

Chapter 3

Saffron in the ancient history of Iran

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3.1 Introduction

Iran is a country whose territory was once not limited to its current borders. Large regions such as the Caucasus, West Asia, Central Asia, and parts of South Asia were parts of Greater Persia. Historically, these regions were ruled by various imperial Iranian dynasties such as Achaemenids, Partians, Sassanid, Samanids, Safavids, Afsharids, Zands, and Qajars. In recent centuries, Iran lost its vast territories and the boundaries of the country became limited to the present ones. Traditionally, Iranian history is divided into before and after Islam. In CE 651, with the death of Yazdegerd III, the last king of the Sassanid dynasty, the ancient Iranian history was over and the Islamic period of the Iranian history began. Based on this, the authors assess saffron production and use in two periods: before and after Islam.

3.2 Saffron in Iran before Islam

There is not much agreement on the origin of saffron; however, Iran has been introduced as one place of origin. There is little and scattered historical evidence on the cultivation and use of saffron and in the texts left from the ancient Iranian languages—namely Avestan and Old Persian, whose period of prevalence is considered to be the end of the Achaemenid era (330 BC)—this plant is not mentioned. However, other texts from the other branch of Indo-Iranian (i.e. Indians) tribe, at nearly the same time, have, though very little, evidence of this plant. Also, in the Vedic Sanskrit texts (in Upanishads ii.3.10), a compound term has been translated as “(saffron) garment” (Macdonell and Keith, 1912, p. 163). In addition, Aeschylus, the Greek playwright, mentions the saffron sandals of Darius Achaemenid when describing his soul in a play called “Iranians” (Collard, 2008, p. 20).

Many of the historical sources have mistaken saffron for turmeric and safflower (*Carthamus lanatus*) and, as a result, make the pursuit of evidence related to saffron in historical contexts difficult. One of the Sanskrit names for saffron is *kāvera*, which is often mistaken for *kāverī* or turmeric (both derived from a commercial site, which is referred to as “chaveris” in geography by Ptolemy) (Laufer, 1919, p. 309). The misapplication of the word saffron is also reflected in other Persian dictionaries. The expression “*korkom*” is considered by Persian dictionaries to be equal to saffron (Dehkhoda, 2001) and some of its forms are used to address other plants such as turmeric (Dehkhoda, 2001). The name of this plant has been cited in Greek as both *κρόκος* and *ζαφωρα* (Oxford English-Greek Learner’s Dictionary, 2006,

p. 616) where the former is related to korkom in terms of root and the latter to saffron. Ancient Chinese references attribute saffron not only to Kashmir but also to Iran in the Sasanian period. One of these sources (Čou šu) features the Yü-kin product as one of the products of the po-se country (Pars), which is also reported by Sui šu. In fact, saffron (*Crocus*), planted by Iranians, has existed as a self-growing plant for a long time (Laufer, 1919, p. 312).

According to some researchers, saffron was never planted in India and probably was imported to Kashmir from Iran. In the Sanskrit sources, saffron has been referred to as kasmira and kumkuma, with the first term indicating the plant entered other parts of India from Kashmir and the other relating to the name Korkom indicating it at least entered India from Iran (Sensarma, 1992, No. 175, 210). However, the third Sanskrit name for saffron is vāhlīka (Sensarma, 1992, No. 422), meaning “Balkhi, coming from Balkh,” which means pahlava or “part” (Laufer, 1916, p. 459). It should be noted that in Tibetan texts three types of saffron (for medical use), named based on their origins, are mentioned: the first one, Kāśmīra, came from Kashmir, the second one, Vāhlīka, Balkhi from Balkh, and the third one, Pārasīka, Parsi coming from Pars (Dash, 1976, pp. 62–63).

The name of saffron can also be found in the Sogdian language, a language of the eastern middle and the mediator language of the Silk Road and throughout Central Asia. In Sogdian Buddhists texts, in which the word kwrkwnph appeared, it has been translated as “Korkom Indian saffron” (Gharib, 2017, p. 201). There are more works concerning that topic in the writings of the Middle Persian (from about 330 BC to about CE 652). The Persian text of *Bundahishn* is the interpretive translation of part of Avesta text; however, its final version, which was compiled during the CE 9th century, contains a chapter on plant classification. In this part, saffron is introduced as karkom or korkom (Bahar, 1990; Farahvashi, 2011, p. 342; Mackenzie, 1971, p. 52; Pakzad, 2005, p. 213).

Other forms of this term are found in most Semitic languages as well as Indian languages: Hebrew: karkōm; Akkadian: kurkām and kurkāmā; Syriac: kūrkamā; Arabic: karkum; Indian: kunkum and kumkum; and Tamil: kunkumam (Kronfeld, 1892, p. 14). While some scholars believe the Pahlavi karkum or kalkum is a substitute for the Semitic languages (Bahar, 1990, p. 184), others cast doubt upon this origin (Laufer, 1919, p. 321).

