
This short but informative book is a morphological study of the traditional Iranian cities which have a long history and have been inhabited from the pre-Islamic times to today. The author attempts to explain the development of cities in Iran not only in terms of the discussions of the “Islamic city”, but also takes into consideration the geographical and climatic manifestations of the Iranian plateau and their effect on the development of their spatial features. This book, however, does not dissuade us that Iranian cities are very different from the “Islamic” prototype. This means that the traditional Iranian cities, like other “Islamic cities” have the Friday mosque at the center of the city, surrounded by the bazar, and the quartering off of the neighbourhoods based on religious, ethnic, or occupational divisions. But what is important is that some of the cities discussed have a longer history than the seventh century CE, hence it is interesting to see how these pre-Islamic cities have developed spatially in the face of Islamization of the city.

Three factors are enumerated for the way in which Iranian cities have developed: one, the physical environment of the Iranian Plateau; two, trade and historical events; and three, the religious and socio-political structure of the country. These three criteria serve as the three chapters of the book, followed by three appendices. In chapter one several questions are dealt with, but what the author emphasizes as the most important aspect of the physical environment of the city is that they were planned in a specific location because of the water resources. Kheirabadi sees the Iranian Plateau like a bowl-shape, with a high outer rim versus a lower interior. It is only in the northern and western rim that substantial rainfall is available, hence the population density also reflects the same pattern. For other regions, it has been the subsurface water system that has kept the population of the other areas, as well as the interior, functioning, i.e., through the qanat system. Similarly it is with the distribution of the qanats that we find settlement patterns in the arid areas. Of course the inner rim is almost uninhabited because of the lack of water and long enduring winds. It is these natural occurrences that the author believes have made the most impact on the location and the morphology of the traditional Iranian cities.

The consequence of such natural manifestations on the morphology of the cities has been that the traditional cities have been compact and concentrated which is a basic feature for the cities in the arid regions. By
having a compact city, where everyone is huddled closely to each other, people can better function and endure the heat of the arid region, and save on the infrastructure as well as defend themselves from outsiders. Within these cities, the narrow streets not only bring the sense of privacy, but also function as air channels, while large open spaces are rare because of the heat. Even here, water appears to be a main factor in the way that the streets were designed. The chapter is concluded by the study of the tradition houses, their structure and function.

Chapter two discusses the second factor for which Kheirabadi believes the traditional Iranian cities have developed. The chapter concentrates on the economical and historical aspects of the “city”. Here, the author focuses on the trade routes, the role of the Iranian leadership on the development of the cities, and bazar's importance and its centrality. The Silk road is certainly a major factor as the author mentions which made the cities on the east-west route very important and thriving in Iran in the pre-modern period. Directly related to trade is the development of caravansaras along the major east-west trade routes. Some of these caravansaras were able to grow and become major settlements themselves because in time shops and then bazars, followed by residential and public building were developed around them. The caravansara near Tehran is a good example of this development. In terms of the effect of the Iranian leadership (kings) on the development of the Iranian cities, Iṣfahān is given as an example, where the Safavids had an important role in its formation and development. What Kheirabadi does not discuss is that Shah ‘Abbās and the Safavids resettled the Armenian artisans from the northern Iranian Plateau to Iṣfahān to create a viable economic center in Isfahan as well, attempting to bring the east-west trade through the heartland of Iran. The chapter is concluded with a long discussion of the role and function of the bazar.

