

## PARADISE AS A GARDEN, THE GARDEN AS GARDEN

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The image of the earthly garden as a foretaste of paradise is one of the strongest and most enduring in the study of Islamic culture. Over the years countless authors have evoked the idea of the verdant garden, with its sensual pleasures of beautiful design, fragrant flowers, luscious fruits, playing fountains and cooling shade (fig. 1), as a counterpart to the delights the believer will encounter in the hereafter. In the last few decades several books have been written on the subject, including a volume of essays presented at a 1976 conference held at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, DC. (Ettinghausen 1976). This was soon followed by *Paradise as a Garden*, a volume on the history of the garden in Persia and Mughal India (Moynihan 1980), as well as a number of museum exhibitions, including one, *Arabesques et jardins du paradis*, at the Louvre in Paris in 1989 (Bernus Taylor 1989) and another, *Die Gärten des Islam*, at the Linden Museum, Stuttgart, in 1993, which included a little bit of everything, from Islamic gardens to courtly arts, to popular arts of Africa and Indonesia (Forkl *et al.* 1993). In the United States, a 1991-92 travelling exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue, which Sheila Blair and I edited, *Images of Paradise in Islamic Art* (Blair & Bloom 1991). This exhibition evolved from the premise that an Ottoman fountain-surround from Diyarbekir, now in the Hood Museum of Art, and decorated with floral sprays and blossoms "symbolized the heavenly garden and the promise of paradise as a reward for the donor who made this gift to the community." Walter Denny, the organizer of the exhibition, suggested that many of the common themes in Islamic art, not only vegetal and floral motifs but also arched panels, were actually metaphors for Paradise and the gates leading to it (Denny 1991). Perhaps the most recent example is the 1999-2000 exhibition of Islamic art in Amsterdam, *Earthly Beauty, Heavenly Art*, which displayed many Islamic textiles, metalwares, ceramics, manuscripts, woodcarvings, ivories, rock crystals, gold jewelry, enamels, and oil paintings from a wide variety of sources under the rubric "gardens and paradise" (Piotrovsky 1999).

There is no reason to believe that the flood of books and exhibitions on this popular theme will cease, but it is worthwhile reexamining the basis for this interpretation of the earthly garden as a metaphor for paradise in Islamic culture. Already it has also met with some scepticism, ranging from the mild to the sharp (Baer 1998:95; Allen 1993). According to Terry Allen, "when supplying a symbolic interpretation [of a work of art] one must either justify it for the particular monument at hand or argue that symbolic significance is common in some wider group of monuments to which it belongs, and thus to be expected"

(Allen 1993:3). Oddly enough, because this interpretation is so pervasive, few if any scholars have bothered to show by exactly what means garden and plant motifs have assumed specifically paradisaical meanings in Islamic civilization. Lacking such interpretations, the wholesale interpretation of the Islamic garden from Spain to India, from the Umayyads to the present, is therefore something of a methodological fallacy, for the image of the garden in the afterlife owes as much to much older Near Eastern, Jewish and Christian conceptions of Eden and Heaven as it does to the Qur'ān. Furthermore, despite conventional wisdom, the Qur'ān did not provide the layout of the typical Islamic garden, whose four-fold plan also derives from much older Near Eastern, classical and late antique garden traditions in the regions where Islam appeared and spread. In short, although the association of gardens and paradise is undeniable in some later Islamic art, not all Islamic gardens were meant to evoke paradise. Nor were all the plant and flower motifs in Islamic art meant to evoke the hereafter. Indeed they often had other important meanings to express, and it is worthwhile looking for them.