In a report in *Bundahish* (One of the most important works of Zoroastrian middle Persian language) on plant classification, kurkum is a kind of flower: “whatever has odoriferous blossoms, and grows in various seasons by the hand labor of men, or has perennial root, and blooms in its season with new shoots and sweet scented blossoms, such as the rose, the narcissus, the jasmine, the sweet-briar, the tulip, the colocynth, the pandanus, the “chapag,” the “kheyri,” the kurkum, the swallow-wort, the violet, the palm tree flower, and others of this kind they call the flower plant” (Dadagi, 1990, p. 87).

Kurkum, in addition to other plants including alizarin and indigo, is a type of dye (Bahar, 1990, p. 88) and since every flower belongs to one of the Amesha Spentas (the first creatures of Ahura Mazda and his close friends) and other gods and goddesses, korkom is a relative of Maraspand or Mansarasand (the Holy Word and a Zoroastrian goddesses) (Dadagi, 1990, p. 88).

3.2.1 Use of saffron before Islam

It appears that the first saffron fields of the world were first established in the state of Mad (Hamadan and Holwan in Iran) (Abrishami, 2004, p. 239) and subsequently spread to Ray, Qom, Isfahan, and coastal areas of the Caspian Sea as well as the Pars state. Later, the cultivation of saffron became common in Transoxiana and Khorasan, and finally, the production of high-quality saffron became massively concentrated in Qohestan and Qaenat (Abrishami, 1997, p. 74).

The production and trading of saffron has always been done by Iranians. The Iranians, while exporting saffron to many parts of the ancient world, introduced its properties to the Greeks, Romans, Chinese, and Sami people like the Arabs. In prehistoric paintings, saffron pigments, which were created in present Iraq and northwestern Iran 50,000 years ago, are found (Willard, 2002, p. 2). The Sumerians used self-growing saffron as the main substance in magical potions (Willard, 2002, p. 12). In ancient Iran during the 10th century BC saffron was cultivated in Darband, Isfahan, and Khorasan and its threads were placed in textiles (Willard, 2002, p. 2), which were bestowed upon the goddesses during rituals. Also, saffron itself was used to dye textiles and in perfume, medicine production, and bathing (Willard, 2002, pp. 17–18). Also, ancient Iranians used to treat melancholia by scattering saffron around the bed and mixing it with hot tea. However, non-Iranians feared the use of saffron as a medicinal and aphrodisiac substance by Iranians (Willard, 2002, p. 41).

During the Sassanian era, saffron planting in Qom and Bavan (located in the district of Ganj Roosta midway between Herat to Sarakhs near Badghis) became popular, as is reflected in some of the texts of that time. In a Pahlavi treatise named Khosrow Ghobadan and Ridak, belonging to the late Sassanid era, which contains a conversation between Khosrow and Anushirvan, Khosrow Parviz and his gulam (male servant) named Ridak, in response to

Khosrow's question about which flower or plant is more aromatic, Ridak mentions a number of flowers and plants without naming saffron. Nevertheless, in its Arabic translation, the saffrons of Qom and Bavan have been acclaimed and described as having heavenly scents (*Al-Tha'alibi-Neyshabouri*, 1993, p. 393). It is believed that the term was probably later added to the original Pahlavi text (*Abrishami*, 2004, pp. 131, 253).

3.2.2 Use of saffron in ancient Iran

Most likely, ancient Persians, especially Zoroastrians, considered saffron a divine creature due to its positive properties, beautiful and eye-catching color, and delicious aroma because from the point of view of Persians, especially Zoroastrians, any good and beneficial being is created by Ahura Mazda. Considering the importance and various uses of saffron in ancient Iran, its location, properties, and applications can be summarized as follows.

3.2.2.1 Saffron for food applications

During the Achaemenid era, saffron was widely used by cooks and crew to produce colorful and diverse dishes (*Abrishami*, 2004, p. 243). In this era, saffron was used in the combination of enlivening and restorative spices, as well as in the combination and decorating of fine cookies and some types of special *taftoon* bread (a kind of bread in Iran) (*Justi*, 1935, p. 26). It is said that Alexander the Great, influenced by Persian culture, traditions, and kings, used saffron in decoctions and rice (*Willard*, 2002, pp. 54–55). During the Greeks domination over Iran, they also became familiar with many native herbs of the Achaemenid territory including saffron. During the Parthian era, the same common foods of Achaemenid such as saffron were consumed (*Abrishami*, 2004, p. 250). In the Sassanid era, making saffron pastries, breads, and cookies was prevalent and wine was produced with saffron (*Abrishami*, 2004, p. 268); in addition, *paloodeh* (a traditional Iranian cold dessert) was a common sweet at that time (*Abrishami*, 2004, p. 277).