The last chapter deals with the role of religion, specifically Islam, the role of the government, and the segregation of the neighbourhoods of the cities. The author contends that in the pre-Islamic period the fire-temple was the centre of the city, and when the Arab Muslims conquered the Iranian Plateau, the mosque replaced the fire-temple. This is not exactly what happened because, based on Donald Withcomb's study of several Iranian cities, it appears that the Arab Muslims first established their mosques outside of the city and the movement into the city was only a gradual process. It should also be mention that a Zoroastrian source of the ninth century CE discusses the location of the fire-temple next to the bath and the bazzar which was still the centre of many cities in the province of Fars and perhaps also other places where Zoroastrians were the majority until the tenth century CE.
The mosque has had a multifunctional quality as the author mentions, and so as the centre of the town, it became the main public centre of the city (main square). In this study the Shiʿite city such as Masha [Mashhad] is the focus, where Imām Rida’s tomb is located which became the centre of the city. This is followed by a discussion of the residential system in the Iranian cities that are divided according religion, origin and profession. One observation of Kheirabadi is that in the traditional cities the rich lived along with the poor in their residential quarter, rather than having the quarter divided by the rich and poor sections. If we take Tehran as a non-traditional city, we see that indeed the northern part of the city has become the “uptown”, and the south has become the residence of the poor. The question is that, what has happened to the traditional Iranian cities, such as Shīrāz, Isfahān, and Mashhad. As for Isfahān, the layout of the city today resembles the same pattern as Tehran.

The book concludes with three short appendices discussing the qanats, the structure of the bazar, and that of the mosque. This is followed by a glossary of Persian terms, a bibliography and an index. Overall, Kheirabadi’s work is quit important and refreshing in the face of a barrage of books and articles on such mishandled mundane subjects as “fundamentalism” and a host of books which are only a degree more serious than journalism. While the book attempts to discuss the Iranian cities, we must remember that there is evidence of pre-Islamic cities which fell into disuse in the early Islamic period; those that were developed from the early Islamic period, and those of the latter Islamic period which may be called Shiʿite. There should be a distinction between these historical periods and their development. When Kheirabadi discusses a Shiʿite city such as Isfahān, it is important to note that it is only with the Safavids in the sixteenth century that this city developed and would have influenced the morphology of Iranian cities from that period. Some pre-Islamic Iranian cities were influenced by the Roman and other forms which are not discussed, nor does the author cites Donald Whitcomb’s important studies on Iranian and early Islamic cities such as Iṣṭakhr or Piacentini’s study of the port city of Siraf. Briefly, the book is too short and tries to include too much in too little space, often missing important works on the subject it attempts to study, at least for the pre-modern period.

To conclude, it must be mentioned that when studying the history of the medieval period, land settlement and its distribution has been the focus of discussion, but as Kheirabadi has shown water is very important for the way in which the traditional cities developed. I would venture to say that water is the single most important reason for the development of not only the city, but also land distribution. For this Kheirabadi should have looked at Richard N. Frye and Michael Morony’s informative articles on land use and settlement.
patterns in the medieval period, followed by J. de Menasce's important article on the importance and antiquity of *qanats* in Iran and the different ways in which land distribution came about as a result of the use of *qanat*.

Touraj Daryaei

---


This monograph by Alice Hunsberger on the life and thought of Nasir [Nāṣir] Khusraw (d. 463/1077) is a long overdue study that fills a gap in the secondary literature. The status of Nasir Khusraw as a leading intellectual and literary figure of medieval Islam was never disputed, yet, as the author explains, his Ismaili [Ismāʿīlī] affiliation left him with few champions. Scholars who are interested in the thought and life of Nasir Khusraw can now use this work; more importantly, teachers in colleges and universities can assign the work or parts of it for their students. One hopes that a paperback edition will soon appear.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this monograph is that it synthesizes all the available works of Nasir and presents us with a comprehensive study and analysis of his thought and life. Moreover, the author engages all the secondary studies available on Nasir, both in European and Persian languages. Hunsberger is aware of the major debates surrounding the author and brings the reader up to speed on these debates. The book is also supplied with a clear map that charts the stages of Nasir’s travels in the Islamic world of the eleventh century.

Hunsberger informs the reader that she decided to use the journey of Nasir in the different parts of the Muslim world as the structural grid on which she will elucidate his philosophy and outlook. The idea is in many ways attractive, yet I myself would have wished that she had stuck to the original plan she had in mind, the thematic approach. Such an approach would have been easier to read and much more pragmatic when it comes to assigning sections to students.