her two sons. The old woman offered to show Hâjat a better way. "In the vaults," she said, "there is great store of wine, the blood of the grape. Pour that over the rocks, and you will find the treasure without all this blood-guiltiness." Hâjat did so; and when the last jar of wine was removed, the door of the treasure-house appeared behind it. Such, condensed, is the legend of Kâryun.

Shah Kâran was, of course, a fire-worshipper² and seems to be a semi-historical personage. He is credited with having made sixty qanats.

It is probable enough, too, that Kâryun may be an ancient place. In a country like Persia, where the habitable spots have been marked out by Nature from the beginning of the world, the smallest human settlement in the desert may date back thousands of years. It is at least true of Kâryun that the ruins of a fort do actually stand on the hill, and that bones are plentiful in the dry torrent beds. What with relics of mortality, ruins, and robbers, Kâryun was an eminently cheerful place. From the hill-top one looked down on the ruins of the village. My guides said there were twenty inhabited houses; I doubt it. The place was once flourishing and well-built. Conical domes of *âbambârs* (water-cisterns) rose among the houses, testifying to a large water-supply and a large population in former years. My guides complained much of robbers, and of the misgovernment of the Qajars, i.e. the present royal family. The day before my arrival a band of robbers had sacked a village of Bidshahr. Kâryun itself had been desolate these twenty years, so they said, but their complaints were exaggerated. ...”

² The Chah Tashi (atashi) or fire-well, was perhaps a holy place in Shah Qaran's time.