



NISHAPUR VI. ARCHAEOLOGY

The area of the archeological site in Nishapur is situated in a fertile plain belonging to the northern boundary of the Iranian Plateau. The plain is divided into two parts separated by Šurarud (also Šurirud), which, endorheic, ends in the large desert of Dašt-e Kavir. It is bounded on the northeast by the foothills of the Binālud range, which peaks at 2,000 m above the plain, separating the plain of Nishapur from that of Mashhad, and on the southwest by the brackish and marshy course of the Šurarud. These southern areas of the plain of Nishapur are unsuitable for agricultural exploitation. The agriculture is therefore organized on the spreading glacis of the foothills, which are irrigated upstream by surface water and downstream by the *qanāt* (underground cannel) system (Fouache, et al.). Only two mountain streams, namely the Mirābād and Bužān, have sufficient water capacity to reach the plain of Nishapur. Both frame the archeological area of Nishapur. The piedmont was traditionally used for pasturage and the spreading glacis were reserved for agricultural fields. The Bužān stream seems to correspond to the Wādi Saḡāvar, mentioned by *Eṣṭakri* (p. 255; Saḡāraḡ in Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 433), which traversed the city at its eastern part and, along its path, activated seventy water-mills (Le Strange, pp. 384-85).

Water was brought into the city through underground canals, which provided most of its supply, as well as through surface canals, as mentioned by Moqaddasi (p. 329) and confirmed by the recent geomorphological investigations (Fouache, et al.). Henry René d'Allemagne (III, pp. 115-30), who visited Iran in 1911, alludes to a historical tradition of “12,000 canals from



12,000 springs” (pp. 115-16). The *qanat* ended their path uphill of the ancient city and traversed it on the surface, or underground, which would have been much more common. Water was consequently drawn up through wells.

The archeological area is today located about 2 km southeast of the modern city, in which stands the Mausoleum of ‘Omar Kayyām inside a magnificent and well-maintained garden. Fortunately, the archeological zone has been more or less spared by modern urbanization projects, except for the railway line to the east, principally toward Mashhad; constructed in the middle of the last century, the line crosses the site from northwest to southeast.

Nishapur was an important crossroads linked to [Central Asia](#) and China by way of Marv, [Bukhara](#), and [Samarkand](#); to [Afghanistan](#) and [India](#) by way of [Herat](#); to the [Persian Gulf](#) through Yazd and [Isfahan](#); and to the west through [Damghan](#), [Ray](#), and [Hamadan](#). It was one of the main cities on the Silk Road (Rtveladze, p. 226). The last excavation has shown that, during late antiquity and the medieval period, the city had the dual characteristic of a residential site as well as a place of economic production. Nishapur, like other cities on the Silk Road, was strongly protected by ramparts, at least in its older sections. Its position between the plain and the mountain, situated in a natural corridor on the main route of the caravan, easily exposed it to strong attacks and invasions.

The first archeological expedition interested in Nishapur was directed by Walter Hauser, Joseph M. Upton, and Charles K. Wilkinson, and was carried out for six years (1935-40) under the aegis of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (for details, see [NISHAPUR vii](#)). Halted by World War II, the work ended with a final mission in 1947. The leading aim of the excavations was to discover and procure objects and architectural decorations for the Museum (Hauser; Wilkinson, 1937) and to delineate their chronology (see also Hauser, Upton, and Wilkinson; Hauser and Wilkinson; Wilkinson, 1937, 1943, 1950, 1959, 1961, 1973, 1986). The architectural ornaments and the artifacts discovered were divided (under the authority of the Iranian Ministry of Education and Fine Arts and following the Iranian antiquities law of 1930) between the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Tehran Museum (Hauser, p. 27; Wilkinson, 1961, p. 103).

Later, a few Iranian investigations of the area brought to light interesting production zones (Kambakhsh Fard and Mahani, 1965, pp. 17-21). It was only in the 1990s that an important Iranian expedition worked continuously at



Nishapur, concentrating its effort on Šādyāk, at some 2 km distance west of the ancient vestiges. This expedition was directed by the Iranian archeologist Rajab-‘Ali Labbāf Kānīki (1995-2002); as of 2015, it was directed by Abu’l-Faḏl Mokarramifar, another Iranian archeologist; both expeditions were conducted under the aegis of the Cultural Heritage (*Mirāt-e faranghi*) office of Mashhad and the Iranian Center of Archeological Research. In 2005 a joint Irano-French expedition began a three-year excavation on the oldest part of the site, the Qohandez.

