View of Lutfullah mosque in Isfahan, Iran. Photo by Images and Stories/Alamy. OPPOSITE: Vessel with marching camels and lion handles likely made in Kashan, Iran. PM object NEP90.
Ibn Khaldun, the great 14th-century CE historian and philosopher, stated that without the city (Arabic: madina) there can be no civilization (Arabic: tamaddun). A rich corpus of geographical literature written both in Arabic and Persian and dating from the 10th through the 14th centuries CE describes the routes, realms, and cities of the Islamic world from the Atlantic to the Hindu Kush.

BY RENATA HOLOD
Medieval Cities in Iran and Iraq
Cities in the medieval Middle East, and in Iran and Iraq specifically, were walled and typically comprised several parts: the citadel (Arabic: qal’eb, Persian: kubandiz or arg); the city proper (Arabic: madina, Persian: shahristan); and the suburbs (Arabic: rabad, Persian: rustaq). In order to be recognized as a city, a settlement further had to contain a dense aggregation of contiguous houses as well as a congregational mosque (Arabic masjid al-jami’, Persian: masjidi jami’).

In Islamic law, a legal person had to be an actual person. Thus, no corporate entity such as a municipality could be recognized. A city, consequently, was owned and ruled by a political authority and its representatives. This authority guaranteed the safety of the urban population, guarded both the city and region, and minted coins. Through the city’s police and market inspectors, the rulings of its law courts were enforced on the trades, prices, buildings, and zoning, as well as on inheritance and pious foundations. Streets were either thoroughfares for public use or private lanes whose surface was owned by all houses opening onto them.

Many new cites were founded in the first three Islamic centuries; among them, Kufa, Basra, Baghdad, and Cairo. Just as many were inherited: Damascus, Jerusalem, Nishapur, Bukhara, and Merv.

Rayy, an Inherited City
At the Penn Museum, we are fortunate to have in our collection materials excavated from Rayy and its immediate region. Occupation in the area of Rayy, specifically at the site of Cheshmeh Ali, has been dated back to the Neolithic period and through the Bronze Age. While the Rayy plain is the best watered plain of the Iranian Plateau, its carrying capacity and viability was considerably extended by the construction of underground water galleries (qanat) to bring additional water to its suburbs and region; this was key to demographic and economic expansion and to the political significance of this city and its region from 200 BCE. The historic center, Rhages (Rayy) dates back to the Parthian period (2nd century BCE through 1st century CE) in the written, numismatic, and archaeological records. It was located on the westernmost spur of the Bibi Shahrbanu Hill. Thanks to its geographical location on the main east-west routes from Iraq (Baghdad) to Central Asia and beyond, and the important south-north route from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea, this place expanded into an important, fortified center, with a citadel on the hill called Kuh-e Sorsore and the city proper (Persian: shabrestan) below.

In the late 8th to 10th centuries CE, Rayy functioned as the “second capital” to Baghdad. It served the seat of the heir apparent in the ‘Abbassid caliphate.
Minting Coins


CENTER: One quarter of a debased silver dirham of Toghril Beg (ruled 1037–63 CE), Seljuq Dynasty. PM object 37-11-284.

ABOVE RIGHT: A standard silver dirham, or monetary unit, of Harun al-Rashid (ruled 786–809 CE), Abbasid Dynasty, minted at al-Muhammadiyya (Rayy, Iran), 804–805 CE. Obverse and reverse. PM object 46-29-25.
From this base, expansion of the empire was launched eastward to the two great rivers of Central Asia: the Amu Darya (Oxus) and Sur Darya (Jaxartes). By the end of the 10th century, under a more local successor dynasty, the Buyids, Rayy shared economic and political power with three other important regional centers: Hamadan, Isfahan, and Shiraz. From that time onward, the massive migration of the Turks from the Eurasian steppes south into the Middle East changed the ethnic make-up of the area. Arriving as transhumant or nomadic confederations, the Turks not only fit into an existing ecological niche but also took over as powerholders in Central Asia and the Middle East, establishing various smaller and larger polities. Rayy became the main seat of the Great Seljuks. From the late 11th through the beginning of the 13th century, the city expanded to its greatest extent and became one of the most politically and economically significant cities of the Iranian world. A new parade avenue, the Sareban, became the place for military display, trooping the colors and the cavalry, while the bazaars of Rayy sold wares from far and wide. Excavations by the Penn Museum at this city recovered coins from Egypt and Constantinople, as well as porcelains from China.

