



NISHAPUR I. HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY TO THE BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Nishapur (Nišāpur) was, with [Balk](#), Marv and [Herat](#), one of the four great cities of the province of Khorasan. It flourished in Sasanid and early Islamic times, but after the devastations of the Mongol invasions of the 13th century, subsided into a more modest role until it revived in the 20th century.

It seems to have been founded by the Sasanian [Shapur I](#) in the 3rd century CE, and possibly rebuilt by [Shapur II](#) in the following century. The name presumably stems from **nēv-šāpūr* “fair, good city of Shapur.” In Islamic times, writers in Arabic rendered it as Nisābur or Naysābur (Markwart, 1901, p. 74; Le Strange, pp. 382-83; Markwart, 1930, p. 52; Barthold, pp. 95-96). In the Sasanid period it was the center of the region of [Abaršahr](#), a name most likely enshrining the name of the Aparnak, a part of the tribal confederation of the Dāha or Dahae who founded the Parthian empire. The name Abaršahr appears on Sasanid coins and sealings and then, together with that of Nishapur, on early Islamic coins up to the caliphate of [Ma'mun](#) in the early 9th century, thereafter fading from records. For the Sasanids, Nishapur provided an administrative center for Khorasan, which was more secure than Ṭus against



raids of peoples from Inner Asia like the [Hephthalites](#) and Turks. From the 5th century onwards it was the seat of a bishopric of the Nestorian Church of Persia, and important for Zoroastrians through the location in the nearby Rēwand hills (probably the modern Kuh-e Benālud) of one of the Sasanid empire's great fire temples, that of [Ādur Burzēn-Mihr](#) (Brunner, p. 768).

At the time of the appearance of the Arabs in Khorasan, Nishapur seems to have been rent by faction, with a group opposed to control of the Kanārangs of Ṭus, who claimed dominion over all Khorasan (Pourshariati, pp. 271-77). The Arab raiders reached Nishapur in 650-52 when the governor of Basra, 'Abd-Allāh b. 'Āmer b. Korayz, led an army via the Kerman road. The town under its *marzbān* eventually surrendered after a siege of some months. A tribute of either a million or of 700,000 dirhams was imposed, and Qays b. al-Hayṭam al-Solami appointed governor (Balāḍori, p. 404; Shaban, pp. 19-20). However, in the troubled times of 'Ali's caliphate, there was a general uprising in Khorasan and Ṭokārestān against the Arabs. The people of Nishapur renounced their allegiance and Kōlayd b. Qorra al-Yarbu'i (Ṭabari) or 'Ali's governor of Khorasan, Kōlayd b. Ka's (Dinavari) was sent to reassert Arab control in 657-58. During this period when the Arabs had been ejected, the son of the last Sasanid emperor, Firuz (III) b. Yazdegerd, is said to have returned to Nishapur (Dinavari, pp. 153-54; Ṭabari, ed. M. J. de Goeje et al., pp. 3349-50, tr. Hawting, pp. 99-100). When Mo'āwiya became caliph, he sent 'Abd-Allāh b. 'Āmer to Khorasan again, and the latter installed Qays b. al-Hayṭam in Nishapur once more, replaced in 665-66 by Ziyād b. Abihi's nominee, Kōlayd b. 'Abd-Allāh al-Ḥanafī, over the *rob'* or "quarter" of Nishapur (Ṭabari, ed. M. J. de Goeje et al., p. 79, tr. Morony, p. 85). Subsequent governors of the town are recorded in the sources, but in general Nishapur in Umayyad and early 'Abbasid times was of much less importance than Marv, which the Arabs had at the outset made their capital in the East as strategically more advantageous an advance post for the conquests in Transoxania and Khwarazm.

At the time of the 'Abbasid Revolution, *kāfer kobāt* ("club wielders") are mentioned as coming from Nishapur to join [Abu Moslem](#)'s *da'wa* against the Omayyads (Dinavari, p. 361), and his commander Qaḥṭaba b. Ḥomayd entered Nishapur in 748 (Ṭabari, ed. M. J. de Goeje et al., p. 2003, tr. Williams, p. 109), to secure it for the new regime. However, the district was affected by the revolt of the Zoroastrian Sonbād, part of a reaction in Khorasan to al-Mansur's killing of Abu Moslem, whose movement may actually have begun at Nishapur (Daniel, pp. 126-27; Pourshariati, pp. 447-50).