### Images of Paradise

The notion of the afterlife as taking place in a verdant garden seems such a natural notion in Western culture that is difficult to imagine the hereafter somewhere else. In Babylonian creation literature, the Edenic "Dilmun" is a rich and fertile place, where rich fields and farms are fed by sweet waters, and frailty, illness and affliction are absent. In ancient Egypt, the beatified awaited an afterlife in a rich and scenic land, with pools of *kha*-birds and *ro*-fowl, where the god Re "sails with the breeze" and the barley grows immensely tall and fruitful (Garthwaite 1991: 15). Perhaps the most familiar of these garden settings is the Eden of the Hebrew Bible, where Adam and Eve begin life in a garden ... in the east [with] every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.... A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one which flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; bdellum and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one which flows around the whole land of Cush. And the name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates (Genesis 2:9-14).

From early times this earthly garden of Eden, which seems to have been located somewhere in Mesopotamia – to judge from the reference to the Tigris and Euphrates, was often conflated with the heavenly paradise, which was understood as the abode of God and the blessed in the afterlife. This locality was initially imagined as a terrestrial or celestial mountain, as in I Kings 20: 23, 28 or Ezekiel 28: 12-19, respectively, but it eventually came to be thought of as a garden, probably because the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew

Bible, used the word *paradeisos* to translate the Hebrew word *pardes* (park, grove) to refer both to the earthly "garden" of Eden as well as to the heavenly abode of the afterlife (EB XX, 751-752, s.v. "Paradise"). The Christian Bible largely adopted Hebrew accounts of paradise, for God had placed Adam in the first Eden and would return his descendants in redemption to the heavenly paradise. Christian theologians such as St Augustine used materialistic terms to depict heaven in his *City of God* but said that man was incapable of comprehending its actual physical situation (Strayer IX, 395-398, s.v. "Paradise, Western concept of").

In the Qur'ān, the nature of the place of the afterlife is defined principally by what it is not, i.e. the Fire, and what it does not have, i.e. a mixture in time of life, death, sickness, labour, obedience, love, pleasure and pain. The Qur'ānic notion that the afterlife takes place in a garden is expressed more than 130 times in the Qur'ān (Reinhart 1991:15-17). In chapter 2:25, for example, we read of "gardens (*ḡanna*) under which rivers flow, and where, whensoever they are provided with fruits therefrom." In chapter 47:15 the semblance of Paradise promised to the pious and devout [is that of a garden] with streams of water that will not go rank, and rivers of milk whose taste will not undergo a change, and rivers of wine delectable to drinkers, and streams of purified honey, and fruits of every kind in them, and forgiveness of their lord. Chapter 51 states that the God-fearing shall be among gardens and fountains," an image more fully expressed in Chapter 76, verses 5-6 and 12-22:

"Surely the pious shall drink of a cup whose mixture is camphor,  
a fountain whereat drink the servants of God,  
making it to gush forth plentifully...  
... and recompensed them for their patience with a garden, and silk;  
therein they shall recline upon couches  
therein they shall see neither sun nor bitter cold  
near them shall be its shades, and its clusters hang meekly down  
and there shall be passed around them vessels of silver, and goblets of crystal,  
crystal of silver that they have measured very exactly.  
And therein they shall be given to drink a cup whose mixture is ginger,  
therein a fountain whose name is Salsabil..."

Putting all these images together, commentators generally imagine paradise as a garden with a central fountain from which issue rivers of water, milk, wine, and honey. This image was, not surprisingly conflated with the four-fold cross-axial plan popular for gardens in many Islamic lands, although the Qur'ānic text actually speaks of many rivers of each of the four liquids. Sometimes, as in a long passage (K55:35-78), paradise is described as two gardens with two fountains and two fruits of every kind. While some commentators have tried to envision these



twinned gardens, philologists believe that these duals were meant to provide the passage with a consistent rhyme.

