



NISHAPUR VII. EXCAVATIONS BY THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

At the time that the Metropolitan Museum of Art started its work at Nishapur in 1935, it was active in excavations at several sites across the Middle East, motivated by a desire to enhance its collections and to provide a context for the archeological materials already in its possession. In Iran, the museum commenced work soon after the passage of the 1930 antiquities law ended the French monopoly on excavation in the country (see [DÉLÉGATIONS ARCHÉOLOGIQUES FRANÇAISES](#) i). Its first excavation was at Qaşr-e Abu Naşr, conducted between 1932 and 1935 by Joseph Upton, Walter Hauser, and Charles Wilkinson. Once finished there, Upton, leader of the expedition, was instructed by the museum administration to find another site at which to work. The Iranian government offered a choice between [Ĥasanlu](#) and Nishapur; Wilkinson made a survey trip to the latter and deemed it promising, and the team obtained a concession to excavate within a ten mile radius of the governor's office. The Metropolitan's team worked for six seasons: Fall 1935; Spring-Winter 1936; Summer 1937; July to December 1938; July 1939 to August 1940; and July 1947 to January 1948.

THE EXCAVATION RESULTS

Nishapur's urban layout. When the Museum's excavators started their work at



Nishapur, little was known about the layout of the medieval city or where its major monuments might be located. The urban center was presumed to be in the field of mounds southeast of the modern city, and within this area, the excavators chose the sites for their trenches based on where significant finds had already been made by locals (thus they opened their excavations with a trench at “Sabz Pushan,” where a farmer had uncovered fragments of carved plaster panels), where they could obtain permission to dig (as much of the site was under cultivation), or where they were specifically asked to dig by a landowner (Vineyard Tepe) or the governor (Falaki). (The excavators’ names for each excavation site were based on its local nickname or a distinguishing topographical feature.) Certain seemingly important areas, such as the citadel (known locally as Tepe [Alp Arslān](#)), and what appears to be a large mosque to its south, were bypassed or little explored, although such decisions may be explained by the difficulty of negotiating permissions with local landowners or of disposing of the earth that they removed from a site (issues to which Charles Wilkinson alluded in a 1950 report to the Metropolitan Museum’s Board of Trustees).

Because of these factors, and the escalation of World War II that caused an unexpected end to their work, the team never gained a clear understanding of the city’s urban development and how the different areas which they excavated might relate to each other. However, subsequent studies have allowed us to better understand the findings of the Metropolitan’s archeologists. These include work on Nishapur’s urban development by Richard Bulliet (especially Bulliet, 1976), and a plotting of the sites of the museum’s trenches against a map of the site by the joint French-Iranian team which excavated at Nishapur during 2004-07. Based on this work, a new map of the site has been created, showing the approximate locations of these trenches within the context of the medieval city ([Figure 1](#)).

The site the excavators called Tepe Alp Arslan can be identified as the citadel of ancient Nishapur. The Metropolitan’s archeologists sunk four test trenches here, which to them revealed little aside from the fact that this this area had been built up artificially (Wilkinson, 1973, p. xxxvii). Recent excavations have shown, however, that this construction took place in the Sasanian period and therefore dates to the foundation of the city, although the Museum’s team believed that they had never found evidence of the city’s early history.

The area referred to as Tepe Madrasa represents the area of initial expansion of the settlement outside the citadel, which took place in the eighth and ninth



centuries when the city was a provincial capital under the Omayyads and the [Abbasids](#). This complicated area was excavated between 1937 and 1940, and then again in 1947-48. The excavators were not allowed to dig within a large square at the center of this site, but around this square they found several monuments, including a mosque that was in use from the second half of the eighth century until the twelfth century, an octagonal water reservoir, and large halls that were richly adorned in carved and painted plaster. This area remained the heart of the city through the tenth century, but by the twelfth century was partially covered by a graveyard (Hauser, Upton, and Wilkinson, 1938, p. 22-23; Hauser and Wilkinson, 1942, pp. 90-116; Wilkinson, 1973, pp. xxx-ii; Wilkinson, 1986, pp. 47-185).

The Qanat Tepe and Bazaar Tepe sites, west of the citadel, also represent the earliest phases of expansion to the ancient city, and both remained occupied from the early ninth century until the late eleventh or early twelfth century. Qanat Tepe was named for its proximity to an underground water channel, or [qanāt](#). Many types of buildings were found here during the 1938 excavations: small residences, a kiln for making ceramic storage bottles, a bathhouse with wall paintings, a small mosque, and a watchtower (Hauser and Wilkinson, 1942, pp. 83-90; Wilkinson, 1973, p. xxxii-iii; Wilkinson, 1986, pp. 259-314). A series of mounds forming a cross at Bazaar Tepe led excavators to believe this was the site of a marketplace (Wilkinson, 1986, p. xxxvi). They found no definitive evidence of this, although later aerial photos do show a major crossroads near where they excavated.