The Persian toponym Nishapur comes from the Middle Persian *Nēw-Šāhpuhr* (Brave Shahpuhr; Marquart, p. 74; Le Strange, p. 383; Honigmann and Bosworth, p. 63). Its province, *Abaršahr* (Marquart, pp. 74-75), is attested in the Sasanian sigillography (Gyselen, 1989, p. 42; idem, 2002, pp. 126, 190). The name of the city is mentioned as the location of a Nestorian diocese in 430 CE (Marquart, p. 75; Vine, 1937, p. 57). Arab historiography perpetuated the names of both Nishapur and Abaršahr; the latter was used in the minting of Umayyad and early ‘Abbasid dirhams (Le Strange, p. 383). The survival of the name *Nēw-Šāhpuhr*/Nishapur until the present day is a sign of the long-term life of the site before and after the Arab conquest in 651. Sources are not in total agreement concerning the founder of the city; some credit Šāpur I (r. 241-72 CE) as its founder, while others mention Šāpur II (r. 309-79) as such. The former is mentioned by many of them, as shown by J. Marquart (p. 75). Ḥamza Eṣfahāni (p. 48) attributes the foundation of Nishapur to Šāpur I, while Ṭabari (i, II, p. 840; tr., V, p. 58 and n. 163) and the local chronicler Ḥākem Nišāburi (pp. 197-98), among others, attribute it to Šāpur II.

Recent archeological missions focused, *inter alia*, on the question of the origins of the city, views of which, according to Wilkinson’s archeological and R. Bulliet’s historical works, remain divergent. The results of a recent study (Rante and Collinet) were realized through analyses of ceramic samples brought to light during excavation, using thermoluminescence and archaeomagnetism, as well as by cross-referencing with the stratigraphical sequence. These have shown that the first architectural activity on the Qohandez of Nishapur belongs to the period corresponding with Šāpur II’s reign and later (4th-5th centuries), without excluding previous occupations of the area. At that epoch, Nishapur should have been more a fortified eastern outpost on the Silk Road than a purely residential place. The Sasanian empire had its northeastern limes at the Oxus River, although one century earlier the Sasanian territory probably extended over Sogdian lands (cf. Honigmann and



Maricq, 1953). The recent archeological researches in Paykend, in the Bukhara oasis, brought to light the foundation of the city in the 4th century, when the Iranian nomadic populations (probably [Chionites](#)) came from the northeast (Rante and Raimkulov, 2013, p. 237). In this period, according to the account of [Ammianus Marcellinus](#) (17.5.1), the Chionite rulers reached an agreement with the Sasanian king (Šāpur II) to support the Persians in the Roman wars. Both frontiers, Sasanian and Chionite, were bordered by city fortresses, and other city-fortresses were constructed farther along the Silk Road. The 4th century therefore represents a period in which the Transoxiana frontier was better defended with the construction of stronger cities, of which Paykend is a clear example, and in Khorasan a dynamic of construction of new well-fortified cities is observable.

The Irano-French excavation concentrated only on the Qohandez, but several studies and surveys have been realized to advance the historical, urban, and cultural Sasanian context. An accurate analysis of the ramparts of the sub-province (*šahrestān*) in 2009 and its comparison with that of the Qohandez belonging to the foundation lead one to suggest that they also belong to the foundation of the city. External comparisons with other cities of the same region corroborate this analysis. At that epoch, the city covered an area of 17.6 ha. No other Sasanian urban organizations have been observed around the ancient nucleus. Nevertheless, it is much probable that several small villages existed around this last one, and they kept growing during the centuries and new villages were also established (Bulliet, 1972, pp. 8 [and note 5], 9; idem, 1976, pp. 67-89).

Thanks to the study of the pottery, it has been observed that the Qohandez was more or less homogeneously occupied in its entire area. The northeastern part is characterized by quite utilitarian coarse wares showing, as does its architecture, a military use of the space. The northeastern open space of the mound leads to the doorway of a quadrangular defensive monument, situated at the northern/northeastern part of the Qohandez. This monument seems to lean on a large rampart (Rante and Collinet, fig. 12) pierced of slits. The rest of the Qohandez seems to have been occupied by administrative buildings and traditional houses. The ceramic material (Rante and Collinet, pp. 141-45) belonging to this period is characterized by the preponderance of closed shapes, corresponding to utilitarian objects, mainly used for storage and cooking, presenting coarse fabrics. The fine material, less common, is characterized by small jars and jugs. The comparisons with Marv, the closest



city (Puschnigg, pp. 105-7), where at the same epoch fine material has been found in very significant quantity, seem to reflect the difference of socio-economical status. This period is also characterized by the appearance of glazed calco-alkaline green/turquoise wares (Rante and Collinet, pp. 144-45). The walls, all made of mud bricks, presented the same types of bricks in terms of their dimensions and method of manufacture. The main module of mud brick employed is $40/42 \times 40/42 \times 10/12$ cm, sometimes accompanied by modules of $45 \times 45 \times 15$ cm, and more rarely of $48/50 \times 48/50 \times 15$ or $38 \times 38 \times 9/10$ cm. The composition of the mud bricks is always quite pure and fine.