Three different words – *ḡanna*, *firdaws*, and *rawḍa* – are used in the Qurʾān to refer to the heavenly garden. Although most commentators consider them to be synonymous, these words actually had distinct meanings. The first, *ḡanna*, is the word used in the Qurʾān for the regions of the beyond prepared for the elect. It is usually translated as “garden,” as in the phrase *ḡannat ʿadn* for “Garden of Eden.” According to the Arabic lexicographers, *ḡanna*, which derives from a root meaning “veiling” or “concealment,” meant an kind of walled orchard of trees, palms, etc. where the ground was concealed or shadowed (Lane 1863: s.v.). According to Ibn al-Faqīh, “the *bustān* [the Persian word for “orchard” not used in the Qurʾān] is more carefully watered than the *ḡanna*.” The great German scholar Ernst Herzfeld suggested that the terrestrial *ḡanna* was irrigated by a regular system of canals (Pinder-Wilson 1976:74 n.9).

The second term, *firdaws*, is used less frequently than *ḡanna* in the Qurʾān. The Arabic and modern Persian form of the Old Persian word *pairidaeza* (*pairi* around + *diz* to mould, form, meaning “enclosure, park”), this word is etymologically related to the late Hebrew *pardez* (used in Nehemiah 2:8 to refer to the park of the Persian king, also Ecclesiastes 2:5), the Armenian word *pardez*, and the Greek *paradeisos*, which Xenophon (ca. 430-355 BCE) had used to describe the enclosed parks, orchards, or pleasure grounds of Anatolia and Persia (Meyers 1997: II, 383).

The third term, *rawḍa* (pl. *riyād*), refers to “a meadow, meaning a verdant tract of land, somewhat watery, not ploughed but covered with grass and flowers.” (Lane 1863: s.v.). It is used only twice in the Qurʾān, once (30:15) in the singular and once in the plural *rawḍāt* (42:22) in the construct *rawḍāt al-ḡannāt*, “luxuriant meads of the Gardens” (Penrice 1971). According to the Dutch scholar de Goeje, the word Arabic word *rawḍa* was applied particularly to vegetable gardens, while the Persian word *bustān* referred to orchards, particularly to the palm grove (de Goeje 1967:189). Muḥammad is related to have said, “Between my grave – or between my house – and my pulpit is a *rawḍa* of the *riyād* of Paradise (Wensinck 1992: I, 319–320), a statement that ultimately led to the word’s considerable funerary associations in later centuries. It came to be applied to the railed enclosure around the Prophet’s grave in Medina (Massignon 1960). By the fourteenth century in Iran it was a euphemism for almost any funerary monument, from tombstones to mausolea, with no particular sense of garden (Blair 1984:74). Particularly in India, its derivative *roza* (Hindi *rauza*) has come to signify a funerary garden, such as those built by the Mughal emperors Šāh Ḡahān (which was popularly known as the *Tāḡ-rauza*) and Aurangzib (Yule & Burnell 1996:772). *Bustān*, another common word for garden, is not used in the Qurʾān. Lexicographers recognize it as a Persian compound noun (*bu*, fragrance + *stān*,

place) taken into Arabic and referring to "a garden of sweet-scented flowers and trees" or more specifically to the Persian flower or formal garden with constantly flowing streams.

### A Brief History of Gardens

Contemporary dictionaries define a garden as a either plot of land used for the cultivation of flowers, vegetables, herbs, or fruit, or a piece of land laid out with trees and ornamental shrubs for recreation or display. Modern gardens are primarily practical places for cultivation (e.g. "kitchen-gardens") or pleasant places for aesthetic pleasure (e.g. "public garden"), but there exists as well an ancient and important tradition of gardening as the manipulation of landscape to demonstrate power. Not only did the gardener show his power by moving earth and water and creating a setting of his own design, but the successful cultivation of exotic plants and animals within the created landscape also expressed the gardener's power over it. The vast swath of land in Afro-Eurasia that eventually came to embrace Islam encompassed enormous climatic, geographical, historical, and cultural variation, but two principal types of gardens predominated over the centuries. The first was a large walled enclosure or park (Gk. *paradeisos*) that might include one or more structures for viewing and enjoyment of the garden; the second was a garden (Lat. *hortus*) enclosed within a structure (e.g. a courtyard house) that might be enjoyed from within the structure itself (Turner 1996: XII, 60-144; Huxley 1992: s.v. "Islamic garden").