The sites Sabz Pushan, Village Tepe, Vineyard Tepe, Falaki and the North and South Horns all represent the further western expansion of the city. Sabz Pushan, excavated between 1935 and 1937, was a residential neighborhood with houses built of sun-dried brick covered with white plaster, consisting of three to four rooms usually arranged around a central courtyard. This area was occupied between the ninth and twelfth centuries (Hauser and Wilkinson, 1936, pp. 178-180; Wilkinson, 1937, pp. 8-17; Hauser, 1937, pp. 23-36; Hauser, Upton, and Wilkinson, 1938, pp. 3-22; Wilkinson, 1973, p. xxx; Wilkinson, 1986, pp. 219-58). In 1936 and 1937, the excavators uncovered two phases of small residences at the Village Tepe, spanning the ninth to thirteenth centuries. The residences were similar in form to those found at Sabz Pushan and Qanat Tepe, with underground storage chambers supplied with water from a canal (Wilkinson, 1937, pp. 20-21; Hauser, Upton and Wilkinson, 1938, pp. 14, 18, 20, 21; Wilkinson, 1973, pp. xxxiii-iv).



At the Vineyard Tepe, excavations in 1936 and 1937 revealed a row of buildings fronting an alley. Some of the buildings were decorated with elaborately carved plaster, others with stone dadoes, and one had an outstanding mural of a mounted huntsman accompanied by a standing figure. It appears that this area was abandoned after an earthquake, perhaps that of 1145 (Wilkinson, 1937, pp. 17-19; Hauser and Wilkinson, 1942, pp. 116-119; Wilkinson, 1973, pp. xxxv-vi; Wilkinson, 1986, pp. 186-218). Before improvements were made to the nearby tomb of Omar Khayyam, the team excavated at site they called Falaki in 1936 at the behest of local officials. Little of import was reported (Wilkinson, 1937, pp. 21-22; Wilkinson, 1973, p. xxxiv). The North and South Horns were excavated in 1935 and 1936. After a test dig, the excavators decided not to continue at the North Horn, but they returned to the South Horn, finding the remains of a pottery workshop specializing in molded ware, as well as evidence of an extensive residential area (Wilkinson, 1937, pp. 19-20; Wilkinson, 1973, p. xxxv).

The excavators also uncovered three kiln sites, although the locations of only two were recorded (Hauser, Upton and Wilkinson, 1938, p. 22; Wilkinson, 1986, pp. xxxv-xl). The fact that these two kilns were constructed in formerly residential areas (near Sabz Pushan and Falaki) suggests that the city's occupation had contracted and shifted away from these areas by the time the kilns were active in the twelfth or thirteenth century.

Finds. The concession for the Metropolitan's excavations stipulated that the finds were to be divided evenly between it and Irān-e Bāstān Museum, Tehran, with the Metropolitan's share totaling approximately 2,100 objects. (The Metropolitan also received finds from other sites, including Tepe [Sialk](#), [Susa](#), and Persepolis, in exchange for surveying equipment that was donated to the Iranian government, and for particularly fine objects from Nishapur which were not permitted to leave the country.) The three main categories of finds were [ceramics](#) (Wilkinson, 1973), [metalwork](#) (Allan, 1982), [glass](#) (Kröger, 1995), and architectural [decoration](#) (Wilkinson, 1986). [Coins](#) were also found in abundance and were used by the excavators and later cataloguers to tentatively date the different areas of excavation. However, they have yet to be published, aside from a preliminary study (Upton, 1937, pp. 37-39).

In terms of ceramics, the Metropolitan's excavations brought to light several types whose decoration was unique to this part of Iran, typically decorated with brightly colored slips in bold patterns. The group of ceramic known as buff ware, which seems to have been unique to the city, is perhaps the most



significant of the excavators' discoveries. These wares are characterized by graphic imagery outlined in a purplish black and highlighted with yellow and green glazes, painted either on a buff colored slip or directly onto the surface of the vessel. The finds from the kilns provided proof that certain types of vessels, including these slip wares, as well as later alkaline-glazed pieces and molded vessels, were in fact made in the city.

The evidence from the excavations also revealed much about the development of architectural decoration in Khorasan. Walls in residences and public buildings were covered with murals, carved and painted **stucco**, and glazed ceramic tiles. The exteriors of large public buildings were clad in baked **bricks** set in decorative patterns, large terracotta panels carved with multilayered ornament, or tiles in glazes of bright blue.

Despite Nishapur's reputation for the manufacture of **textiles**, none were found in the excavations, although hundreds of spindle whorls were excavated. Smaller items, such as toys, musical instruments, **chess** pieces and dice, were also found in abundance, allowing us a small view into the daily life of Nishapur's citizens.

The Metropolitan Museum's excavations at Nishapur succeeded in providing to art historians a sense of the physical nature of this fabled city, known previously only in written accounts, and proof for the local manufacture of certain classes of ceramics. However, the abrupt end to the work and other factors hindered the complete publication of the excavations. Hopefully, future studies will help synthesize the expedition's findings, currently each discussed in separate publications, and better integrate them with what is known of Nishapur's written history.

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