In *Shahnameh*, in the story of Zahhāk, Satan, disguised as a young chef appears and provides Zahhāk with a beef dish that had been marinated with saffron (*Khaleghi-Motlagh*, 2007, vol. 1, pp. 49–50):

On the fourth day, he (Zahhāk) prepared food made from beef/

Marinated with saffron and golāb (rose water) that is the aged wine and pure musk.

In the story of Bahram Gur, the merchant who was Bahram's host, while preparing to cater for Bahram, goes to bazaar and buys saffron (*Khaleghi-Motlagh*, 2007, vol. 6, p. 465):

He searched for sugar, almond, chicken and lamb to finalize the preparation of the feast/

He carried wine, saffron, musk and golāb while going home with his heart filled with thrill.

3.2.2.2 Medical and pharmaceutical uses

Saffron has long been known in Iran as an effective ingredient for the provision of medicines and for the treatment of various diseases. In particular, during the Sassanid era, it was used as a medicinal herb for oral treatments, especially in kings' palaces (*Najmabadi*, 1962, pp. 416–417).

Saffron even had some applications in battles. For example, Alexander would take a shower with saffron in the middle of his battles, and later the custom of bathing with saffron was followed by Alexander's army and was taken to Greece (*Willard*, 2002, pp. 54–55).

In the narrative related to the Shapur War, the son of Ardashir Sassanid, with the Zizan, the Arab Amir (king), it has been mentioned that Shapur intended to conquer the fort. Having seen Shapur from the top of the fort, Zizan's daughter falls for him so passionately and as a result, betrays her father and devises a scheme and informs Shapur through a letter. Based on this scheme, the guards of this stronghold become drunk with "saffron wine"; consequently, Shapur reaches the city and Zayzen as well and kills him (*Dinavari*, 1991, p. 75).

Saffron was also used for abortion. In ancient Iran, the abortive properties of some drugs were well known. One such drug named "shaeteh" was mentioned in Avesta (*Avesta*, 1991, pp. 14–15) and is comparable to saffron in terms of properties and is likely related to it. Moreover, as "shaeteh" was used for abortion, one of the main properties of saffron has appeared in old medical and pharmacological resources. It should be noted that the term "shiyati" in ancient Persian and the term "shadih" in Sassanid Pahlavi both mean "joy" and are related to "shaeteh" on the one hand and the joyful and abortive properties of saffron on the other, while proving that requires more examination (*Abrishami*, 2004, p. 472).

3.2.2.3 Cosmetic use

In Iran, saffron was recognized as an aromatic substance and it was believed that burning it as well as applying its incense to fill spaces with fragrance. In addition, it was processed in various ways to aromatize and decorate the skin and keep it fresh. Using saffron as perfume and incense in Iran goes back to ancient times, based on historical evidence and documents (Abrishami, 2004, p. 375). Indeed, saffron is among the first *tanacetum balsamitas* and plants used to produce oily and watery perfumes and cosmetic oils (Abrishami, 1997, p. 247).

In the Achaemenid era, saffron was used to aromatize the king's throne and surroundings (Abrishami, 2004, p. 243). Ferdinand Justi, while describing the life of Darius Achaemenid, wrote:

The Iranian king rubbed special fragrant oil over his body that consisted of a combination of sunflower oil cooked in milk fat, saffron and date wine.

Justi (1935, p. 17).

During the Parthian period, the kings and magies (*moghan*) also made a mixture of herbs with milk fat, saffron, and date wine and used it as makeup for their faces (College, 1979, p. 81).

3.2.2.4 Ritual uses

Saffron was also used in variety of ceremonies and rituals in ancient Iran with varied applications such as an incense, donating and sprinkling it mainly in rituals held to welcome elders, gifting it in weddings, and drinking saffron syrup in religious ceremonies. The following provides evidence of these applications.

3.2.2.4.1 Burning and incensing saffron

This was common in ceremonies and celebrations and also to welcome elders and victors. Besides using incense to give palaces, rooms, and surroundings a pleasant fragrance, it had therapeutic and disinfecting benefits too (Abrishami, 1997, p. 251, 253).

In *Shahnameh*, it has been mentioned that Fereydun, after holding a light ruby glass of wine in hand, "He ordered to build a fire and they burned ambergris and saffron" (Khaleghi-Motlagh, 2007, vol. 1, p. 89). Saffron was burned at important ceremonies such as the interment of Rustam. According to Ferdowsi's account, the undertakers burned ambergris and saffron after cleansing his wounds and drying them (Khaleghi-Motlagh, 2007, vol. 5, pp. 458–459).