Gardens are first mentioned in Mesopotamian texts from the third millennium BCE, in which the hero Gilgamesh enters the Amanus mountains to find "a bounded wood" where the fearsome Humbaba guards its straight paths and tends its cedars (Dalley 1986:368-370). The enclosure and straight paths are clearly the work of human activity; the trees are tended because they are valuable. Indeed, the Sumerian language makes no distinction between an orchard [of trees] and a garden. In inscriptions and texts kings boast of creating large parks or gardens fed by impressive irrigation works. Ashurnasirpal II (r. 883-859 BCE) diverted water from the Upper Zab River to create an irrigated garden or park at Nimrud in which he had an impressive collection of foreign plants and animals, and his successor Sennacherib (704-681 BCE) did the same at Nineveh. One of Sennacherib's parks recreated the entire landscape of the marshes of southern Iraq, complete with its flora and fauna. The famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon built by Nebuchadrezzar II 605-562 BCE) were meant to imitate the alpine landscape of Media (Meyers 1997: II, 383, s.v. "Gardens").

In Egypt, the annual flooding of the Nile Valley led gardens to evolve in a somewhat different manner than they had in Mesopotamia. The Greek historian Herodotus cited the need to annually re-mark the boundaries of fields and gardens as the origin of geometry, and the rectilinear organization of irrigation channels

characterized the overall design of Egyptian gardens and fields throughout antiquity (Meyers 1997: II, 384). Gardens were associated not only with palaces and houses but also with temples and tombs, where the plants and pools "represented the place of creation from which life sprang" (Wilkinson 1990). Texts describe the trees Rameses III (1182-1151 BCE) brought back from Punt (Ethiopia), Palestine, and Syria, and the painted reliefs from the funerary temple at Deir el-Bahari shows Queen Hatshepsut's expedition to Punt to collect plants for the god Amun. She created gardens between Karnak and Luxor for the Feast of Opet, thereby confirming her right to rule. Archaeologists discovered that the avenue of sycamore trees planted to adorn her funerary temple were purposefully cut down, perhaps by her son to damn her memory. That he did so shows how symbolically important such plantings were (Meyers 1997: II, 384).

The tradition of gardening in ancient Iran was closely dependent on Mesopotamian tradition. At Pasargadae, the palace of Cyrus the Great in 6th century BC, archaeologists found palace pavilions set into shady irrigated parks laid out orthogonally. Excavations revealed the first known examples of straight watercourses creating four-fold (*čahar-bag*) garden plans. This arrangement may have served to facilitate irrigation of the plots, but it may also have been meant to symbolize Cyrus' domain, for he was known in Babylonian texts as "king of the four quarters." One may imagine Cyrus enthroned at Pasargadae in the heat of the day, during festivals, recreation, and at other times, looking down the centre of his garden from the main pavilion along the axial "vista of power" towards his *paradeisos*, allowing a glimpse into the political role gardens played (Meyers 1997: II, 383).

Following the conquests of Alexander the Great in the east, the Persian tradition of the *paradeisos* was transmitted to large gardens of the Hellenistic, Roman and Sāsānian periods<sup>1</sup>. Smaller gardens in the Mediterranean lands followed the Roman tradition of the *hortus*, particularly after the Hellenistic peristyle, or paved court, was merged with the Italic tradition of the atrium house, and the paved court gave way to plantings and pools or cisterns. As the Roman developed new aqueducts, cisterns of still water were supplemented and replaced by fountains, and running water became important features of garden design (Turner 1996: XII, 68, s.v. "Garden II, 4 Rome").