It was in the Islamic period, under the **Taherid** dynasty (205-59/821-73), that Nishapur became the capital city of Khorasan (Eṣṭakri, p. 258; Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 434; Barthold, p. 96), as well as an important place of manufacture. **ʿAbd-Allāh b. Tāher**, who ruled as the governor of Khorasan (r. 213-30/828-45), established his headquarters in Šādyāk, located slightly more than 2 km west of the ancient city. The new urban center, firstly used as a military structure, rapidly assumed the features of an urban political center, also enclosed by a strong rampart, as the last Iranian excavations have shown (Labbāf Kāniki). The area between these two urban foundations, the Sasanian and the Taherid ones, was rapidly urbanized from the 8th century, a process that developed considerably during the 9th-10th centuries and continued until the early 13th century (for the hypothetical archeological area of Nishapur in the Islamic period, see Bulliet, 1976, fig. 1). The American excavations revealed structures and objects dated by the excavators from about the late 8th to the 12th centuries, but they did not provide any stratigraphy. A refined chronological sequence of the finds thus cannot be established. In addition, the objects discovered were not considered as stratigraphical assemblages. It is not known which types of **ceramics**, **glasswares**, **metals**, and so on were contemporary with one another (Allan, p. 13; Kröger, p. 23). Thanks to the patient study of the glasswares and of their respective find-spots, when known, Wilkinson's opinion of the contemporary occupation of Tepe Madrasa, Sabz Pušān, Qanāt Tepe, and Village Tepe (Kröger, p. 30), mostly around the 10th century, was confirmed.

The recent archeological works have shown that the urban and cultural changes undoubtedly occurred in this epoch (middle 8th-early 11th centuries; see Rante and Collinet, fig. 40). The urban changes are traceable above all in the northern part of the Qohandez. The fortress seems to have lost its military function and the area restructured as an urban space. Moreover, the



excavation of the rampart side effectively showed the abandoning of its military role, since the rooms and the passages for the archers were filled with layers presenting late material, probably belonging to the previous period. Based on the pottery analyses and study of the assemblages, a cultural change seems to have appeared from the late 10th century. The central part of the Qohandez shows the formation of a large depression. Here, the study of the pottery material pertaining to this period seems to show a lesser proportion of fragments, due perhaps to a decline in the use of this specific area. The southern part of the Qohandez, the largest one, in contrast shows a proportionally much more significant presence of pottery fragments. The defensive function of the Qohandez seems to have continued, as excavations have brought to light the abandonment of the original rampart and the construction of a second rampart during 8th-9th centuries (Rante and Collinet, fig. 12). The 8th-9th centuries are still characterized by the use of square mud bricks of 38/40 cm per side. The 10th century is characterized by the use of smaller mud bricks, 27/29 cm per side and 9 cm thick.

Concerning ceramics coming from the recent archeological works, also compared with Wilkinson's finds, the main characteristic of this period in the whole area of Nishapur is the variety of shapes; the most represented types are storage jars and basins for the coarse wares, and jugs and glazed bowls for the fine ones. In contrast to the previous epoch storage material seems to be less represented, whereas the finer material, used for consumption, has increased. Another main characteristic is the considerable increase of glazed material, most of which is monochrome, even if a large part is also polychrome. All of the potteries analyzed and studied confirm that they were produced in Nishapur. The glazed monochrome wares are of two types, green or turquoise. The appearance of splash, sgraffiato, painted sgraffiato, slip painted, and buff clayey wares at this period has been observed, stressing the appearance of cultural handicraft innovations. It is probable that the appearance of fritware was already observable in the late 10th and early 11th centuries. The growth of fine and medium-fine vessels shows a development of the serving and consumption of food and drink production.

