10.22034/4.11.121 *Revitalization School*, *4*(11), 52-63., 2026

Original Research Article

The Economic and Commercial Life of Najafabad from the Safavid to the Qajar Period*

Neda Hojati Najafabadi[1]**
Mahdi Momtahen[1]
Ali Omranipour[1,2]

1. Department of Architecture, Faculty of Architecture and Art, University of Kashan, Kashan, Iran

2. Department of Architecture, Faculty of Architecture, College of Fine Arts, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 11 May 2026
Revised: 21 July 2026
Accepted: 26 July 2026
Online available: 23 August 2026

Keywords
Economic history, Safavid period,Qajar period, Najafabad

ABSTRACT

Najafabad is one of the planned towns established during the Safavid period in connection with the economic and security policies of Isfahan. It gradually developed into a major center of production and exchange within the hinterland of the Safavid capital. This study seeks to identify the principal components of Najafabad's economic structure and to examine its interaction with the economic system of Isfahan from the Safavid to the Qajar period. Employing a historical-analytical approach, the research draws upon documentary evidence from library sources, travel accounts, historical chronicles, and local records.

The findings indicate that although Najafabad's economy was primarily based on horticulture and animal husbandry, it was in fact shaped by a dynamic interplay between agricultural production, processing industries, urban crafts, and market-oriented exchange. Water infrastructure, particularly the qanat system, played a crucial role in expanding agricultural production and sustaining local livelihoods. In addition, processing industries especially oil presses and watermills added value to raw agricultural products and facilitated the integration of the local economy into regional exchange networks. The study further demonstrates that Najafabad's economy evolved through sustained interaction with Isfahan. This relationship reflected both the town's functional dependence on the regional center and its significant contribution to the provision of goods and the circulation of economic activity across the region. Overall, from the Safavid through the Qajar period, Najafabad developed not merely as an agricultural settlement but as an urban center with a diversified economy founded on the interconnected processes of production, processing, and exchange, thereby consolidating its position within the regional economic system.

* This article is derived from the master's thesis of Neda Hojati Najafabadi, entitled "Designing a Work–Life Neighborhood Unit Based on the Functional Capacity of the House and Extended Family in Najafabad." The thesis was completed under the supervision of Dr. Mehdi Momtahan and the advisory guidance of Dr. Ali Omranipour at the Faculty of Architecture and Art, University of Kashan, and was successfully defended in 2023.

** Corresponding author: Phone: +989302833690, E-mail: ndhojati@gmail.com

This is an open access article disributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

[Downloaded from jors-sj.com on 2026-11-07]

[DOI: 10.22034/4.11.121]

Introduction

Najafabad, located 25 kilometers west of Isfahan, is regarded as one of the outstanding examples of planned urban development during the Safavid period, having been founded on a coherent and purposeful design. Unlike many historical cities in Iran, whose physical expansion primarily resulted from gradual and organic growth, Najafabad was established from the outset according to a geometric layout and with explicit economic and environmental considerations. As the French sociologist André Siegfried (1950/1964) observed: "Najafabad is a city that was built during the reign of Shah Abbas according to the order and plan of Sheikh Baha'i. Najafabad is the only place or one of the very few places that was created for a specific purpose and in accordance with a comprehensive master plan conceived through a unified vision; consequently, it possesses a distinct order and systematic structure."

The establishment of Najafabad cannot be regarded merely as an architectural or urban development initiative; rather, it should be understood within the broader context of the Safavid state's strategic policies aimed at strengthening subsistence infrastructure, supporting the capital, and organizing the peripheral territories surrounding Isfahan. Roger Savory (2003) argues that, through the design of sophisticated irrigation networks and the foundation of Najafabad, Shah Abbas and Sheikh Baha'i effectively provided a "solid agricultural foundation" for the new Safavid capital. In his article Iranian Adaptation, Mehdi Bazargan (1978) characterizes Najafabad as a city established with a military function, founded by the order of Shah Abbas to accommodate weapons craftsmen. This industrial-military identity was not only reflected in historical accounts but also became deeply embedded in the city's physical fabric and the continuity of its occupational traditions. According to Bazargan, the renowned metalworking industries of Najafabad in later periods including knifemaking and the production of cutting tools represent a legacy of the Safavid-era weapons manufacturing tradition. This expertise was gradually transferred from the royal arsenals to the urban marketplace, where it persisted in new forms while preserving its original technical foundations[1].

Moreover, Najafabad's geographical location and its position along the communication corridor linking Isfahan with its surrounding regions provided favorable conditions for integrating agricultural, industrial, and commercial activities. Accounts by several travel writers, together with evidence concerning caravan routes and regional trade networks, indicate that Najafabad played a significant role in the supply, distribution, and exchange of goods. This assertion is supported by the fact that travelers such as Brugsch, Flandin, Dalmani, and others passed through the city. Furthermore, Brugsch specifically refers to the commercial caravans that traversed this route[2]. These accounts are not mutually contradictory; rather, they suggest that all of these functions may have constituted complementary objectives underlying the foundation of Najafabad (Fig. 1, 2).

Despite its historical significance, the economic life of Najafabad during the period from the Safavid to the Qajar era has rarely been the subject of a comprehensive and independent scholarly investigation. Much of the existing literature has focused either on the city's physical, architectural, and historical characteristics or has provided descriptive accounts of its occupations and local features, without examining the evolution of its economic structure or the interrelationship between subsistence, production, exchange, and its regional functions within an analytical framework.

Accordingly, the principal objective of the present

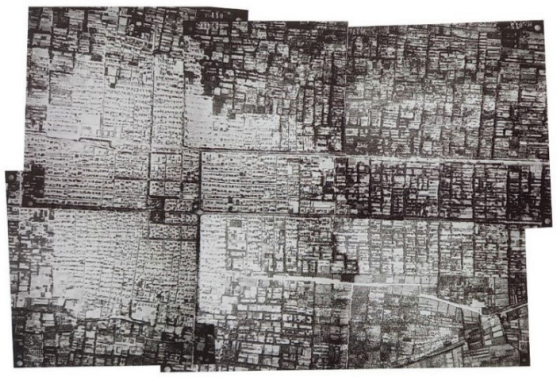


Fig.1. Aerial photograph of Najafabad in 1956, showing the orchards surrounding the town. Source: Karbasi (2020), Aerial Photograph Archive of the National Cartographic Center of Iran.