In the east, Sāsānian rulers adopted the Achaemenid *paradeisoi* for their hunting parks and palaces. Perhaps the most famous Sāsānian palace was at their capital Ctesiphon, which was famed not for its gardens as such but for the carpet known as *bahar-i kisrā*, or "the king's spring." According to the 'Abbāsīd historian at-Tabarī, the Muslim conquerors discovered the carpet, which measured

<sup>1</sup> For a summary, see Meyers 1997: II, 385-387.



sixty cubits square, in the palace when they took the city in 637-38. It had a gold-coloured background, "its brocade was inlaid," the fruits depicted on it were precious stones, its foliage was silk and its waters golden. "They had been keeping it ready for use in winter for the time when their provisions were all but exhausted. When they wanted a drinking party, they would sit and drink on this carpet. Then they would feel as if they were sitting in a garden." The conqueror of the city, Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas, was so impressed with this stupendous carpet that instead of cutting it up and distributing it to his troops, he sent it whole to the caliph Umar, who was residing in Medina. Upon receiving it, however, Umar decided to cut it up into equal pieces and distribute it among the people (Juynboll 1989:33).

Although few carpets produced over the next eight or nine centuries in the Islamic lands survive, the analogy of the carpet to a flower-strewn garden remained popular, particularly in Iran, and flower and plant motifs were among the most common design elements on Iranian carpets<sup>2</sup>. In some cases carpet designs refer generically to gardens simply through the representation of beautiful flowers and plants on the surface, but in other cases the reference is quite explicit, as in a celebrated series of so-called "garden" carpets, which depict the plan of a formal Persian garden divided into quadrants by streams and embellished with pavilions, birds, and different types of plants and trees. The earliest such carpet to survive is the most splendid, an enormous seventeenth-century Iranian example discovered in the palace of the Maharaja of Jaipur (Blair & Bloom 1994:177-178), but many later examples of varying quality are known (Bloom & Blair 1997:369; Blair & Bloom 1991: no. 34).

The advent of Islam in the seventh century led to the increasing development and homogenization of these different garden traditions, as an evolving Arab-Islamic culture was carried from Spain to Central Asia, and gardeners introduced and cultivated hitherto exotic plants for practical and aesthetic purposes (Watson 1983). The *paradeisos* seems to have evolved into the *hayr*, or game preserve, which is first encountered in a series of palaces constructed by the Umayyad caliphs (r. 661-750) in the Syrian desert (Sourdell-Thomine 1960-; Strika 1968). Ironically, neither of the Umayyad sites in Syria known as Qasr al-Hayr, or "Castle of the Paradisical Gardens," actually had such a game preserve, the present names being merely figments of the bedouin imagination (Grabar *et al.* 1978). Other Umayyad palaces, however, are known to have included vast walled enclosures of arable land that were irrigated by aqueducts and drained by means of

<sup>2</sup> A convenient introduction to Islamic carpets is Turner 1996: s.v. "Islamic art VI, 4. Carpets and flatweaves."

sluice-gates. One of the most elaborate was the palace known as *Hirbat al-Mafḡar*, "The Ruins of Mafḡar", near Jericho (Hamilton 1959).

Although none of the verdant gardens that are known to have surrounded Damascus in the Umayyad period have survived, some scholars believe that the mosaic panels once decorating all the walls of the Great Mosque of Damascus, which depict buildings set amid trees and above rivers (fig. 2), were meant to evoke descriptions of paradise in the Qur'an. While this interpretation is commonly accepted today, other scholars have suggested, following medieval writers, somewhat more prosaic interpretations – that they represent all the towns of the world or the garden landscape once found outside Damascus along the Barada River – and the interpretation of these mosaics remains a matter of lively scholarly debate (Ettinghausen *et al.* 2001:26).

The initial plan for the Round City of Baghdad, founded by the 'Abbāsid caliph al-Mansūr in 762, appears to have made no provision for gardens, but when the 'Abbāsids left the Round City for either suburban palaces near Baghdad or for the vast expanses of *Sāmarrā'*, gardens became a major feature of palace design. It has been argued that, in contrast to Umayyad palaces, 'Abbāsid palaces were designed around the idea of presenting views and framing the act of vision, and this was as true at Baghdad as it was at *Sāmarrā'* (Ruggles 2000:94–100). The rural location and great size of such foundations as the *Dār al-Hilāfa* and the *Balkuwārā* at *Sāmarrā'* allowed the incorporation of large and different types of gardens within their walls. Many of the palaces incorporated one or more quadripartite gardens within their walls; others, such as the *Dār al-Hilāfa*, incorporated a game-park or *hayr* beyond the racecourse and polo ground.