In this early Islamic epoch, the urban fabric of Nishapur noticeably increased. The new Islamic city, *Šādyāk*, built by the Taherids had a quadrangular form and was encircled by a strong rampart, today excavated by the Iranian expedition. Several archeological mounds excavated by Wilkinson's expedition, which today have disappeared, are situated between the old city



and Šādyāk, namely Tepe Madrasa, Sabz Pušān, Vineyard Tepe, and Qanāt Tepe. The first three were situated very close to the Taherid city, while Qanāt Tepe was situated to the west of the Qohandez and the city. This urban evolution shows that, from the 9th century, the city settled around Šādyāk and extended eastward. Numismatic finds also demonstrate this tendency (see Wilkinson, 1986, pp. 54, 189, 221, 261). Qanāt Tepe, in fact, would show a good level of occupation especially between the 8th and early 9th centuries, then, unlike others, it seems to have decreased. In any case, between the 9th and 12th centuries the whole area of Nishapur held an important population, which Richard Bulliet (1972, pp. 9-10; idem, 2009, pp. 8-9) estimated at about 100,000 souls, but if one considers a unique occupation layer corresponding to the 10th century it could be estimated at approximately 50,000 to 70,000, because of several unpopulated zones as well as several zones which were not constantly inhabited, such as workshops (see Bosworth, p. 162). Moreover, even if reference is made only to the Qohandez, which was quite inhabited during this period and was possibly taken as comparison data, consumption material still seems to support this last figure.

At the time of Islamic conquest, the people of Nishapur were primarily Zoroastrian, although Christian and Jewish communities were present as well. Soon, a significant wave of conversion to Islam took place, especially due to economic and social, rather than religious, necessity. However, the peak of the conversion to Islam took place between the 9th and 11th centuries, when the majority of the people of Nishapur were Muslims, even if Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian communities continued to exist (Bulliet, 1972, p. 15).

It is difficult, if not impossible, to estimate the different social classes of the entire population of Nishapur in the 10th-12th centuries. However, it is possible to define a very large part constituting the middle and lower levels of the society and a very exiguous part corresponding to its upper levels, a sort of “patriciate.” It is certain that lower classes supplied work and service for the patricians. The respect and stature of these families derived from landholding, trade, and religion. In fact, for at least one and half centuries, until the Mongol invasion, these families, which also had control over the choice of the judges (*qāzi*), monopolized the political, religious, and economic power of Nishapur, (Bulliet, 1972, pp. 20, 62).

In the 11th and 12th centuries the city increased its wealth, but not its urban expansion. The areas previously occupied seemed to retain their position and their extension. The few plans published by Wilkinson (1986, pp. 48-53, 186,



220, 260), especially that of Tepe Madrasa constituting a sequence of three levels, seem to show the reemployment of space rather than its extension. This choice was also certainly influenced by water sources. On the Qohandez, this period is characterized by the large-scale levelling of the mound. This remains visible, although a deep layer is overhung by a large layer of rocks constituting the street. The Qohandez comprised a central eastern depression, probably characterized by the presence of storage buildings and dumpsites. The remaining part contained houses of the affluent, once again showing continuity from the late 9th-10th centuries. The first appearance of baked brick corresponds to this period, and it was identified in the upper parts of the archeological remains still visible today. The size of the baked bricks, $23 \times 23 \times 7/9$ cm, is a well-known module attested mainly during to the Saljuqid period in Iran (Rante and Collinet, 2013, p. 47).

From the origin of the city, pottery continued to be produced here and the raw materials employed (clay and inclusion materials) came from the same regional sources. In this period, the finest tablewares are much better represented than the storage ones. Moreover, the general typology is also very similar to the previous period. The most common types of coarse wares are storage vessels and basins, while the fine ceramic is characterized by jugs and glazed bowls. This period is also characterized by the appearance of pot shapes and an additional increase and development of bowl typologies. On the contrary, cooking pots are not so well represented, testifying to a probable change in occupation. Concerning the glazed pottery, a preponderance of the monochrome category has been observed in both fabric types, clayey, and fritwares. The polychrome glazed ceramic, painted sgraffiato, slip-painted undercolored glaze wares, nevertheless continued to be produced, even if in much lesser quantity. Fritwares, quite numerous, are mostly turquoise monochrome. The early fritware type identified in stratigraphy is the turquoise monochrome. The other monochrome glazed later types (cobalt blue and opaque white, but also molded and engraved monochrome wares), such as the underglaze and overglaze painted ones, have been identified in the upper layers and on the surface of the Qohandez. The analyzed shards belonging to this polychrome group of fritwares present a very siliceous glaze, different from the previous one, thus corroborating the hypothesis of an enrichment in technology during the 12th century (Rante and Collinet, pp. 155-71).

This is also the period in which Nishapur, and Khorasan as a whole, were



affected by severe earthquakes. The city required a permanent reconstruction, probably also visible in stratigraphy. In 1221 the **Mongols** penetrated the city and sacked and destroyed it. However, archeological traces in Šādyāk, as well as on the Qohandez and the city, show that life continued, even if to a different degree and probably not in the whole Nishapur area. It seems that Šādyāk continued to occupy previous habitations; the Qohandez presents a high degree of abandonment and the city area seems to have been furnished with several workshops.

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