3.2.2.4.2 Donating and gifting saffron

In ceremonies held to welcome elites such as kings, elders, grand people, and champions, musk, dinar, dirham (silver coin, the currency of Islamic world), and saffron were donated and thrown to receive such people and welcome them. In joyful ceremonies and celebrations, saffron was used to aromatize the atmosphere, and in fact, the strong aroma of saffron and the glittering of gold stimulated the brain and staring of eyes. Saffron donation and dirham and the burning of incense, ambergris, and saffron was done in winter (Abrishami, 1997, p. 255).

In *Shahnameh*, when Iranians welcomed Bahram Gur returning from Kannuj it was noted that people (Khaleghi-Motlagh, 2007, vol. 6, p. 595):

Dirhams were thrown from horizon to horizon/ as well as musk, dinar and saffron.

When Kay Khosrow comes back to Iran from Turan, Iranians decorate the city and throw dirham, saffron, dinar, and musk (Khaleghi-Motlagh, 2007, vol. 2, p. 453):

Once King Kay Khosrow returned to the city/ the world was filled with fragrance, colors and images.

Thanks to the decoration, the world was decorated/ doors, roofs and walls were filled with ambitions.

The musicians sitting everywhere/ golāb, wine, musk and saffron.

According to *Shahnameh*, in some ceremonies during ancient Iran, similar to Persian diba, gem, gold, silver, and turquoise, saffron was also among precious and aristocratic gifts that were gifted. In particular, in engagement ceremonies and weddings, saffron was one of the gifts wrapped up and gifted. For instance, when Siavash gets engaged to Farangis, Golshahrbanoo, the wife of Piranviseh prepares 100 trays of saffron and sends them to Farangis (Khaleghi-Motlagh, 2007, vol. 2, pp. 302–303):

Thirty camels were carrying gold, silver, trays and Persian clothes

One hundred trays of saffron and musk were carried, along with Golshahr and her sisters.

Among the gifts Manucheher gives to Sam, in addition to the Arab horses decorated with gold saddles, Indian swords with golden scabbards, dinar, fur, ruby, Roman slaves, trays of peridot, turquoise cups, crimson gold, and raw silver covered with musk, camphor, and saffron are seen (Khaleghi-Motlagh, 2007, vol. 1, p. 177):

The trays of peridot and turquoise cups/ were either crimson gold or raw silver.

Full of musk, camphor and saffron/ were all brought by obedient.

3.2.2.4.3 Decoration of steeds with saffron

In addition to decorating festivities with fragrant substances, occasionally kings, elders, and champions would decorate their elephants and horses using musk, wine, golāb, and saffron. This was also done to the forelocks and manes of Sām and Zāl's horses on the day of their arrival to Kabul to visit Rudaba (Khaleghi-Motlagh, 2007, vol. 1, p. 262):

All horses' manes and forelocks were covered with musk and saffron.

On the day Rostam triumphantly returned from the battle with Afrasiab, an elephant, the face of which was covered with musk, wine, and saffron, was brought to him at Kay Khosrow's command (Khaleghi-Motlagh, 2007, vol. 3, p. 281):

The entire elephants' mane was filled with musk, wine and saffron from horizon to horizon

Countless of saffron and dirham were thrown and musk and ambergris were sifted too.

The mane of Siavashe's horses were decorated with musk, wine, and saffron on the day of his visiting with Kavous (Khaleghi-Motlagh, 2007, vol. 2, p. 208):

The horse's mane covered with musk, wine and saffron.

3.2.2.4.4 Drinking saffron syrup

Using saffron syrup (which was a mixture of golāb, sugar, water, ice, basil, and saffron) was common in some Zoroastrian ceremonies and rituals (Razi, 2010, p. 263).

3.2.2.4.5 Magical uses

According to the evidence, saffron had special magical and pseudomagical applications such as in various amulets for the exit of the jinn and evil spirits from the body of the infected. In one of Zoroastrian texts called *The Narrative of Darab Hormozdiar* in the Pahlavi language (Unwala, 1922, vol. 2, p. 275) about preparing a kind of amulet used to relieve headache, it was mentioned that after crushing musk and saffron and mixing them with wine, a substance was obtained with which "nirang" (a spell or script similar to prayer used to eliminate problems and illnesses) had to be written on a deer's hide and worn on the left arm. Also, it was mentioned that if on the day of Esfandarmaz (Esfand fifth), when a celebration was held, a nirang was written with saffron on deer's skin or paper and then put on the roof, no illness would strike that area in that year (Unwala, 1922, vol. 1, p. 527).

3.2.2.4.6 Writing uses

Surprisingly, the use of saffron as ink in ancient Iran goes back to the mythological era, likewise it is said that at the time of Garshasp, one of mythological Iranian heroes, using saffron and musk as ink was common (Yaghmaie, 1975, p. 433). In Sassanid era, hides were covered with saffron so that the unpleasant smell would disappear. It is said that because Khusrow Parviz had a delicate nature and disliked the bad smell of hides used for writing, he ordered that no secretary was allowed to send him the tax lists unless they were written on hides that had been covered with saffron and golāb (Balazori, 1988, pp. 368–369).

