Durand-Guédy David, Mottahedeh Roy P., Paul Jürgen (eds.)
Cities of Medieval Iran

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This special edition consists of a selection of articles presented at a conference at Harvard University in 2015 on 'Iranian Cities from the Arab Conquest to the Early Modern Period,' plus articles by scholars later invited to contribute. Included are thirteen original articles, along with an introduction to, and translation of, Jean Aubin's (1927–98) 'Éléments pour l'étude des agglomérations urbaines dans l'Iran médiéval,' which appeared in 1970 in *The Islamic City* (eds., Hourani and Stern). Aubin's essay, Jürgen Paul notes, is difficult due to his elaborate style and prose, but the essay is 'still relevant' because 'many of the questions it raises still seek full answers' (p. 21). Concerns raised by Aubin include, firstly, on the issue of 'locality': the conception of a city by its denizens, and its relationship to the hinterlands; secondly, the sub-divisions of a city, *viz*., quarters and bazaars; thirdly, the imperative to adopt local perspectives when writing urban history. Research into locality includes topics like the construction of sacred space; transitions from pre-Islamic urban spaces to Muslim urban spaces; and urban and rural inter-dependencies, such as fortifications, agriculture, hydrology, and commerce.

The special edition is a welcome addition to the literature on Iranian urban spaces. The aforementioned *Islamic City* dealt primarily with the Arab world; however this volume, by an eclectic array of scholars from fields ranging from archaeology to history, covers cities of the Iranian plateau into Khurasan. Excluded, however, are essays on cities of the Persian Gulf, Khuzistan, and the Caspian Sea littoral. A masterful review article by Jürgen Paul sets the table with a comprehensive exposition on the state of scholarship on Islamic cities. Overall, the volume offers a veritable banquet for social historians.

A topical approach to the volume is best. Firstly (and appropriately), the transition from a pre-Islamic city to a Muslim (majority) city. Etienne de la Vaissière, in 'Inherited Landscapes of Muslim Bactra,' shows that local histories (*viz*., the *Fażā'il-i Balkh* that Arezou Azad profitably mined), offer sparse information on Balkh's transition. However, he offers archaeological evidence on Buddhist monasteries, hydrological networks of the Balkh oasis, and defense system, to demonstrate how the pre-Islamic past was either forgotten or re-interpreted by Muslims in the centuries following the Arab conquest. 'Balkh and its oasis,' writes de la Vaissière, 'had to be totally reorganized due to the highly uncommon monastic system. Balkh was an Islamic city built almost from scratch, except for a few landmarks […]. [T]he Muslim period inherited a complete irrigation network, which does not seem to have been modified during the first centuries of rule' (p. 137). Donald Whitcomb, in '"From Shahristan to Medina" Revisited,' takes a 'bird's eye' view of urban patterns by examining towns and cities in Fars province, and Jundi-Shapur in Khuzistan, through archeological works and aerial photography. He challenges prevailing assumptions on the Sasanian city (chiefly, views espoused by Hugh Kennedy in 'From Polis to Medina'), but does not offer conclusions on Muslim acquisitions of Sasanian heritages. Jamsheed Choksy, in 'Yazd: a "Good and Noble City" and an "Abode of Worship",' explains how pre-Islamic heritages survived in Yazd's irrigation systems, its confessionally diverse architectural structures, and thrived also within Yazd's religious domains.

Literary approaches are taken by Sarah Bowen Savant and Majid Mahdi, in 'The History of Iranian Cities through their Books […]', and Roy P. Mottahedeh, in 'Medieval Lexicography on Arabic and Persian Terms for City and Countryside.' Savant and Mahdi examine one multi-text compilation (*majmūʿa*) produced in Injuid (8th/14th century) Shiraz (MS Köprülü 01589). A study of the production of manuscripts allowed for the extraction of social history. Mottahedeh takes a refreshing approach to the study of Iranian cities and proffers an essay that will be an invaluable reference. He analyzed dictionaries produced in the 5th/11th to 7th/13th centuries in eastern Iran. The dictionaries contain terminology for cities, towns, farmland, pasture, and desert, and elements falling within each category, for instance, terminology for architectural features. They also contain information about markets and social structures. Mottahedeh combines definitions in the dictionaries with information provided by Muslim geographers, to 'form a more perfect picture of medieval Iranian society' (p. 465). Mottahedeh analyzes lexical terms in eleven categories: 'the city,' streets, suburbs, 'fortress and palace,' mosque, market, 'within the city,' 'local hierarchy,' 'town and village,' 'urban and rural,' and lastly, irrigation.

Irrigation is an indispensable research category in the study of Iranian cities. Rocco Rante, in 'Iranian cities: Settlements and Water Management from Antiquity to the Islamic Period,' adopts a long-term perspective on how cities and hinterlands were irrigated. He takes into account features like geomorphology and topography, which he shows helped shape both the founding and the subsequent

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histories of cities. For comparative analyses, Rante proffers examples from two dissimilar environments: the arid Iranian plateau, where subterranean water-channels (*qanāt*, *kārīz*) dominate, and Persianate Transoxiana, where overground water-channels (*nahr*, *jūy*) connected to rivers transport water to farmlands and cities. The manner of irrigation, Rante demonstrates, determined how a city grew, its layout, and even its political-administrative center of gravity, which tended to be situated nearest the best water. He includes four case studies: Rayy, Nishapur, Marw, and Paykand. The development of Rayy, and possibly Nishapur, was facilitated by private investors who funded the excavation of *qanāt*s, which is capital and labour-intensive.

