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The Transformation of the Image of Soltaniyeh in European Travel Accounts from the 8th to the Late 11th Century AH

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Abstract

The city of Soltaniyeh was founded in the 8th century AH (14th century CE) on the Sharuyaz Plain and rapidly became one of the principal political and economic centers of the Ilkhanate. Its decline in the post-Ilkhanid era led to the gradual loss of much of its urban fabric. Reconstructing its historical landscape today requires archaeological investigation and the use of written sources. This study argues that European travelogues from the 8th to the 11th century AH constitute a valuable corpus for reconstructing the city's historical condition, identifying lost structures, and analyzing the external gaze of the "Other."This research examines the image of Soltaniyeh in the accounts of Western travelers and explores the relationship between changes in the city's urban status and shifts in travelers' perceptions. The methodology is based on a comparative analysis of these travel narratives, considered alongside broader historical sources and modern scholarship.The analysis reveals a clear chronological change in perception. Eighth-century AH accounts primarily document the Christian community settled in Soltaniyeh and provide only limited descriptions of the city's physical fabric. Ninth-century narratives shift their focus to Soltaniyeh's economic role, regional and transregional commercial networks, and traded goods. By the tenth and eleventh centuries AH, the city is increasingly represented as a landscape of ruins and a reminder of its former grandeur. Travelers' attention turns more strongly to surviving monuments and urban elements, including the Arg, the Dome of Soltaniyeh, mosques, bazaars, and city gates. One significant finding is the value of these accounts for identifying vanished buildings, particularly the pillared Jami Mosque. They also record European misinterpretations, such as identifying Islamic buildings as churches, which can be used as analytical evidence for understanding travelers' cultural presuppositions. Overall, these travelogues are valuable for reconstructing aspects of Soltaniyeh's urban history and for understanding how Iranian cities were perceived from an external perspective and how these perceptions changed over time.

Keywords: Ilkhanid period; Western travel accounts; Soltaniyeh; city; historical monuments.

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