3.2.2.4.7 Applications of saffron in astronomy and astrology

In an ancient astronomical text called *Tang Loosha* (Homayoon-Farokh, 1987) written in Sassanid Pahlavi, for each day of the year, a celestial range and descriptive chart is presented and the horoscope of the people born on that day determined. To describe the horoscopes of the people born at these times (the 19th degree of Cancer, the 23rd of Libra, and

the 16th of Pisces) the author mentions the pleasant aroma of saffron and predicts a bright future (Homayoon-Farokh, 1987, pp. 67, 275, 123, 293, 248, 325).

3.3 Saffron in Iran after Islam

The earliest reports of the cultivation of saffron in Iran in the Islamic period date back to the 9th and 10th centuries AH, based on which a vast territory from east to west and from southeast to northwest of Iran can be regarded as saffron cultivation areas. For example, in the northeast of Iran in Vararud, around Tirmidh; in the east in Qahestan, Ghaen, Birjand, and Torbat-e-Hydarieh; in the southeast in the city of Daghsh of Zamindavar lands of Sistan; in the central regions in Hamedan, Nahavand, Qom, Rey, and Isfahan; in west and northwest in Soltanieh, Tabriz, and Baku; and in the south in Gur (Firouzabad), Estehbanat, and Shiraz. There are also many villages in different regions of Iran named with derivatives of the word saffron in Persian such as Zaferan, Zaferani, and Zaferanieh, which indicates the vast range of saffron cultivation and production throughout Iran. But according to the available evidence, the range of cultivation and production of saffron was gradually reduced from the late CE 19th century, so that from the Qajar period its cultivation was limited to the cities of Khorasan.

3.3.1 Cultivation of saffron

Saffron is planted in most warm and cold climates, but it yields better in cold climates. The time of planting is in the summer. After plowing the land with a shovel, the seeds are spread and covered with soil. The land should not be irrigated for up to 40 days. In the first year, the crop yields few flowers. Saffron plants live between 3 and 5 years on a land. Mice are the main pests of saffron, and when the leaves go yellow, it is clear that its root has been eaten under the ground (Sotoudeh and Afshar, 1989, pp. 203–204).

The planting distance of saffron bulbs from each other is a span (about 22.5 cm). The best time to harvest saffron flowers is in the early morning, when the flower forms a bud; the head of the bud will be held straight and the end is taken out of the bulb (Moshiri, 1967, pp. 210–211).

Lamei-Gorgani, a 5th century AH poet, refers to the season of flowering and harvesting of saffron in the fall:

I am like a strand of saffron in fall/

She is like a bunch of Jasmines in the month of Nisan.

Dabir-Siaghi (1976, p. 109)

Or:

As the fall comes, the blessed Mehregan is upon us/

Flowers flourish, saffron flowers, bergamot orange comes, and basil grows.

Dabir-Siaghi (1976, p. 138)

3.3.2 Saffron as a commodity

The first narrations of zakat (a form of alms-giving treated in Islam as a religious obligation or tax) on saffron show that the value of this plant was not a fixed one. According to the book *Fotuh-al-Boldan*, the scholars of Hijaz disagreed on the amount of zakat payment on saffron, as it has been quoted in their arguments. But some scholars believed that zakat applies to saffron, while others limited the matter to the power of land, and some did not believe in the necessity of paying tax for this product (Balazori, 1988, p. 108).

Perhaps this disagreement arises from the lack of proper knowledge on the use of this valuable plant. However, historical documents from the Islamic era show that saffron has always been among the agricultural products of higher value, and according to Rashid al-Din Fazlullah Hamedani (Sotoudeh and Afshar, 1989, p. 205): “It is easy to consume but it is very useful, therefore, it’s a fine product which is not found in any land and it costs a fortune.”

An examination of existing historical documents shows that the amount of tax demanded from saffron was higher than that of other plants; for example, in the CE 10th century in Qom, even the tax taken from a destroyed land of saffron was calculated to be half the amount of an arable land (Tehrani, 1982, p. 108). The oldest information on the taxes taken from saffron is for the saffron of Nahavand, which was 30 dirham per acre (Tehrani, 1982, p. 120). After that, there is information of taxation in Tabarestan, where in the days of Mansour Davaniqi, the

Abbasid Caliph, Esfahbod Khorshid, the ruler of Tabaristan, in addition to 300,000 dirhams, and several other valuable goods, sent 10 *kharvars* (ass-loads; *Kharvar* is the unit of weight, equal around 300 kg) of saffron to Baghdad, which according to Ibn-Esfandiari, nothing like that had happened in the whole world (Eqbal, 1941, vol. 1, p. 175).