It is with the advent of the Taherid governors in Khorasan in the early 8th century that Nishapur rises to prominence as the political and cultural center of the East, since they moved their capital thither from the less salubrious Marv, which was now eclipsed. Under the patronage there of a governor like 'Abd-Allāh b. Ṭāher (828-45), the city became a lively intellectual and literary center for Arabic scholarship, with *adab* and poetry especially prominent (Bosworth, 1969, pp. 58-67). It also began to thrive commercially, above all for its famed luxury cloth. The subsequent decline of the Taherids enabled the former 'ayyār leader from Sistan, Ya'qub b. Layṭ, to take over Nishapur from Moḥammad b. Ṭāher (II) in 863, but over the next three decades or so control of the city oscillated between the Saffarids and various military adventurers. Only in 896 did 'Amr b. Layṭ manage to secure power there, but this was abruptly ended in 900 when the Samanid Esmā'il b. Aḥmad defeated 'Amr and established Samanid rule over Khorasan, one which endured for a century (Bosworth, 1994, pp. 108-21, 193-202, 228-30).

During the 250 or so years of successive Samanid, Ghaznavid and Great Saljuq rule in Khorasan, Nishapur attained a peak of prosperity in agricultural production, economic and commercial activity, and artistic florescence (particularly in ceramics and the weaving of fine cloths). As the capital of Khorasan, it was the seat of the 'amid or civil governor and of the commander-in-chief (*sepahsālār*) of the army there, and merchants, artisans and officials came to form an influential bourgeoisie there under their spokesman and head, the *ra'is*, chosen from the leading local families, who represented the city and its interests *vis-à-vis* the central government. In addition to the mercantile and official elements, there was an especially prestigious and influential component of this ruling city élite, sc. that of the religious institution, strongly Sunni and containing theologians, religious lawyers (*foqahā'*) and traditionists from the two main *madḥabs* of the Islamic East, the Ḥanafis and the Šāfe'is. The dominance of these two *madḥabs* was nevertheless challenged from the end of the 10th century onwards by the pietistic and populist sect of the Karrāmiyya, favored at the outset by the Ghaznavid sultans themselves. According to the 10th century geographer Maqdesi, there was still a significant number of Mo'tazeli scholars, and a certain number of 'Alid families who were accorded the usual respect due to descendants of the Prophet but who, perhaps intentionally keeping a low profile, do not seem to have had a very marked role in public affairs (Bosworth, 1963, pp. 165-66, 195-98). The social prominence, and the intellectual and religious standing of such groups, must have been a stimulus



to the composing of several biographical dictionaries of the scholars of Nishapur, beginning with the *Ta'riḫ Nayšābur* of the Aṣ'ari qadi and traditionist Moḥammad b. 'Abd-Allāh b. al-Bayye', called al-Ḥākem al-Naysāburi (d. 1014), the starting-point for a succession of continuations and epitomes (see [ABU 'ABD-ALLĀH B. AL-BAYYE'](#), and on the great families of this ruling bourgeoisie during these centuries, see Bulliet, 1972). References to Demmi communities in Nishapur are sparse, though the Sufi Shaikh Abu Sa'id b. Abi'l-Ḳayr is said to have converted forty of the local Christians in the middle years of the 11th century (Bosworth, 1963, pp. 201-2). Social and economic tensions, only dimly known, as well as the lively atmosphere of intellectual, religious and sectarian clashes and debate in Nishapur, may have contributed to the periodic mentions in the Ghaznavid and Saljuq historical sources of the activities there of *'ayyārs*, apparently arising out of paramilitary bands but also including lawless, even bandit, elements, involving violence and other antisocial activities (Bosworth, 1963, pp. 167ff., 261-62; Tor, p. 267 n. 57).