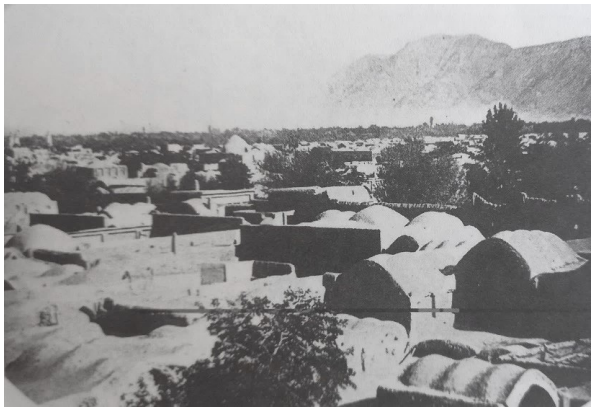


Fig. 2. View of Najafabad photographed by the German photographer Ernst Hoeltzer, during the reign of Nāṣer al-Dīn Shah Qajar. The photograph depicts the town's compact earthen urban fabric, its vaulted mud-brick rooftops, and the lush trees within residential courtyards. Source: Hoeltzer, 1955/1956, 232.

[Downloaded from jors-sj.com on 2026-11-07]

[DOI: 10.22034/4.11.121]

study is to examine the formation, continuity, and transformation of Najafabad's economic life from the Safavid period to the Qajar era by addressing the following research questions:

1. How did the structure and pattern of Najafabad's urban economy develop during the Safavid and Qajar periods, and what transformations did it undergo?
2. What position did Najafabad occupy within the regional network of exchange, and on what basis were its commercial interactions with the political center (Isfahan) organized during the Safavid and Qajar periods?

Literature Review

Although the existing studies on Najafabad are valuable for understanding its local history, urban fabric, and physical development, they have rarely addressed the city's economic life in a direct and systematic manner. Some local works, such as Risāleh-ye Diyāriyeh-ye Khurākushk and An Introduction to the History and Culture of the People of Najafabad, rely primarily on narrative accounts, local memories, and general descriptions of occupations and the city's social characteristics. While these works are important for preserving local historical memory, they generally lack an analytical framework for examining economic developments within their historical context. Among academic studies, works such as Salehi Najafabadi (2018) and Hojjati et al. (2026), although primarily focused on the architectural and physical dimensions of the city, provide valuable information regarding the spatial organization of the bazaar and the indigenous economy of Najafabad. Nevertheless, these studies approach the subject mainly from the perspectives of architecture and urban history and pay comparatively little attention to reconstructing the city's economic system, examining the relationship between occupations and local products and broader historical transformations, or assessing Najafabad's position within the regional economic network. Accordingly, the principal gap in the existing literature is the absence of a study that integrates evidence from local histories, travel accounts, historical geographical sources, and documentary records relating to occupations, production, and exchange in order to examine, independently and analytically, the evolution of Najafabad's economy from the Safavid to the Qajar period.

Methodology

This study adopts a historical research strategy and employs a descriptive–analytical method. Data were collected through library research, drawing upon published sources, travel accounts, historical documents, and relevant scholarly studies, and were subsequently analyzed using an interpretive approach. The primary focus of the research is to reconstruct the evolution of Najafabad's economic structure, identify the principal components of its subsistence economy, and elucidate the relationship between the city's geographical setting and its economic functions.

Given that a substantial portion of the available evidence particularly that found in travel accounts pertains to specific phases of the Qajar period, and that continuous and comparable data are not available for all historical periods, this study seeks to present a relatively coherent account of the city's economic transformation through historical inference and the synthesis of dispersed sources. Accordingly, the analysis extends beyond a descriptive presentation of the evidence and instead emphasizes the interpretation of the interrelationships among historical records, the city's spatial structure, and the continuity or transformation of its economic activities.

Findings

• Horticulture and animal husbandry: the foundation of Najafabad's subsistence economy

Horticulture and animal husbandry constituted the principal components of Najafabad's subsistence and economic system during the Safavid and Qajar periods. Many historians have argued that one of the primary objectives behind the foundation of the city during the Safavid era was to strengthen the subsistence base and food security of Isfahan.

Shirvani (1983), who visited Najafabad during the reign of Naser al-Din Shah, provides the following description:"...Shah Abbas founded this township, designing all of its houses and gardens according to an engineering plan. He laid out avenues extending for more than one farsakh on all four sides of the settlement and planted them with plane trees and fruit-bearing trees. Throughout all the lands of Iran, I have not seen another city or township constructed according to such a plan."The extent of the orchards and the highly organized agricultural landscape of the city were so remarkable that they attracted the admiration of foreign travelers. Heinrich Brugsch (1968/198), the German traveler, writes in his travel account: "The gardens of Najafabad are so extensive that we rode our horses through the tree-lined garden lanes of the town for three-quarters of an hour before finally reaching its streets and bazaar." Eugène Flandin[3] & Pascal Coste

[Downloaded from jors-sj.com on 2026-11-07]
[DOI: 10.22034/4.11.121]

(1851/1957) likewise emphasized the city's orchard-centered character, describing Najafabad as a settlement concealed amid extensive gardens. The renowned historian al-Isfahani (1989, 372), in his description of historical Najafabad, writes: "From the very beginning of its construction, the Safavid rulers laid out a grand avenue in the style of the Chahar Bagh. Plane trees were planted along both sides, while gardens extended continuously on either side of the avenue to its farthest end. The town was built with exceptional elegance. Although much of it has since fallen into ruin and many of its trees have perished, its remaining splendor and beauty still testify to the greatness of its founder... Its climate resembles that of Marbin, and its gardens continue to display extraordinary freshness and verdure (Fig. 3, 4)."

"There are also many herdsmen in that township (Najafabad)" (Jaberi Ansari, 1999). Livestock husbandry constituted a widespread and economically significant occupation, second only to agriculture in attracting the labor and attention of the local population. The abundance of both abandoned and active livestock enclosures across the northern and southern plains of Najafabad attests to the extensive scale of pastoral activities in the region (Yazdani Najafabadi, 2017). From its early years, Najafabad developed into the principal commercial center for the surrounding villages, attracting livestock breeders and farmers on a daily basis for the exchange of agricultural and pastoral products. The city's orchard products including almonds, pomegranates, grapes[4], and walnuts also possessed considerable commercial value. Mirza Hossein Tahvildar[5] (1964) refers to the annual export of almond kernels from Najafabad to Bombay. Likewise, the author of Nisf al-Jahān fī Taʿrīf al-Iṣfahān highlights the superior quality of almonds produced in the region and notes that orchard products were processed into dried fruits including dried apricots, plums, peaches, and Askari raisins before entering commercial markets[6]. These accounts indicate that Najafabad's farmers were not confined to the production of raw agricultural commodities. Rather, by processing orchard produce into durable and transportable products, they succeeded in extending their commercial exchanges to distant markets. Alongside agriculture and horticulture, livestock husbandry constituted the second major pillar of Najafabad's economy. In addition to supplying dairy products and other animal-derived commodities, it provided essential raw materials for textile production, particularly wool, while also contributing to the sustainability of agricultural production through the provision of animal manure. As summarized in Table 1, agriculture, animal husbandry, and local industries formed a mutually reinforcing economic system that ensured both the continuity of production and the sustainability of the local subsistence economy.