There is no information on the taxation in other cities except Qom; taxation of saffron in Qom in the CE 10th century was in all the villages of Qomroud, except Tabrash (Tafresh) Dakhel, Jast, and Faleq, and was 62 Dirham for each acre, and in Tabresh Dakhel, Jast, and Faleq, it was 43 dirhams and one-third for each acre (Tehrani, 1982, pp. 121–122).

There is other information on the taxation of saffron from Qomi historians from CE 1668 about the wage given to land surveyors and the people who determined the taxation (Modarresi-Tabatabaie, 1975, p. 245); this report shows that at that time, saffron was being cultivated in Qom.

The oldest price rate of saffron goes back to the time of Karim Khan Zand, when each shahi maund of saffron was worth 25,600 dinars (Moshiri, 1978, p. 315). Given the prices available from this commodity in the Qajar period, it can be said that the price of saffron was on the rise in this historical period, and each mithqal of saffron cost 20 dinars between the years of 1153 and 1163 AH, while it rose to 120 dinars during Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar (Abrishami, 1997, p. 601). In the year 1924, the price of saffron in Birjand, which was sold in Isfahan, was 835 Rials per kilo (Nasr, 1992, p. 166).

Historical, poetic, and allegorical evidence also shows that saffron was an expensive commodity. Najmuddin Abu al-Raja Qomi refers to saffron as wealth and gold coin. When he speaks about the ministry of Kamal al-Din Mohammad Khazan, he writes that after him and Nizam al-Mulk, “there were many high-ranking ministers who wasted oodles of saffron by their lack of tact” (Daneshpazhouh, 1984, p. 100). Saffron was also a valuable commodity rulers sent around to neighbors as tributes (Ghaffari-Fard, 2004, p. 701).

Manouchehri-Damghani (died in CE 1041) implicitly refers to the high price of saffron in a verse (Dabir-Siaghi, 1968, p. 25):

If my face gets jaundiced for being a lover, it's all the same!

As saffron is even dearer than red tulip.

Ghatran-Tabrizi also compares the yellowness of his face and the sanguine face of the beloved, and says that “despite being as yellow as saffron, I am as worthy as tulip which is abundant and cheap, while despite the similarity of the face of beloved to red tulip, she is as dear as saffron” (Nakhjavani, 1983, p. 313):

I have the color of saffron, and she is like the tulip petal!

I am as cheap as tulip and she is as dear as saffron.

But Amir Khosrow Dehlavi is happy to buy the soil of the beloved’s residence at the price of saffron (Nafisi, 1982, p. 72):

I place my face on your doorway, and If you allow me!

I will buy its soil at the price of saffron.

Among the poems of Naser Khosrow (died in 471 or 481 AH), there is a verse indicating that some merchants sold fake saffron due to the high cost of it:

For your duplicity, you do not care, if you pass off hay as saffron.

According to Naser Khosrow, fraudsters used Reseda to make counterfeit saffron (Minavi and Mohaghegh, 1978, pp. 14, 199).

Khaghani (died in 595 AH) also refers to cheating on the sale of saffron by filing and drying the cooked beef (Sajjadi, 1979, p. 85):

Wherever there is a companion, there are also opponents,

Yes, the load of saffron is beef.

In the 7th century AH, Ibn-Ikhwah noted the addition of chicken meat to saffron as well as beef. To identify fake saffron, he said that “soak a little of saffron in vinegar, if the strands attached to each other and were combined, it is adulterated and counterfeit; otherwise, it is pure” (Ibn-Ikhwah, 1968, p. 122).

In proverbs, the high price of saffron is mentioned. Perhaps the oldest phrase used in this regard is in *Tarikh-i Jahangushay* written by Juvaini. In a quoted story from Qa'an, Juvaini points out that Moukakhatoon, Qa'an's wife, wished to give her two pearl earrings to the person who brought a couple of melons. In order to make his wife understand that the melon seller does not know the price of the earring, Qa'an uses the phrase: "like saffron before a long-eared donkey" (Qazvini, 2004, vol. 1, p. 168).

Qadri-Shirazi in the Safavid era uses a turn of phrase that indicates the scarcity and the price of commodities in which the price of hay is equal to saffron (Kheirandish and Vosoughi, 2005, p. 106). Ghasemi-Kermani, a poet of the Qajar period, also has an interesting turn of phrase for the pricing of goods by some people, and in his poem he says that if saffron is priced by donkeys, the price of it will be the same as hay (Afshar, 1993, p. 118).

3.3.3 Applications of saffron in Iranian daily life

Saffron has different applications in Iranian daily life. For most contemporary Iranian people, saffron is used in food. However, historically, in addition to its function as food, this valuable plant provided odor and aroma and was even used in dyeing despite its high cost; it was also known for its medicinal properties. The medical applications of saffron are discussed extensively in other chapters of this book, so in this section we will focus on the other three uses.