Nishapur stands at the northern edge of the Iranian plateau, 'in an interfluvial zone, rich in water resources' (Rante, p. 49). Richard Bulliet, in 'Why Nishapur,' proffers geographic and socio-economic answers as to why Nishapur, which was not an administrative center, an Arab military outpost, or Muslim pilgrimage site, and not serviced by water transport, thrived. Indeed, Bulliet posits that *c.* 1000 AD, Nishapur was the second largest city in the Islamic world after Baghdad (p. 101). Bulliet proffers manifold reasons, including, access by residents of town and country to *qanāt*-supplied water; herding of camels for muling; and a burgeoning cotton industry — cotton farming demands copious water supplies and summer heat — transformed Nishapur into a trading and exporting center. Apropos of commerce and geography is Roy Mottahedeh and Mehrdad Amanat, 'Medieval Kashan: Crossroads of Commerce and Culture.' Kashan, 'in some senses was a new city' (p. 423), founded by rich Arabs after the conquest of Iran. Kashan's relative remoteness allowed it to thrive as a Shiʿi center, which had Shiʿi judges and seminaries. Shiʿi families dominating Kashan improved the commonweal through extensive public projects. Although Kashan often came under the sway of the rulers of Rayy or Isfahan, its Shiʿi elites maintained cordial relations with the Sunni elites of Rayy and Isfahan. Kashan's prosperity is connected to *qanāt*-dependent agriculture, the city's location on trade routes, the nurturing of pedagogical and artisanal traditions, and investments in charities and schools.

The importance of elites in the betterment or degeneration of their city is evident from the sketch of Kashan. David Durand-Guédy, 'Isfahan during the Turko-Mongol Period (11th–15th centuries)', Daniel Zakrewski, 'Local elites and dynastic succession: Tabriz prior to, under and following Mongol Rule […]', and Jürgen Paul, 'Balkh, from the Seljuqs to the Mongol Invasion,' examine (*inter alia*) the roles of elites. Durand-Guédy reflects on Isfahan's political culture and its reputation for political insolence. He suggests that three modes were employed by notables in times of crisis: submission (when the opposing force was too powerful to resist), forced collaboration with a dominant force; and where elites sought a new ruler to fill a political vacuum, or tried to remain independent — although self-rule was not an aspiration. His analyses have broader implications for the study of Iranian cities and the upper-echelon notables that frequently make decisions for the lower socio-economic strata of a city. Zakrewski, writing of Tabriz from the Mongols to the Safavids, shows that local elites actively participated in dynastic successions. Claimants to the throne secured the support of elites by offering political stability. Urban notables (*aʿyān*) retained statuses despite changes of dynasts, while rural elites acquired influence newly. Jürgen Paul shows that Seljuq Balkh's *aʿyān* played decisive roles in administration, and in the application of Shariʿa in a *qāḍī*'s court. Balkh was an example of the Seljuq-era *amīr-aʿyān* system, which continued into the post-Seljuq period, but now reflected political instabilities.

A city's defenses were critical to its survival in the medieval past when invasions or raids by nomads were unfortunate but common episodes. Ali S. Esfahani, in 'The Fortified Landscape of Isfahan,' provides an exposition on the fortifications around Isfahan through recourse to satellite imagery, field work, and literary sources. His conclusion, and hence the importance of his article, is that a network of fortifications was strategically developed and emplaced to permit observation, communication, and defense. The network protected, and thereby fostered, settlement and urban growth.

Lastly, we have Denise Aigle's contribution, 'Among Saints and Poets: The Spiritual Topography of Shiraz.' Sacred space (*ḥaram*, *ḥīma*) is found in virtually every Iranian city, but Shiraz is a special case where the whole city is deemed sanctified, a 'fortress of saints' (*burj al-awliyā'*). Shiraz is home to many sanctified sites, which are the tombs of exemplary people, chief among them are the descendants of Imam ʿAli, prominent Sufis, and poets laureate. Aigle traces Shiraz's sacred spaces, then articulates how its sanctity is expressed in textual sources (*viz.*, the 8th/14th century *Shīrāz-nāma* and *Shadd al-īzār*; the latter text is a pilgrimage guide to sanctified sites in Shiraz's cemeteries). Aigle's greatest contribution is identifying processes of sanctification, i.e., how tombs acquire sanctity due to supernatural phenomena, for example, effusion of light (e.g., the *Shāh-i chirāgh* ʿAlid shrine), apparitions, miracles, and wonders. The 'shrine,' Aigle notes, 'is first and foremost a place of

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mediation between profane and sacred' (p. 169). It is a locus, the source of blessings (*baraka*), which suffuse the vicinity, it is the locus of contact between supplicant and saint. Aigle brings the personal nature of devotional practices and shrine visitations to life.

The edition is an invaluable addition to the literature on medieval Iranian cities. The review by Jürgen Paul alone makes the volume an invaluable resource. Jean Aubin's article, translated here by Paul, makes Aubin's probing inquiries and thoughts accessible to a new generation of scholars. It is difficult, however, to commend or critique a composition that has many distinct components brought together from different academic perspectives, and in diverse academic styles. It is up to the reader to determine which of these articles suits their particular interests, hence the summaries. Articles by Mottahedeh (Arabic and Persian terms) and Aigle (sacred topography) are especially commended for the innovative approaches of their authors, but this should not detract from the importance of the other contributions.

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