The destruction of Rayy by the Mongol invasions of the 1220s to the 1230s ended a brilliant period of urban living. Life crept back again to the small nearby town of Veramin by the beginning of the 14th century. Still, the advantageous geographic location of the Rayy plain meant that this important crossroad was not forgotten. By the 19th century, the Qajar dynasty made Tehran its capital. Today, Tehran can be understood as the direct geographical descendent of the earlier Rayy/Rhages. Its urban sprawl has effectively erased most of the traces.
of medieval Rayy so visible on the aerial photographs from Erich Schmidt’s Penn Museum expedition of the late 1930s.

**Isfahan, an Early Modern Garden City**

Early modern Isfahan took its form from 1592 CE onward when Shah ‘Abbas I inaugurated the new capital and its spacious public zones, attaching them to the existing earlier city. In its heyday, the new city drew merchants, missionaries, and travelers from as far afield as Portugal, Hindu-stan, and Muscovy. Despite the fact that Safavid Isfahan was flourishing in early modern history (the late 16th through early 18th centuries), research on its past cannot be supported, as one would expect, by a full panoply of written records. Safavid’s historical evidence was partly erased by the disastrous Afghan eight-year siege (1722–1730 CE) and subsequent sack of the city. The Afghan assault upon the open, un-walled, and badly defended city destroyed the state archives, dumping them into the Zayandeh River. It also killed many of the leading bureaucrats—effectively erasing the memory of the vanquished state.

What remains at the site is the physical layout of the new city: some of the greatest urban plans and architectural monuments of the Iranian world, and the early modern world as a whole. A great rectangular plaza (*Maidan-i Naqsh-i Jahan*) was surrounded by shops topped with viewing galleries. The plaza was anchored on the short, southern side by the new main mosque, the *Masjid-i Shah* (today called the *Masjid-i Imam*). On the north rose a tiled and painted entrance to the great new covered bazaar. The long, west side was centered on the entrance gate to the palace and a viewing tribune (platform) called *Ali Qapu*, through which the public zone of administration buildings as well as the private zone of palaces

**ABOVE:** Isfahan’s extensive trade networks flourished throughout the eastern hemisphere, traversing three continents. Traders moved over land and by sea to reach their destinations.
could be accessed. Opposite, to the east, stood the jewel of the smaller Lutfullah Mosque. Completing the new ensemble, though not connected directly to it, was the important Avenue of the Four Gardens (Khiyaban-i Chahar Bagh). It crossed the Zayandeh River on a bridge that was also a pavilion and a dam, and that led out along the upper avenue onto yet another series of gardens and garden promenades. Significantly, these kinds of public open spaces found consistently in the grander spaces of the new city would have engendered a “spectatorial” habit among the Isfahans. It should be no surprise, then, that such a viewing habit, one to which they had become so accustomed over several generations, would have been reproduced down to neighborhood scale, as found in an early 18th century bath with its tile portrait of the great avenues.

Remaining also from these years are representations of the city’s inhabitants and visitors, and of its public life in images, as well as in items of material and visual culture. The absence of archives makes these all the more precious. The fabulous Safavid textiles traded for Peruvian silver were depicted in Persian and European paintings and even used as coronation robes for European kings. We are fortunate to have in the Penn Museum collection several fragments of these textiles. Numerous Safavid paintings were assembled in albums at the Safavid, Ottoman, and Mughal courts, and given as gifts to all and sundry from the Portuguese to the Muscovites. Memoirs of the numerous foreign travelers and missionaries (some 32 European accounts of varying quality), in particular the images of Isfahan by Cornelius Le Bruyn from his 1707 visit there, give us a glimpse of the Isfahani heyday.

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