These gardens and parks were surely not unpleasant spaces, but the overriding concern in their design seems to have been the exercise of power and vision, not the creation of a sensuous paradise on earth. The caliph al-Qahir (r. 929–34 with interruption), for example, had an orange-garden that was planted with trees from Basra and Oman, whence they had only recently been imported from India (Mez 1937:384). In 917 the Byzantine ambassadors to Baghdad were taken to a zoological garden, where there were herds of wild animals, which drew near to the people, sniffing them, and eating from their hands. They were then brought to a court where there were four elephants adorned with brocade and cloth marked by figure work. Mounted on each elephant were eight men from Sind and fire hurlers. The sight of this filled the Ambassadors with awe (Lassner 1970:89).

From there they were taken to a court with one hundred muzzled and chained lions, and then to the New Kiosk, a building situated amidst two gardens. In the centre was an artificial pond and stream made of white lead in which four luxuriously-appointed boats floated. The lake was surrounded by a lawn in which stood four hundred artificial palm-trees. "Dressed in a sculptured teakwood, each tree was covered from top to bottom with rings of gilt copper, and each branch



bore marvellous dates which were not quite ripe. On the sides of the garden were citrons...and other kinds of fruit" (Lassner 1970:89-90). Oddly enough, when the ambassadors were taken to the "Paradise Palace" (*Qasr al-Firdaws*), it was not decorated with gardens and plants but with copious displays of rugs and armour, including thousands of breastplates, shields, helmets, casques, cuirasses, coats of mail, quivers and bows (Lassner 1970:90). When a visiting Byzantine dignitary criticized Baghdad for its lack of gardens, he was told, according to the *Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī*, "We were not created for frivolity and play" (Lassner 1980:198).

Like their predecessors of centuries before, 'Abbāsid gardens in Mesopotamia provided a model for gardens elsewhere in the Islamic lands in the ninth and tenth centuries. In Egypt, the Tūlūnid ruler *Ḥumārawayh* is said to have been among the greatest garden-builders:

On his father's *maydān* he had all kinds of flowers and trees planted; rare grafts such as almonds on apricot stems, various kinds of roses, red and blue and yellow lotus. In laying out the garden patterns of pictures and letters were followed. The gardener had to see that no leaf overlapped the other. Ponds, fountains, artificial wells ... and pavilions enlivened the garden ... the paths [of which were] covered with Babylonian mats. The palm-trunks were covered with gilded metal plates (Mez 1937:384).

Perhaps the best evidence for gardens in the medieval period comes from Spain, where the caliph 'Abd ar-Rahmān III created the palace-city of *Madīnat az-Zahrā'* outside Córdoba following 'Abbāsid models. Court nobles founded smaller garden estates in Córdoba's suburbs as sensual places of worldly pleasure and arenas for political ceremonial, not as earthly recreations of the Qur'ānic paradise believers expected in the hereafter (Ruggles 2000:215).

At Córdoba the courtyard of the mosque had been planted with trees since the ninth century, a fact that has led some scholars to interpret this insertion of vegetation into a religious context as a reference to paradise. More probably, the trees were a practical solution to keeping down the dust and providing shade, and many mosques, from Algeria to Iran, still have trees planted in their courtyards. Paradisical themes, however, did begin to appear in the eleventh century in funerary gardens, and eventually they were carried over to non-funerary gardens, but even there, paradise was invoked only as a standard of beauty, not as a model to be emulated (Ruggles 2000:216). Indeed, paradise was not always imagined as a garden. For example, the *Aljafarīa* palace in Zaragoza, the royal palace of the Banū *Hūd* in the late eleventh century, was conceived as a setting for royal *soirées*; to judge from the contemporary poetry that was recited there, it was metaphorically compared to paradise, although gardens played little, if any, role in its design (Robinson 1997).