Fig. 3. In the caption beneath the photograph, Zell-e Soltan wrote: "This is the Chaharbagh of Najafabad. It is a beautiful and long boulevard, lined with tall, old plane trees that provide excellent shade. Water is always flowing along both sides of it." Source: Golestan Palace Album House, Album of Old Buildings of Isfahan and Zell-e Soltan's Hunting Photographs, Photograph No. 34.

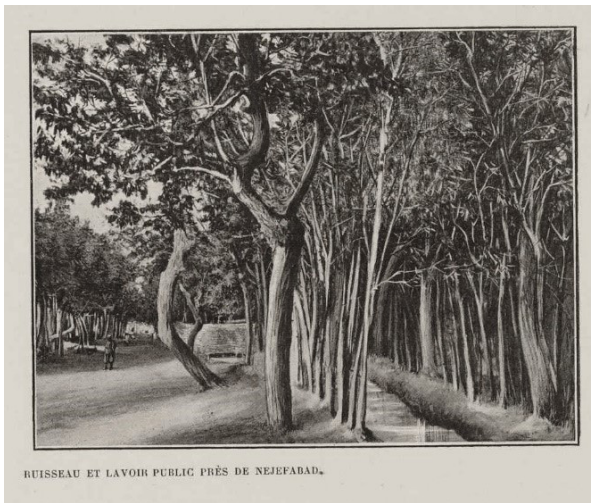


Fig. 4. The outskirts of Najafabad. Source: D'Allemagne, 1911/1956.

The prosperity of agriculture and animal husbandry gradually fostered the emergence of an extensive network of economic exchange, transforming Najafabad from a local center of production into one of the principal commercial depots serving the hinterland of Isfahan. The volume of trade became so substantial that two large caravanserais in the city of Isfahan one located near Hakim Mosque and the other in the Old Square (Meydan-e Kohneh) were designated specifically for the daily marketing and sale of agricultural products from Najafabad and its surrounding villages (Salehi Najafabadi, 2018).

The significance of Najafabad's agricultural production was not confined to periods of economic prosperity; it also assumed a critical role during times of crisis.

[Downloaded from jors-sj.com on 2026-11-07]

[DOI: 10.22034/4.11.121]

Table 1. Major horticultural, agricultural, and livestock products of Najafabad and their associated industries during the Qajar period. Source: Hojati Najafabadi, et al., 2026, and adapted by the author.

Primary product		Processed product	Related activities and industries developed around the product		
Garden	Almonds	Dried Fruit			
	Pomegranates	pomegranate concentrate	Dyeing industry (using its bark in dyeing)		
	Walnuts	Dried Fruit	Dyeing industry (using its bark in dyeing)		
	Berry	mulberry syrup Dried Fruit (Dried Berries)			
	Grapes	Currants, Raisins, Verjuice			
		Vinegar			
	Wood	Baskets, Firewood, etc.	Wicker weaving (a type of basket woven with purple, pomegranate, or willow branches), carpentry		
Agricultural	Wheat	Flour	Mill		
	Barley	Flour			
	Vegetable seeds	Edible, Industrial, and Medical Oil	Asarkhane (Oil mill)		
	Cotton	Fiber	Spinning and dyeing industry	Handloom industries (canvas weaving, Giveh making, carpet weaving)	Chitgar
Livestock	Milk	Yogurt, Cheese, Butter, Oil, Kashk			
	Wool	Carpet weaving thread	Spinning and dyeing industry	Handicrafts (rug weaving, felting)	

Reports published in the newspapers Zayandeh-Rud (1950) and Mofattesh-e Iran (1957) indicate that during years of bread shortages and famine, the arrival of agricultural produce from Najafabad into the Isfahan market contributed to lowering food prices and partially alleviated the subsistence crisis experienced by the city's inhabitants (Yazdani Najafabadi, 2017).

Beyond supplying foodstuffs, Najafabad also served as one of the principal sources of fuel for Isfahan. Al-Isfahani (1989), who visited the city during the Qajar period, notes that the densely wooded orchards of Najafabad supplied firewood sufficient to meet approximately half of Isfahan's annual fuel requirements, derived solely from the regular pruning of their trees.

• Crafts and market activities in Najafabad's economy

Although the bazaar of Najafabad was not initially organized into strictly specialized sections and it was common for merchants to sell carpets alongside dried fruits within the same shop some of its secondary passageways gradually evolved into specialized commercial rows (rastehs) (Salehi Najafabadi, 2018). The emergence of craft-specific quarters occupied by cobblers, knifemakers, felt-makers, and dyers reflects the increasing sophistication of the city's socio-economic structure and the growing division of labor (ibid.). Among these occupations, the textile and dyeing industries constituted one of the most prominent sectors of Najafabad's market economy. This industry represents a clear example of a localized and sustainable economic system, since much of the production chain from the procurement of raw materials to processing and the marketing of finished goods was carried out within the region itself.

Brugsch (1968/1983) describes the bazaar of Najafabad as follows: "After passing through several streets and alleys, we arrived at the bazaar of Najafabad. Although it was already afternoon, all the shops remained open, and the merchants were actively engaged in their businesses. A considerable portion of the local industries and handicrafts consisted of cotton ginning, spinning, and dyeing. Using simple implements, the craftsmen separated the cotton fibers from their seeds and then spun the fibers into yarn with hand spindles... Dyeing workshops were also numerous in the bazaar. The dyes most commonly used were indigo and its derivatives, together with natural pigments extracted from plants and fruits according to techniques and formulas inherited from previous generations."This account demonstrates that the bazaar of Najafabad functioned not merely as a marketplace for the exchange of goods but also as an integral component of the production process, with manufacturing activities taking place within the market and its associated craft quarters. The

[Downloaded from jors-sj.com on 2026-11-07]
Revitalization School
2026
56
[DOI: 10.22034/4.11.121]

widespread use of natural dyes particularly those derived from pomegranate rinds and walnut husks, both of which were abundantly available in the region illustrates the close interrelationship between horticulture and urban crafts. Likewise, before the establishment of mechanized wool-spinning factories, the wool required for carpet weaving, rug production, and various textiles was supplied by livestock raised in Najafabad and its surrounding villages. Within this integrated economic structure, several products of Najafabad including knives[7], karbās (coarse cotton cloth), qalamkār[8] (hand-block-printed textiles), carpets[9], and rugs gradually acquired the capacity to compete in broader commercial markets and, in some cases, reached interregional markets and neighboring countries (Salehi Najafabadi, 2018). During the Qajar period, cotton ginning, spinning, and dyeing constituted a substantial share of the city's handicraft production. According to Ranjbar Najafabadi (2011), this development reflects the gradual decline of agricultural activity in the late Qajar era, as an increasing proportion of the population shifted toward industrial and craft-based occupations (Fig. 5, 6, 7).