The geographers of the later 9th and 10th centuries give information on the topography and buildings of the city. It stood on a fertile plain, in which irrigated agriculture flourished, with the Benālud Kuh range of mountains to its north and east separating it from the in which lay Ṭus and the later Mashad. Nishapur is described by Eṣṭakṛi as being a farsakh in length and breadth and comprising of 42 wards. A natural hazard for the city all through its history was frequent, destructive earthquakes (Melville, 1980). It had the usual tripartite formation of eastern Islamic cities, with a citadel (*qohandez*) having two gates, the city proper (*šahrestān*) having four gates, and an extensive suburb (*rabaz*) with some fifty gates. The main congregational mosque in the suburb was an enlargement by the Saffarid 'Amr b. Layṭ of a structure originally built by Abu Moslem, and 'Amr also built the administrative centre or *dār al-emāra*. The city's water supply came from a local stream, the Wādi Sagāvar running from the nearby small town of Boštaqān, which turned seventy mills, plus numerous *qanāts* running down from springs in the Benālud Kuh range (Le Strange, pp. 382-85; Aubin, pp. 72-3; Bulliet, 1976, pp. 67-89; Barthold, pp. 96-99). Nishapur's local products, manufactures and specialties are set forth by the 11th century local author Ṭa'ālebi. Its textiles included fine cotton and silk garments, with those having a *molḥam* weave (i.e., having a silk warp and woof of some other material) being especially prized, whilst the surrounding region was the unique source for the much sought after edible earth (*noql, ṭin najāḥi*) a diatomaceous earth or



kieselguhr, exported to lands as far distant as Egypt and the Maghrib, and was further renowned for turquoises (*firuzas*) of superlative quality (Ta'ālebi, tr., Bosworth, 1968, pp. 131-33).

Nishapur and Khorasan in general had suffered under the harsh rule and financial exploitation of the Ghaznavids. Hence when in 1037 the Saljuq leader Togrel Beg's troops first appeared outside the city, the citizenry were disinclined to offer any resistance (Bosworth, 1963, pp. 252-58). Togrel soon afterwards made Nishapur his capital before moving westwards to Ray and Isfahan, and the third Saljuq sultan Alp Arslān resided there for a while, the city being the original home of the great vizier Nezām-al-Molk, who served both Alp Arslān and his son Malekšāh. However, when Sanjar became ruler in Khorasan and senior member of the Saljuq family, he preferred to have his court at Marv, strategically more convenient for the defense of the northeastern frontier of Iranian lands and for his military campaigns against the Khwarazmshahs and the Qara Khitay of Central Asia. The general level of prosperity for Nishapur continued under the Saljuqs and it remained a vibrant center for Sunni Muslim scholarship and for literary activity, producing such leading Šāfe'i scholars as the two Jovaynis, Abu Moḥammad 'Abd-Allāh (d. 1047) and the Emām al-Ḥaramayn Abu'l-Ma'ālī 'Abd-al-Malek (d. 1085). It was for the latter that Nezām-al-Molk founded his Neẓāmiyya *madrasa* in Nishapur, at which another great local scholar (actually born at nearby Tus), Abu Ḥāmed al-Ġazālī, taught for a while. A certain amount of social disturbance, *fetna*, is recorded by the historian all through this period, involving such groups as the 'ayyārs and the Karrāmiyya and the Ḥanafi-Šāfe'i rivalry, but does not seem to have affected the underlying prosperity of the city.

This last, was, however, increasingly affected by events in the second half of the 12th century, when after the death of Sanjar, Khorasan was affected by incursions of the ambitious and expansionist Khwarazmshahs and by the ravages of bands of Oghuz/Ġozz Turkish nomads, who sacked the city in 1153, destroying amongst much else mosques (including the Mani'i one, which had replaced the congregational mosque going back to Abu Moslem and 'Amr b. Layt), *madrasas* and libraries, with the populace fleeing to the suburb of Šādyāk. One of Sanjar's gholām commanders, Mo'ayyed-al-Din Ay Aba, nevertheless managed to drive out the Oghuz, enlarge and fortify Šādyāk, and secure a power base at Nishapur for controlling much of Khorasan over a period of twenty years till his death in 1174 (Bosworth, 1968, pp. 155-56). The



city's prosperity revived, although severe earthquakes, to which the whole region of Nishapur was always liable, necessitated a permanent removal of the core of the city by Ay Aba to Šādyāk, the old site being now abandoned (Le Strange, p. 385; Melville, pp. 104-9). The extensive ruin fields of the earlier Islamic city have been investigated by archaeological expeditions financed by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (see below).