Surely the most famous gardens from Islamic Spain are those of the Alhambra and Generalife palaces in Granada (fig. 3), built by the Nasrids between the

thirteenth century and the fifteenth. While these beautiful gardens are popularly likened to paradise, there is little contemporary evidence for such an interpretation. Rather, "by the fourteenth century in Andalusia, the creation for a prince of a garden with a fountain surrounded by handsomely decorated buildings can be considered an automatic gesture without compelling meaning" (Grabar 1978:123). Instead of paradise, the inscriptions in the palaces of the Alhambra create a metaphor of garden, city and kingdom, where the ruler's eye surveys all, thereby expressing his power over all creation (Ruggles 2000:203).

We know comparatively little about contemporary gardens in the eastern Islamic lands. As in Spain, palaces were likened to paradise in the fulsome encomiums of court poets anxious to earn their patrons favour, but gardens were not a necessary element of the metaphor (Meisami 2001). The funerary associations of the garden already noted in Spain appear in the east at least from the early fourteenth century, where the word *rawḍa*, but not *ḡanna*, refers to a funerary complex, sometimes – but not necessarily – located in a garden. According to the ebullient *Īlhānīd* chronicler, Abū l-Qāsim al-Kāšānī, the tomb complex of the *Īlhānīd* sultan Ulḡaytū (d. 1316) was like the "garden of Iram" (*rawḍa-yi iram*), with a great variety of trees, including spruce, juniper, palm, and fruit-trees, and waterways including brooks, rivulets, and streams (Kāšānī, *Tārīḥ* 46; Blair 1986: 145). In contrast, the endowment deed to the funerary complex of the contemporary *Īlhānīd* vizier Rašīd ad-Dīn includes a description of the vizier's *rawḍa*, which included the tomb and surrounding buildings, a court with a pool, mosques for winter and summer, a library, a classroom, and other cells and chambers, but no mention of a garden as such (Blair 1984:74).

Gardens continued to play an important role under the Tīmūrids in fifteenth-century Iran and Central Asia, where enormous palaces of tents were erected in garden estates, known as *bāḡ*, and cities such as Samarqand and Herāt were surrounded by garden suburbs (Golombek & Wilber 1988:174–183; Golombek 1995; Subtelny 1997). At Samarqand, the city was surrounded by a "necklace" of garden settlements named after the renowned cities of the Muslim world – Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, Sultāniyya, and Šīrāz, once again underscoring the association of gardens with power rather than paradise. The Tīmūrid tradition of garden design was taken to India by the Mughals, where the *roza*, or four-fold garden, became a standard feature of funerary architecture. It has even been argued that the Taj Mahal at Agra, set in a magnificent garden (fig. 4), is a representation on earth of God's throne in heaven (Begley 1979). In the eastern Mediterranean region, by contrast, Ottoman gardens do not fit comfortably into the traditional definition and seem to have evolved along quite different lines (Necipoglu 1997).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, there can be no doubt that over the centuries many Muslims envisioned paradise as a garden and that beautiful gardens were often thought to represent a foretaste of the hereafter. Nevertheless, it would be foolish to equate all Islamic gardens and plant imagery with the notion of paradise as described in the Qur'an. As scholars are coming to realize, the notion of a single Islamic society beginning in seventh-century Arabia and continuing to twenty-first century Morocco and Indonesia is fallacious. No single theory, however attractive, can explain fourteen centuries of human culture over one-quarter of the globe's surface. Furthermore, the tradition of transforming the landscape, whether on a large or small scale, and the image of the heavenly garden are both much older than Islam, and as we have seen, gardens of pre-Islamic and Islamic times often had other meanings, particularly the creation of aesthetic delight and the representation of power, two perennially popular themes in the history of art. Conversely, the image of paradise could be realized in forms other than gardens. In short, without a specific indication that a particular garden or motif was meant to represent paradise, it seems best to tread cautiously. Indeed, knowing how tempting it is for poets to exercise their verbal prowess in the hope of gaining a purse from a patron, we should even be wary of such taking such remarks too literally.