• Processing industries: oil presses and watermills

During the Safavid and Qajar periods, Najafabad's economy was not based solely on the production of agricultural and livestock commodities; it also relied upon a network of processing industries and related services. Among these, traditional oil presses (ʿaṣṣārkhānehs) constituted one of the principal pillars of the city's productive economy. According to some accounts, Najafabad once contained nearly twenty oil presses (Khalili, 2016), of which fewer than five survive today. Brugsch (Brugsch, 1968/1983) referred to these establishments as "factories," reflecting their importance within the local economy[10]. The primary raw materials processed in these facilities were oil-bearing seeds cultivated by a large number of local farmers. Beyond producing edible and medicinal oils, the oil presses were also engaged in the manufacture of lamp oil a strategic commodity whose export to neighboring countries constituted one of the region's most profitable commercial activities (Salehi Najafabadi, 2018). All of the oil presses were situated along the city's principal thoroughfare, Kucheh Shah (Royal Lane), or within the bazaar district (ibid.). The concentration of such processing industries in Najafabad attracted merchants and travelers from distant towns who came to utilize the services of these establishments. Many remained in accommodations attached to the oil presses or in nearby caravanserais for several days, generating a continuous flow of commercial traffic and reinforcing the city's role as an active center of regional trade and economic exchange (Fig. 8, 9, 10).

The sustainability of Najafabad's extensive orchards in an environment lacking permanent surface water depended largely on the engineering ingenuity embodied in its qanat system. Nafisi (2009), in the introduction to The Divan of Sheikh Baha'i, writes: "Another scientific achievement attributed to Sheikh Baha'i is the design of the Najafabad kāriz (qanat), known as the Zarrin-Kamar Qanat, one of the largest underground water channels in Iran. From its outlet (mazhar) to the end of its irrigation network, it



Fig. 5. Manufacture of war equipment and tools. Source: Najafabad Anthropology Museum.



Fig. 6. Cotton beating. Source: Najafabad Museum of Anthropology.

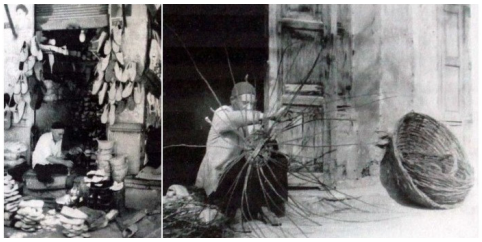


Fig. 7. Loudeh (Traditional Woolen Pad) Weaving and Giveh. (Traditional Handwoven Footwear) Making Industry in Najafabad Source: Karbasi, 2005.



Fig. 8. Akhlaqi Asarkhaneh. Source: Khalili, 2016.



Fig. 9. Baba Moheb Asarkhaneh. Source: Khalili, 2016.

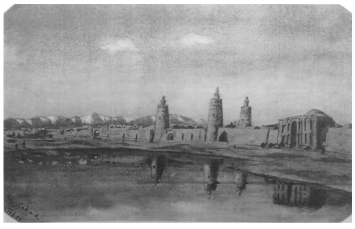


Fig. 10. A drawing of the Zanbooriha Caravanserai and the moat in front of it, created by an English traveler in 1912. Source: Khalili, 2016.

[Downloaded from jors-sj.com on 2026-11-07]

[DOI: 10.22034/4.11.121]

extends for nine farsakhs and is divided into eleven major watercourses." The greater part of Najafabad's water supply was provided by qanats. Thirteen qanat channels, constructed or rehabilitated during different periods from the pre-Safavid era through the Qajar period, conveyed water from the upstream highlands to the city (Salehi Najafabadi, 2018). Their principal function was the irrigation of orchards and agricultural lands. This extensive irrigation network not only sustained agricultural production but also supplied the hydraulic power required to operate the city's watermills, thereby supporting both agricultural productivity and local processing industries (Fig. 11, 12).

Documents concerning the demarcation of the qanats refer to twenty-seven watermills located along their courses (ibid.)[11].

Likewise, Al-Iṣfahān records: "The watercourse of Jūb-e Shāh, regarded as one of the most important qanats in Iran and reserved exclusively for Najafabad, passes through the district of Kerun. It extends for nearly nine farsakhs and irrigates more than four hundred jaribs of land every twenty-four hours. The same water powers several mills that together grind approximately fifty kharvārs of wheat into flour each day" (Jenab, 1992). The extensive operation of these watermills provides clear evidence of the substantial volume of grain production and the vitality of the regional economy during the Qajar period (Fig. 13, 14).

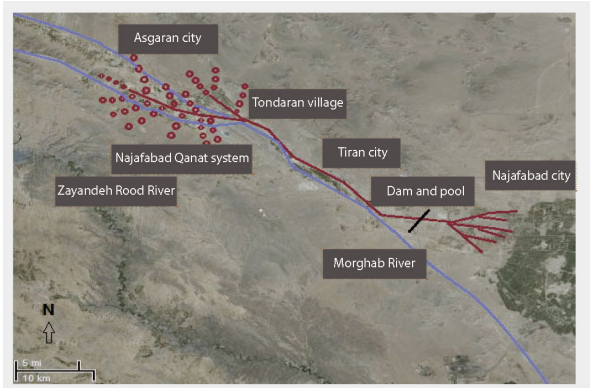


Fig. 11. The Najafabad Qanat Network Overlaid on a Satellite Image. Source: Ghayour Najafabad & Sharifi, 2011.

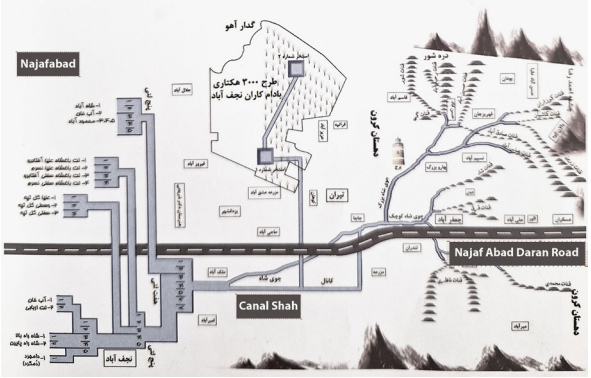


Fig. 12. A schematic diagram of the qanat routes within the citySource: Khalili, 2016.



Fig. 13. The Urban Boundary and Primary and Secondary Streets of Najafabad in the Late Qajar Period, Digitized and Superimposed on the 1966 Base Map. Source: Salehi Najafabadi, 2018.