The city was again destroyed in 1208-9 by a powerful earthquake that affected all of Khorasan, the inhabitants fleeing to the adjoining plain. The geographer and literary biographer Yāqut visited Nishapur in 1216, staying in Šādyāk, and he observed the damage done by earthquakes and by the Oghuz; nevertheless, the city's resilience was such that he thought it the finest in Khorasan (Yāqut, V, p. 332). But a further cataclysm soon followed, when Khwarazmian rule over Khorasan and the city was ended in 1221 by the Mongol Čengiz Khan's hordes. The defenders fought fiercely against Čengiz's son Toluy for three days, but were overwhelmed and the population massacred (Jovayni, tr. Boyle, I, pp. 169-78).

The city seems to have survived this disaster and to have revived, but was once more severely affected by earthquakes; the one which occurred most probably in 1270 seems to have marked the final destruction of Šādyāk, necessitating rebuilding of the town at yet another site (Melville, pp. 110-11). It was this new city, now under the rule of a governor of Khorasan for the Il-khanid ruler Abu Sa'id, which Ebn Baṭṭuṭa visited in circa 1332, purchasing there a Turkish slave boy and describing the city as one of the four metropolises of Khorasan, with fertile agriculture and orchards which merited for Nishapur the title of "little Damascus," and with four flourishing *madrasas* thronged with students of the Qur'an and religious law (Ebn Baṭṭuṭa, III, pp. 80-82, tr. Gibb and Beckingham, 1958-94, III, pp. 583-85). Around this same time, Ḥamd-Allāh Mostawfi was especially impressed by the city's copious water supplies, which drove no fewer than forty mills (Mostawfi, tr. Le Strange, pp. 147-48).

Towards the end of the 1330s Nishapur passed under the control of the Il-khanids' successors in western Khorasan, the Sarbadarids, and then in 1381 came within Timur's empire. Since the Timurids favored cities like Samarqand and Herat, and subsequently the Safavids built up Mashad as the religious and administrative center of the province of Khorasan, Nishapur no longer played a major role in the affairs of Iran but seems to have enjoyed a continuing modest degree of economic and commercial prosperity; in 1404 the Spanish



traveler to Timur's court at Samarqand, [Ruy González de Clavijo](#), found it flourishing and densely populated (Clavijo, tr. Le Strange, pp. 181-83). However, earthquakes continued to plague the region, and that of 1405 destroyed what had been the third city site of Nishapur. It is generally considered that Nishapur was then rebuilt yet again on what is the modern site of the town today, some 5 km/ 3 miles to the northwest of the extensive ruin fields of earlier sites, where only mounds, the footings and lower parts of mud brick walls, and barely recognizable weathered stumps of buildings remain (Matheson, pp. 199-200; Melville, pp. 113-14 and Pls. I-II; Wilkinson, 1986). The city suffered from attacks by the Uzbeks in the earlier part of Shah 'Abbās I's reign, i.e. the later 16th century; and some two centuries later, in 1750-51, the Afghan Aḥmad Shah Dorrāni (see [AFGHANISTAN x. POLITICAL HISTORY](#)) attacked Khorasan after Nāder Shah's death and ravaged Herat, Mashad and Nishapur, sacking the latter place brutally after a six month siege.

The governor installed by the Afghan king, the Turkish chief 'Abbās-qoli Khan, took measures to rebuild and revive Nishapur. It passed to [Āgā Moḥammad Khan Qājār](#) in 1796, and in the early Qajar period the town still retained its walls, according to Fraser, who was there in 1821 and who described them as 4,000 paces in circumference; but Ferrier in 1845 found them ruinous and useless as defenses, and estimated the population at a mere 8,000 (Barthold, pp. 100-01). When Curzon was there in 1889, attempts were being made to repair the walls; the population, he was told, was around 10,000. Eight years afterwards Yate found the walls in good condition, and the town reasonably prosperous; it had a lively and extensive bazaar and a colony there of Russian Armenian merchants who were said to export annually from Nishapur some 50,000 tumans or £10,000's worth of wool, cotton and dried fruits, although nearby Sabzevār (the medieval Bayhaq) was apparently a much greater commercial centre. Both of these British travelers were impressed by the importance and value of the turquoises quarried at Bār-e Ma'den in the Nishapur district (Curzon, I, pp. 261-7; Yate, pp. 399-414).



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