3.3.3.1 Odor and aroma

Saffron is one of the most famous fragrances and odors (Imam, 1963, p. 307; Minavi and Harirchi, 1976, pp. 125, 302–303; Sajjadi, 1966, p. 45) used in religious environments (Homayoon-Farokh, 1987, pp. 67, 248, 325), and has been used together with musk, amber, and camphor to create incense. According to one report, Mehdi Abbasi ordered the walls of the House of God to be covered with musk and saffron (Mohaddes, 1993, p. 93). Also, Hesam al-Dawla Ardeshir Bavandi, son of Esfahbod Hassan, from Espahbodan of Tabarestan, burned saffron in golden censers in his castle, together with agarwood (aloes-wood or *oud*) and ambergris (*anbar*) (Eqbal, 1941, vol. 2, p. 121).

Saffron, in addition to odor, has also been used to make perfume. Shahmardan Abil-khair in *Nezhat Nameh Alaei* mentions several perfumes, one of the ingredients of which was saffron (Jahanpour, 1983, pp. 546–547). Saffron was one of the fragrances women used in their makeup (Homayoon-Farokh, 1987, pp. 123, 293). Due to the fact that saffron is warm and light (Afshar, 1967, p. 226), its aroma must also be considered a warm-tempered smell.

3.3.3.2 Dyeing

In ancient times, both in medical and nonmedical books, yellow is interpreted as saffron. In the coloring of wool and fleck of carpets, textiles, and even paper, it is also referred to as saffron color (Zakaria-Kermani, 2009, p. 64). However, given that saffron was expensive, dyers often made yellow with turmeric, sumac, dried pomegranate skin, snapdragon leaves, berry leaves, reseda, pepper, and safflower, which is known as dyeing saffron (Baker, 2006, p. 33; Zakaria-Kermani, 2009, pp. 55–57). Despite its high price, dyers used saffron in dyeing by diluting it; this expensive color was used more for expensive silk fibers (Baker, 2006, pp. 33).

Saffron was also used to make gold plating (Dimand, 1986, pp. 77–85). Before the gold plating, the plate was colored with saffron (Déroche, 2000, p. 158).

Due to the solubility of saffron extract in water, lack of need for adhesives, and its transparency, it was used in coloring epigraphs, titles of Qur'anic Surahs, chapter headings, and some letters.

Saffron extract was also used to reduce the solution acidity of colors such as rust and paper corrosion (Barkeshli, 1998; Mayel-Heravi, 1993, pp. 530, 566). In particular, saffron has been used in the Persian miniature paintings since the 13th century as an inhibitor of destructive verdigris (*zangar*) effects due to its pH stability (Barkeshli, 2018; Barkashli and Atale, 2002). The inhibitory effect of saffron on the destructive effects of verdigris has even been reflected in Persian texts in the form of mystical poetry (Barkashli, 2013, 2015).

Saffron is also used to create a variety of colors such as russet, cathay, yellow, golden, pistachio, rose, and orange.

Another use of saffron is in producing ink (Keshmiri, 2017, p. 160; Mayel-Heravi, 1993, p. 555). Saffron ink is used for writing, painting, and illustrating (Mayel-Heravi, 1993, p. 96, 156). Motavvas ink, from the Middle Ages, is made of saffron; it appeared to be colorful like peacock feathers or what today is referred to as luminescent (Mayel-Heravi, 1993, p. 96, 97, 192).

Another use of saffron was for starching paper (Noshahi, 2001).

In addition, the color of saffron is used by Persian-speaking poets to describe jaundice of the face, sadness, and sometimes as a sign of asceticism and austerity.

*You show up and changes occur again,
My face gets yellow like saffron for your temper.*

Adib-Boroumand and Nasiri-Kahnamouei (2005, p. 556)

*Make your face like saffron yellow by staying awake at night,
So that your face is sanguine on the day of judgment.*

Afshari and Emami (2013, p. 726)

But more often than not, poets the term to describe fear, as when the face goes pale and saffron-like before an awe-inspiring king:

When he is in a fight wielding sword, spear and an iron helmet, the face of riders get like saffron in fear.

Nakhjavani (1983, p. 481)

*Due to your lotus-like sword, from which water drips,
The face of rebels goes yellow like saffron.*

Nourian (1985, p. 163)

3.3.3.3 Food

The most important application of saffron in the culture and history of people in Iran is in food. An examination of ancient culinary and edible texts suggests that this valuable plant was used both in dishes and in drinks; also, due to its color, it was used to color and decorate food, and also used to give an appetizing taste.

One of the most important pieces of evidence on the nutritional value of saffron in ancient Persian and Arabic texts is its application as a seasoning to give aroma to food (Imam, 1973, p. 61) and make it digestible and tasty (Behnamir, 1967, p. 289). Perhaps the oldest report on the use of saffron as a seasoning in Iranian history after Islam can be found in the book *History of Qom*, which mentions cooked meat marinated with saffron and cinnamon (Tehrani, 1982, p. 247).