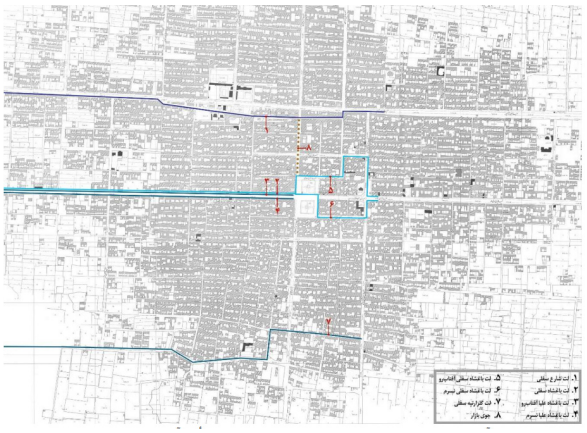


Fig. 14. The Routes of the Water Channels Entering Najafabad during the Qajar Period, Digitized and Superimposed on the 1966 Base Map. Source: Salehi Najafabadi, 2018.

• Najafabad's position within local and regional exchange networks

An examination of the economic development of Najafabad during the Naseri period demonstrates that improvements in the quality and diversity of its manufactured goods played a decisive role in establishing the city as one of the principal commercial centers within the hinterland of Isfahan. Describing Najafabad during the reign of Naser al-Din Shah, Brugsch (1968/1983) observed: "The bazaars of Najafabad offer luxurious, artistic, and exquisite goods that cannot be found elsewhere in Iran." Historical evidence further indicates that the presence of approximately 450 active commercial establishments, together with public institutions such as mosques and prominent bathhouses, reflects both the city's

[Downloaded from jors-sj.com on 2026-11-07]
[DOI: 10.22034/4.11.121]

economic self-sufficiency and its considerable degree of commercial independence from Isfahan[12].

Within Najafabad's economic structure, three key institutions played a fundamental role in promoting commercial activity. The first comprised the oil presses (ʿaṣṣārkhānehs), which represented the city's productive capacity and processing industries. The second consisted of the timchehs, enclosed commercial halls that functioned as specialized centers for wholesale and retail trade. Najafabad contained approximately ten timchehs, each generally identified by the name of its original owner (Khalili, 2016), while the locations of five of these have been identified through historical research (Salehi Najafabadi, 2018). The third element was the network of caravanserais, which provided the accommodation and logistical infrastructure required for merchants and the transportation of goods. Historical records indicate that Najafabad possessed approximately twenty caravanserais, the majority of which were concentrated within the bazaar district, although the locations of only thirteen have been identified with certainty (Salehi Najafabadi, 2018).

The coexistence of these institutions within the urban marketplace demonstrates the emergence of a well-organized system of production, exchange, and distribution. Moreover, a quantitative assessment of these commercial facilities in relation to the city's population reveals an important characteristic of Najafabad's economy. The remarkably high number of watermills, oil presses, timchehs, and caravanserais relative to the size of the city suggests that its economic infrastructure was designed not merely to satisfy local demand but to serve a much broader network of regional trade and commercial exchange (Fig. 15, 16, 17).

Discussion: Najafabad at the Nexus of Infrastructure, Production, and Exchange

An examination of the occupational structure of historical Najafabad reveals, on the one hand, the diversity and complexity of its social composition and, on the other, the close interdependence of its economy with the broader economic development of Isfahan. The findings indicate that although the physical structure of the city was fundamentally based on extensive orchards and agricultural lands, and agriculture played a vital role in supplying the Safavid capital, Najafabad's economy was by no means one-dimensional. Alongside the principal sectors of agriculture and animal husbandry, occupations such as the manufacture of weapons and military equipment, together with the highly developed oil-pressing



Fig. 15. The Concentration of Urban Elements such as Caravanserais and Timchehs within the Bazaar Area Indicates the Presence of an Extensive Bazaar in Najafabad. Distribution of Commercial Guilds and Caravanserais overlaid on the 1956 Aerial Photograph (National Cartographic Center of Iran) Source: Hojati Najafabadi, et al., 2026.



Fig. 16. Zill al-Sultan annotated the caption beneath the photograph as "The Beginning of the Shops of Najafabad". Source: Golestan Palace Album House, Album of Historic Buildings of Isfahan and Zill al-Sultan's Hunting Photographs, 19.



Fig. 17. The Najafabad Bazaar Source: D'Allemagne, 1911/1956.

[Downloaded from jors-sj.com on 2026-11-07]

[DOI: 10.22034/4.11.121]

industry, endowed the city with a distinctive semi-industrial character.

The findings further demonstrate that Najafabad's economy rested upon three principal pillars. The first consisted of the extensive orchards and cultivated lands surrounding the city, whose productivity was sustained by an elaborate qanat network and irrigation system that enabled continuous agricultural production despite the region's relatively arid climate. The second pillar comprised the processing industries most notably the traditional oil presses (ʿaṣṣārkhānehs) and watermills which served as the intermediate stage of production by transforming raw agricultural commodities, such as oilseeds and cereals, into higher-value products, including lamp oil and flour, suitable for commercial distribution and export. The third pillar was the urban marketplace, together with its specialized commercial rows (rastehs) and caravanserais, which facilitated the circulation of goods and integrated the city into wider regional exchange networks. The interaction of these three components produced a relatively cohesive and self-sustaining economic system in which agricultural and horticultural production was directly connected to processing industries and subsequently to commercial distribution networks (Fig. 19).

Accordingly, Najafabad's economic advantage cannot be attributed solely to its geographical location or its proximity to Isfahan. Rather, its comparative strength derived primarily from the effective organization of local resources, the specialized division of labor, and the integration of production with commercial exchange. Its proximity to Isfahan, convenient access to regional transportation routes, and the concentration of diverse groups of producers and artisans created conditions that enabled the city not only to satisfy a substantial share of the surrounding region's demand but also, in certain sectors, to become a producer of commodities destined for interregional markets (Fig. 18).

The durability of this production-oriented economic system can also be observed in later historical records. As reported in the Geographical Gazetteer of Isfahan (1976), Najafabad continued in subsequent periods to sustain its economy through a combination of agriculture, animal husbandry, and a range of artisanal and workshop-based industries, reflecting the long-term resilience of the integrated economic structure established during the Safavid and Qajar eras.

Accordingly, the economic history of Najafabad cannot be fully understood without considering the structural interconnections among its water

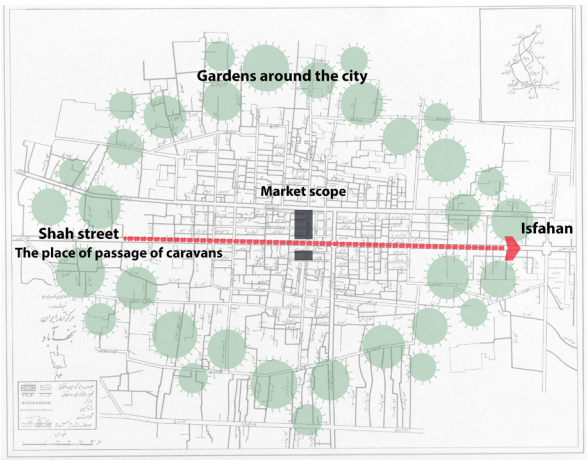


Fig. 18. The Location of the Bazaar Area, Timchehs, and Caravanserais in Relation to Caravan Routes. Digitized and Superimposed on the 1974 City Map Source: Statistical Center of Iran, with modifications by the Author.