As our knowledge of the history of art in Islamic societies has become more nuanced, scholars have come to realize that intentional ambiguity plays an important role in many forms of Islamic art (Blair & Bloom 2000). Nothing prevents us from interpreting a garden or a floral motif as an image of paradise, but at the same time nothing forces us to do so. The decision is left entirely to the viewer, who is invited to take out of it – or put into it – as much as he or she likes.

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Fig. 1. Kashan, Bagh-e Fin. Photo author.

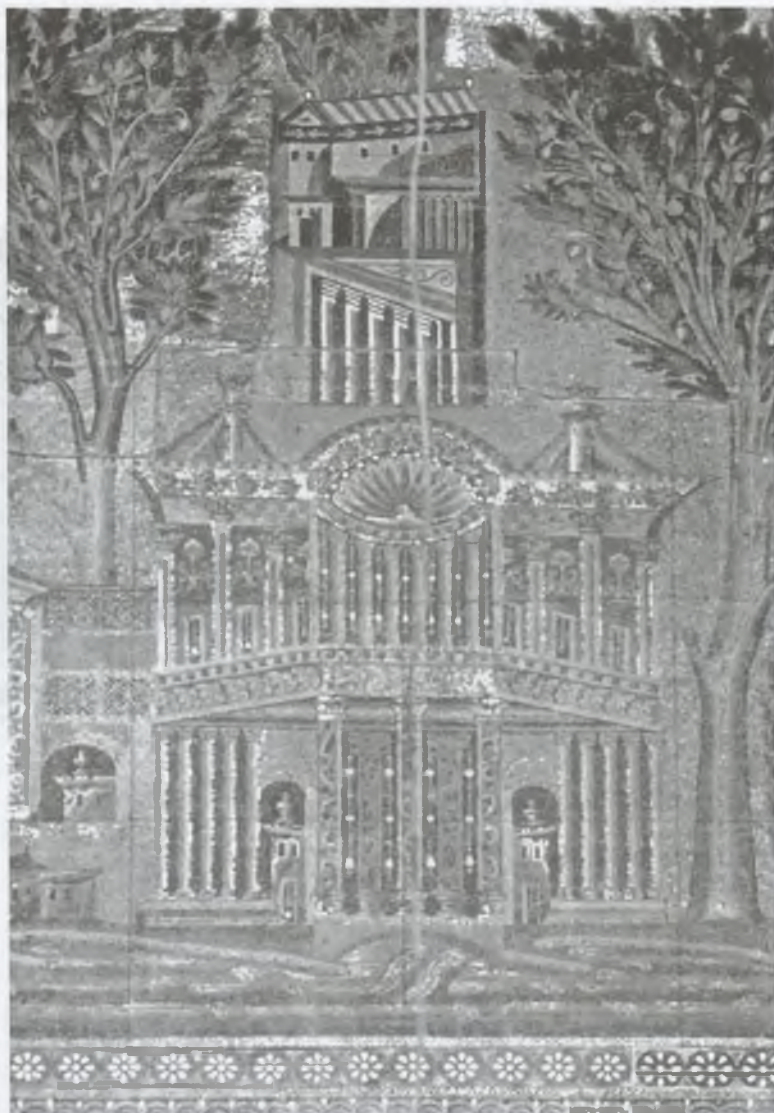


Fig. 2. Damascus, Umayyad Mosque,  
mosaic panel with landscape and fantastic buildings. Photo author.



Fig. 3. Granada, Gardens of the Generalife. Photo author.





Fig. 4. Agra, Gardens of the Taj Mahal. Photo author.