Islamic Archaeology in Iran

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Islamic archaeology did not fully develop in Iran until after 1930 when the French monopoly of excavation in that country expired and the gates were open for all. The digging of the Islamic levels by the French at Susa was ably published in 1928 by R. de Kochchelin but not preceded by excavation reports. Now the tendency has been to publish excavation reports with little to follow as thoroughly as M. de Kochchelin's publication. After 1930 American excavations were commenced at two very important Islamic sites: Isarakhr and Rayy. The first was undertaken by the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, the latter by the University Museum, Philadelphia with contributions from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The work at the former site was reported in the briefest kind of way and the latter by only incidental references. These excavations were followed by those of the Metropolitan Museum of Art at Nishapur, a city that flourished especially in the Samanid and early Seljuk periods. Several reports and articles have appeared on this work in the Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum and a full account of the pottery is in the hands of the editor. The second world war brought a change of policy in regard to the Metropolitan Museum's field activities, and properly supervised excavation came to an end in Nishapur—partly great loss from an architectural point of view. Since that war there has been little American activity in excavating Islamic sites, an exception being an extension of the work undertaken by the Peabody Institute, Harvard University, at the pre-Islamic site of Tepe Yahya, this extension being the clearing by Andrew Williamson of Tepe Dasht-i Deh which is nearby. In 1968 the German Archaeological Institute of Iran thoroughly undertook a kick built by the second Mongol ruler: the Il-Khan Abuqa (1265-81). They were fortunate in finding glazed tiles of some of which were dated 671/1272. By careful study the wall paintings and the most curious references have been made, nonetheless produced, through the Industry of George C. Miles of the American Numismatic Society, The Numismatic History of Rayy, information the scope of which far exceeds merely cataloguing coins.

Although some of the exploratory journeys that are being made do not entail actual excavation, they are archaeological. The buildings of the Islamic period are often of great age and many of them, whether a millennium old or only a century old, should be recorded, especially as a great number of them are disintegrating. Work of this nature was well launched many years ago by the first director of the Iranian Archaeological Service, M. Andre Godard, who, an architect by training, brought to this task the technical understanding which is necessary for recording such buildings, and even more necessary for carrying out restoration in an accurate way. The results were magnificently published in Aithar-e Iran (1936-1949), a series which attained a standard of excellence in illustration that regretfully has not since been approached. The work done by him, by Arthur Upham Pope, Donald Wilber and other assistants, published in The Bulletin of the Iranian Institute of America, and the late Myron Bement Smith, who studied brick architecture in the most painstaking way and made it public in
Of great importance is the continuance of surveys which fortunately are being undertaken in various parts of the country. These have brought to light several buildings not hitherto generally known as, for example, the Seljuk towers found and well published by David Strochnitz and Cuyler Young, Jr. There are surely more buildings of importance to be discovered. Surveys of this kind have become an almost international affair with members of various institutions undertaking the task, publishing the results, whether done individually or in cooperation, in journals such as Iran and the Archæologisches Mitteilungen aus Iran, N.F. The buildings examined are of various dates and both religious and secular. At the present time, in the course of restoring one such building, the Hasht Behesht at Isfahan, the Safavid core has been stripped of its Qajar alterations—and this is a reminder that what is stripped away can also be of interest. This and other important restorations are being undertaken with Italian help. Some of them are described and illustrated in Travaux de restauration de monuments historiques en Iran, ed. G. Zander, Rome, 1968.

The destruction of architecture of the Qajar period, although sometimes necessary for present-day requirements, should be limited as much as possible to inferior examples. There was a definite style during the nineteenth century and such was true and meaningful of Iran of that time. For this reason alone its architecture should be both more fully recorded and preserved together with its tile and painted decoration and gardens. In the surveys, pigeon towers have not been overlooked but some attention might be given to the monumental ice walls which, with their elaborate brick decoration, are probably doomed as modern methods of refrigeration gradually take over.

A great need exists for further investigation into the whereabouts of potteries. It is extraordinary how little we know of large related groups that obviously come from various centers. To name but a few, we do not know for certain where the so-called Kubachi ware was made—was there more than one center? We know little of the places of manufacture of many types of Safavid pottery. Of earlier periods, no kilns have yet been found at Rayy, none are known that produced the so-called Gerasas and Yarakan ware, or those of Amed and Sari. It is evident that, apart from very specialized types of pottery, such as luster, which come from but one or two sources, others were made in various places within certain geographical areas. These matters and the geographical spread as well as the whys and wherefores of popularity require a great deal of study. There are specific though perhaps very limited problems such as why, Iran, a cobalt producing country, used it in its glazed pottery only during and after the Seljuk period, whereas it was definitely used in Mesopotamia, which produces no cobalt, in the ninth and tenth centuries. What appears to be necessary once again is to emulate Sir Aurel Stein who in his Archæological Reconnaissances in Northwestern India and Southwestern Iran published in the most excellent way, using color, the sherds carefully catalogued from specific sites. An extension of this type of work done in the same painstaking method would be a great contribution.