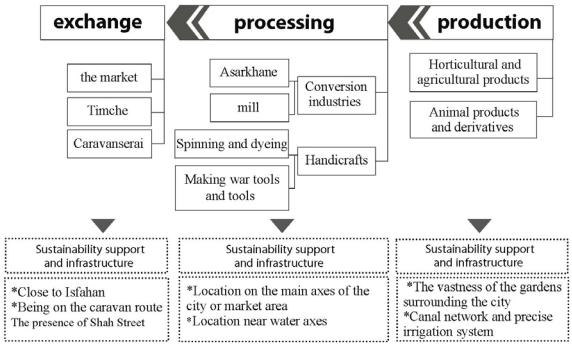


Fig. 19. The Triadic Structure of the Economy in Historical Najafabad. Source: Authors.

infrastructure, agricultural and livestock production, processing industries, and market organization. From this perspective, Najafabad represents a significant case study for understanding the role of peripheral cities within the economic structure of Safavid and Qajar Iran. By effectively organizing local resources and integrating systems of production and exchange, such cities achieved a remarkable degree of economic resilience and played an important role in sustaining regional economic networks.

Conclusion

This study adopted a historical–analytical approach to examine the evolution of Najafabad's urban economy, focusing on the processes through which it emerged, developed, and sustained itself from the Safavid to the Qajar period. To this end, dispersed evidence relating to productive activities, subsistence strategies, economic infrastructure, and exchange networks was collected from library sources, travel accounts, and historical-geographical texts, systematically classified, and subsequently analyzed.

The findings demonstrate that Najafabad was never merely an agricultural settlement serving the

[Downloaded from jors-sj.com on 2026-11-07]
[DOI: 10.22034/4.11.121]

hinterland of Isfahan. Rather, from its inception, it possessed a multifaceted economic structure based on the integration of three complementary spheres: production, processing, and exchange. At the production level, horticulture and animal husbandry formed the foundation of the local economy. Agricultural output was not confined to local consumption; the generation of marketable surpluses enabled Najafabad to participate actively in the commercial networks surrounding Isfahan.

At the infrastructural level, the findings confirm the decisive role of the qanat system in enabling and sustaining agricultural production. Beyond supplying water to orchards and cultivated lands, the qanats functioned as the city's fundamental economic infrastructure, supporting productive capacity, ensuring the stability of settlement, and sustaining a range of dependent occupations. In this respect, the qanat network may be regarded as the silent yet indispensable engine of Najafabad's economy, without which neither the extensive orchards nor the continuity of its production-based subsistence system can be adequately explained.

At the processing level, industries such as traditional oil presses (ʿaṣṣārkhānehs) and watermills constituted a critical intermediary between primary production and the marketplace. By transforming raw commodities including oilseeds and cereals into durable and marketable products such as lamp oil and flour, these facilities enhanced the mobility and commercial value of local production. Consequently, Najafabad's economy extended beyond primary agricultural production, as processing industries converted locally produced raw materials into commodities suitable for wider regional distribution, thereby contributing significantly to the resilience and prosperity of the urban economy.

At the level of exchange and urban organization, the bazaar and its specialized crafts played a central role in regulating the circulation of goods and services and in consolidating Najafabad's economic functions. The diversity of occupations and the emergence of specialized commercial rows (rastehs) ranging from occupations associated with livestock and horticultural products to metalworking, textile production, and dyeing demonstrate that the city's economy was not limited to agriculture alone. Rather, the bazaar served as the principal interface connecting local production, processing industries, and regional trade, while simultaneously shaping Najafabad's distinctive economic identity.

The findings further indicate that Najafabad's economic position was defined through continuous interaction with Isfahan, the principal Safavid capital. This relationship was characterized by a dual dynamic. On the one hand, Najafabad's economic functions were closely influenced by the political and commercial demands of Isfahan. On the other hand, through the production and distribution of agricultural commodities, livestock products, and processed goods, the city played an active role in supplying and sustaining the regional economy.

Accordingly, the economic history of Najafabad cannot be adequately understood through a single-dimensional perspective focused exclusively on agriculture or the marketplace. Instead, it requires a network-based analytical framework that recognizes the structural interdependence of water infrastructure, primary production, processing industries, and commercial exchange. From this perspective, Najafabad represents a significant case study for understanding the economic role of peripheral cities in pre-modern Iran. Through the effective organization of local resources and the integration of production with trade, such cities evolved into resilient and complementary economic centers that reinforced, rather than merely depended upon, the major political and commercial capitals.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there was no conflict for them in conducting this research.

Endnote

1. The author writes: "Najafabad is a city that was established during the reign of Shah Abbas, according to the order and design of Sheikh Baha'i, as a royal arsenal (qūrkhāneh), and was populated by weapons craftsmen. The well-known knife-making workshops and the production of knives and cutlery for which Najafabad is famous today are remnants of that period."
2. "Along the route, we encountered caravans of camels carrying their loads. These caravans had come from Yazd and were transporting their merchandise via Isfahan to Hamadan and, from there, onward to Tabriz." (Brugsch, 1968/1983, 385)
3. Eugène Flandin traveled to Iran during the reign of Mohammad Shah Qajar, between 1840 and 1842, and undertook extensive journeys throughout the country, carefully visiting and documenting many of Iran's historical monuments and sites.
4. Jean Chardin, the renowned French merchant and traveler of the seventeenth century, observed:"The Guebres, or Zoroastrians who are the noblest of the Iranian peoples and the most ancient cultivators of this land produce the finest varieties of grapes. The Zoroastrians of Najafabad, a township situated four farsakhs from Isfahan, cultivate grapes far better than the Muslims (Chardin, 1711/1957)."
5. He compiled the book Geography of Isfahan in 1897 (1294 AH) at the order of Naser al-Din Shah.
6. Al-Isfahani, who visited Najafabad during the Qajar period, writes:"It produces abundant and excellent almonds; indeed, virtually all of Isfahan's almonds come from this place" (al-Isfahani, 1989). Mirza Hossein Tahvildar similarly observes:"Both hard-shelled and soft-shelled premium

[Downloaded from jors-sj.com on 2026-11-07]