Saffron was also used in Iranian food such chickpea dishes now known Abgusht. The oldest mention of the use of saffron in chickpea dishes is in a book written by Safi (Golchin-Ma'ani, 1983, p. 414). Following him, Boshagh-Atameh delicately notes the saffron flavor:

*If you want chickpea dish to benefit you,
Use herbal distillates with saffron therein.*

Rastegar-Fasaei (2003, p. 18)

In addition to varieties of ash, saffron is one of the additives in most of the ash dishes mentioned in ancient texts (Shafiee Kadkani, 1988, p. 66; Ashpazbashi, 1974, pp. 76–77); in addition to ash, saffron was an important flavoring and seasoning in stews, kebabs, Kuku, dolma, kadu bouranee, samosa, and some breads such as komaj (Afshar, 2007, 1981a,b; Golchin-Ma'ani, 1983, p. 414; Mojahed, 2007).

Saffron was also used to color food. The most famous coloring use of saffron is in saffron pilau, which is mentioned in ancient texts by many references. In addition to saffron pilau, in foods made with rice with meat, chicken and fish, and also in combination with legumes, depending on the type of pilau, saffron was used to color the food (Afshar, 2007, 1981a,b; Ashpazbashi, 1974; Mojahed, 2007; Olivier, 1992, p. 166).

Saffron was also used to decorate food in Iranian cuisine. Perhaps the oldest reference in which mentioning to the use of decorating food with saffron is the Collection of Athir al-Din Akhsikati (died in CE 1181), which is to decorate Ash Zireh-ba with saffron:

*Porch becomes yellow with the rays of sunrise,
Like Ash Zireh-ba that gets yellow with saffron.*

Farrokh (1958, p. 258)

Apart from ash dishes, the side dishes were also decorated with saffron because it made food look good (Afshar, 1981a,b; Mojahed, 2007, p. 34).

Saffron has a very colorful effect on desserts Iranians serve after the main course. Among them, are different kinds of halvahs (gozab khorma (Yousefi, 1971, p. 101), yellow flower, starch, common purslane, carrot, vervain, tobacco (Afshar, 2007; Golchin-Ma'ani, 1983, p. 414; Ashpazbashi, 1974, pp. 48–49), where saffron is a flavoring and a colorant; in addition to halvahs, saffron has had numerous applications in the preparation of Sholeh Zard (Ashpazbashi, 1974, p. 77; Molavi, 1990, pp. 196, 339) and in sweets such as loz (Afshar, 2007, pp. 5, 51), zolbia (Moshiri, 1967, p. 259), sohan (Hakim-Souri, 1939, vol. 1, p. 25), also saffron syrup (Hakim-Souri, 1939, vol. 2, p. 21; Sefatgol, 2007, p. 167), and saffron distillate (Ibn-Hawqal, 1987, p. 65; Khazarji, 1975, p. 80).

Saffron is also considered important because of its exhilarating effect. In ancient times, even looking at a saffron farm was considered exhilarating (Dabir-Siaghi, 1957). However, the effect of the saffron farm may be due to its smell. Saffron pickers and those who use saffron in their food are not exempt from its vibrant and exhilarating effects. In the following there are some examples from early and later poets on this matter. It is worth noting that poets considered yellow as the color of sadness, which is in conflict with the exhilarating nature of saffron, and the question has been cast in many ways by poets:

If saffron makes one exhilarated,

Then why does flowering of saffron make the flower gardens and gardens sad?

Eqbal (1939, p. 513)

This subject was also mentioned in the following verse in Divan of Khaghani:

If one only gets happy by saffron,

It shows his heart is as sad as saffron color.

Sajjadi (2003, p. 35)

And Seyed-Hassan Ghaznavi says:

If saffron makes on smile,

Why has crying made my face yellow as saffron.

Modarres-Razavi (1983, p. 253)

According to historical records, there was a place called Zaferanja (place of saffron) that is naturally expected to be vivacious, but the Shiites gathered and mourned for Imam Hussein (AS), who was martyred in Karbala, in this site (Mohaddes-Ormavi, 2012, p. 406). Qavami-Razi, a Persian classical poet, refers to this contrast and conflict in a poem written as elegy for the martyrdom of Imam Hossein (AS):

Tears come to the eyes in Zaferanja, The saffron, which brings smile.

Hosseini-Ormavi (1955, p. 16)

3.4 Conclusion

The historical texts of Iran, the most important country in terms of saffron, show that although today saffron is cultivated in the eastern areas of Iran, it was grown in different parts of Iran previously. Reviewing these texts also shows that saffron was used in various ways throughout Iranian history and people used it in their foods, medical agents, etc. Comparing the different applications of saffron in different countries should be a topic of future research.

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