[DOI: 10.22034/4.11.121]

almonds are produced here. Both varieties are large and rich in kernel, particularly those from Kerun and Najafabad, which are in high demand. Every year, almond kernels are exported to Bombay" (Tahvildar, 1964). According to al-Isfahani, the lands of Najafabad were "predominantly covered with orchards and vineyards" (al-Isfahani, 1989), and viticulture was practiced extensively throughout the region. He further remarks:"The grapes of Najafabad are renowned, particularly the Mithqali variety, and nowhere else are grapes of this type produced with such superior quality and sweetness" (ibid.). Elsewhere he adds:"They are unsurpassed and deserve the highest praise" (ibid.). Pomegranate cultivation likewise occupied a prominent place in the city's horticultural economy. Al-Isfahani notes:"Najafabad possesses numerous pomegranate orchards, supplying pomegranates to the whole of Isfahan and to most surrounding villages. No other locality near Isfahan produces pomegranates on such a scale" (ibid.). Tahvildar likewise states:"The finest pomegranates of Ardestan and Najafabad are superior to the well-known varieties of Kashan, Qom, and Saveh" (Tahvildar, 1964). Walnut and mulberry trees were also planted extensively in orchards and along irrigation channels. Describing the region's peaches, al-Isfahani writes:"The late-season peaches produced in Najafabad are exceptionally large, juicy, and sweet, and few places can rival their quality" (al-Isfahani, 1989). He further observes:"Its peaches are superior to most peaches grown in Iran and enjoy widespread renown; the finest peaches of Isfahan originate from this locality" (ibid.). In addition to these products, other fruit trees including quince, cherry, pear, persimmon, and fig (the latter commonly cultivated in household gardens) were grown throughout the area. Various cereal and legume crops, such as wheat, barley, lentils, and rice, were also cultivated, although on a relatively limited scale.

7. The quality and craftsmanship of these knives were of such a high standard that Najafabad may be regarded, after Zanjan and Saveh, as Iran's third most important center of knife production (Teymouri et al., 2016). The peak of this craft's prosperity and commercial success dates back to the Qajar period, particularly during the reign of Mohammad Khan Qajar. The earliest Najafabad knives were manufactured entirely by hand using simple, traditional tools. The blades were forged, polished, and tempered, while the handles were fashioned from goat horn (ibid.).

8. During the Qajar period, Najafabad also developed calico printing and qalamkār textile production as important local industries, and their products were distributed to the regions surrounding the city (Ranjbar Najafabadi, 2011).

9. Isfahan was one of the most important centers of carpet weaving in Iran during the Safavid period (Nasiri, 2003). Owing to its close geographical proximity to Isfahan, the carpet industry of Najafabad was profoundly influenced by that of the provincial capital, and its periods of prosperity and decline closely paralleled those of Isfahan. Consequently, an understanding of the historical development of carpet production in Isfahan provides valuable insight into the evolution of the carpet industry in Najafabad (Tavakkoli Najafabadi, 2010).

10. Brugsch (1983, 362), describing his visit to Najafabad, writes:"After touring the bazaar, the kadkhudā (village headman) asked us, 'Would you like to visit the oil-pressing factory of Najafabad?' Our reply was in the affirmative..."

11. Of the watermills associated with Najafabad, only one Seyyed Ebrahim Watermill was located within the urban area, while the remainder were situated outside the city's residential limits. Three mills Yavar Ali Khan, Seyyed Ebrahim Ayat, and another mill along the same route were positioned on the course of Jūb-e Shāh (the Royal Watercourse). The Sandal and Kharun qanats each powered a single watermill, known respectively as Kariz and Shirkhaneh. Another mill, bearing the same name as the Shirbacheh qanat, was located adjacent to its outlet (mazhar) (ibid.).

12. Al Davoud (1989) describes Najafabad as follows:"Magnificent bathhouses, numerous and successive caravanserais, and mosques were to be seen. The town contained nearly four hundred and fifty shops of various kinds, all in active operation, each stocked with its own category of goods and merchandise, to such an extent that the inhabitants had no need whatsoever to depend upon the city of Isfahan."

References List

• *Al-Davoud, S. A. (1989). Do Safarnameh az Jonub-e Iran dar Salhaye 1256 H.Q. va 1307 H.Q.* Amir Kabir. [in Persian]

• Al-Isfahani, M. M. ibn M. R. (1989). *Nisf al-Jahan fi Ta'rif al-Isfahan* (M. Sotoudeh, Ed, 2nd ed.). Amir Kabir. [in Persian]

• Brugsch, H. K. (1983). *Reise der k. preussischen Gesandtschaft nach Persien* (H. Kurdbache, Trans.). Etelaat. (Original work published 1863)

• Chardin, J. (1957). *Voyages de Monsieur le chevalier Chardin en Perse* (M. Abasi, Trans.). Amirkabir. (Original work published 1711).

• D'Allemagne, H. (1956). *Du Khorassan au pays des Backhtiaris: trois ans de Flandin, E. N., & Pascal Coste, X. (1957). Voyage en Perse* (H. Noorsadeghi, Trans.). Ashrafi (Original work published 1851).

• Ghayour Najafabad, H. & Sharifi najafabadi, R. (2011). The design of Najafabad,A display of governing thought of regional planning in Safavid era. *Geographical Research, 26*(103), 1-26.

• Hoeltzer, E. (1976). *Persien vor 113 Jahren* (M. Asemi, Trans.). Ministry of Culture and Art, Iranian Anthropology Center. (Original work published 1975)

• Hojati Najafabadi, N., Momtahen, M., & Omranipour, A. (2026). Residential and Livelihood Patterns in Najafabad's Historic Houses. *Bagh-e Nazar, 23*(155), 57-70. https://doi.org/10.22034/bagh.2026.525103.5835

• *Iran Statistical Center*. https://amar.org.ir

• Jaberi Ansari, M. H. (1999). *Tarikh-e Isfahan va Ray*. Mash'al. [in Persian]

• Jenab, M. S. A. (1992). *Al-Isfahan* (A. Nasr, Ed, 2nd ed.). Golha Publications. [in Persian]

• Karbasi, A. (2005). *Design of the Entrance Park of Najafabad* [Master's thesis, University of Tehran]. [in Persian]

• Khalili, F. (2016). *Moqaddameh-i bar Tarikh va Farhang-e Mardom-e Najafabad*. Mehr-e Zahra. [in Persian]

• Nafisi, S. (2009). *Kolliyat-e Ash'ar va Athar-e Sheikh Baha'i. Chokameh*. [in Persian]

• Nasiri, M. (2003). *Rugs, Persian*. Parang.

• National Geographical Organization of Iran. (1976). *Geographical Gazetteer of Iran (Settlements): Province 10, Isfahan*.

• Ranjbar Najafabadi, Z. (2011). *Archaeology of Najafabad: A Study of the Formation and Development of the City during the Safavid Period* [Master's thesis, University of Tehran]. [in Persian]

• Salehi Najafabadi, Z. (2018). *The Urban Structure of Najafabad during the Qajar Period* [Master's thesis, Shahid Beheshti University]. [in Persian]

• Savory, R. (2003). *Iran Under the Safavids* (K. Azizi, Trans.). Markaz. (Original work published 1980)

• Shirvani, H. Z. A. (1983). *Bustan al-Siyahah* (Travel Account). Bita. [in Persian]

• Siegfried, A. (1964). *L'ame des peoples* (A. Aram, Trans.). Tehran. (Original work published 1950)

• Tahvildar, Mirza Hossein. (1964). *Geography of Isfahan* (M. Sotoudeh, Ed.). University of Tehran. [in Persian]

• Tavakkoli Najafabadi, M. (2010). *An Investigation of the Factors Affecting the Decline in the Quality of Handwoven Carpets in Najafabad* [Master's thesis, Tehran University of Art]. [in Persian]

• Teymouri, M. (2016). *Traditional Handicrafts of Najafabad, Isfahan*. In Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Research in Science and Technology. [in Persian]

• Yazdani Najafabadi, A. (2017). *Risaleh-ye Diyariyeh-ye Khorakushk: A Geographical, Historical, Economic, and Social Study of Najafabad* (1st ed.). Mehr-e Zahra. [in Persian]

[Downloaded from jors-sj.com on 2026-11-07]

[DOI: 10.22034/4.11.121]

Table 2. List of Travelers and Historians Cited in This Article Who Described the Historical City of Najafabad and Its Characteristics.

Person	Period	Subjects Discussed
Jean Chardin	Circa 1711 CE, Safavid Period	Jean Chardin, the renowned French merchant and traveler of the seventeenth century, devoted nearly fifty years of his life to studying and writing about Safavid Iran. The outcome of these efforts was his celebrated ten-volume travel account, Travels in Persia and the East Indies. In his discussion of the fruits of Iran, Chardin identifies Najafabad as one of the regions noted for producing grapes of exceptional quality. Among the travel accounts written by European visitors, this represents the earliest known reference to Najafabad, making it a source of considerable historical significance.
Eugène Flandin	During the Qajar era in 1840	Eugène Napoléon Flandin was a French painter, architect, and traveler who visited Iran in 1840. During his two-year stay in the country, he traveled extensively through various cities. Isfahan was among the cities he visited, and on his way there, he also made a brief stop in Najafabad.
Shirvani	During the Qajar era, 1795–1831	Bustan al-Siyahah is the result of a 37-year journey (1210–1247 AH). The book contains a wealth of diverse information on geography, history, the beliefs and doctrines of various religious sects and intellectual schools, as well as a wide range of other miscellaneous subjects.
Heinrich Brugsch	During the Qajar era, 1860	Dr. Heinrich Karl Brugsch, a renowned German diplomat and Egyptologist, first traveled to Iran in 1859, during the early years of the reign of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar. During his several-year stay in Iran, he visited many cities across the country. He recorded his experiences in a book entitled Travels of the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Prussia to Persia. In Chapter Two of Volume Two, under the section describing the continuation of his journey to Isfahan, Brugsch provides an account of his visit, together with his companions, to the city of Najafabad. According to his narrative, they arrived in Najafabad on 26 September 1860, corresponding to 4 Mehr 1239 SH (26 September 1860 CE).
Holster	Qajar era	Ernst Hoeltzer (1835–1911) was one of the pioneering photographers of the second half of the nineteenth century who came to Iran during the reign of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar. He spent nearly twenty years of his life in Isfahan, where he produced an extensive photographic record of the city and its surroundings. In 1976, Hoeltzer's photographs of Isfahan, together with his notes, were first published in a book entitled Iran One Hundred and Thirteen Years Ago.
Henry René Dalmani	Qajar era 1907	Dalmani, a French collector and merchant, first traveled to Iran in 1899 and returned for a second visit in 1907, during the final years of the Qajar period. He published the observations and findings from his second journey in a book entitled From Khorasan to Bakhtiari: Three Months of Travel in Persia. In Chapter 13, titled "From Isfahan to Junqan," he provides a detailed account of his stay in Najafabad, describing the city's geographical setting and general conditions at that time. He also discusses the Bábí community in the region and recounts his encounters and observations concerning its members.
Tahvildar	Qajar era 1877	In 1294 AH (1877 CE), he compiled The Geography of Isfahan at the command of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar.
Seyyed Ali Al-e Davoud	Qajar period	Two Travelogues from Southern Iran, written by Seyyed Ali Al-Davoud, comprises two travel accounts describing the physical geography, transportation routes and distances between cities and villages, and the human and economic geography of the central and southern regions of Iran during the Qajar period.
al-Isfahani	Qajar era 1882–1891	Nisf al-Jahān fī Ta'rīf al-Iṣfahān (Half the World: A Description of Isfahan) is one of the most important historical and geographical sources on the city of Isfahan. It was compiled during the Qajar period, approximately between 1300 and 1308 AH (1882–1891 CE). The work constitutes a concise encyclopedic survey of late Qajar Isfahan, providing detailed information on the city's geography, architecture, economy, agriculture, social customs, public institutions, and surrounding settlements. Owing to the breadth of its coverage and the richness of its firsthand observations, it represents an indispensable primary source for the study of Isfahan and its dependent towns, including Najafabad, during the late nineteenth century.
Mir Seyyed Ali Jenab	1885–1886	Al-Iṣfahān was written around 1303 AH (1885–1886 CE). In this work, the author presents a comprehensive account of Isfahan, covering subjects such as the city's history, religious traditions, mosques and places of worship, public bathhouses, customs and social practices, as well as other aspects of its historical and cultural life.
Jaberi Ansari	1904–1905	History of Isfahan, Ray, and the Whole World (Tārīkh-i Iṣfahān va Ray va Hama-yi Jahān), authored by Haj Mirza Hasan Khan Ansari, was compiled in Isfahan around 1322 AH (1904–1905 CE). The opening section of the work is devoted to the historical development, architectural monuments, and geographical characteristics of Isfahan and its surrounding villages, providing valuable information on the region's historical landscape and settlement patterns.
Roger Savory	Contemporary	Roger Mervyn Savory was a distinguished British Iranologist and one of the foremost specialists on the Safavid period. He authored numerous books and scholarly articles on the history of Iran, with particular emphasis on Safavid political, administrative, and social history. In his influential work Iran under the Safavids, Savory briefly discusses the origins of the city of Najafabad, referring to its establishment within the broader context of Safavid state policies and regional development.

COPYRIGHTS
Copyright for this article is retained by the authors with publication rights granted to Revitalization School journal. This is an open access article disributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE
Hojati Najafabadi, N., Momtahen, M., & Omranipour, A. (2026). The Economic and Commercial Life of Najafabad from the Safavid to the Qajar Period. *Journal of Revitalization School, 4*(11), 52-63.

DOI: htpps://doi.org/10.22034/4.11.121
URL: https://jors-sj.com/article-1-121-en.html

[Downloaded from jors-sj.com on 2026-11-07]

[DOI: 10.22034/4.11.121]