

Concepts of royal garden architecture from Mesopotamia to the Indus in the 9th to 13th centuries, based on textual and archaeological evidence

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Studies on 'Islamic' garden history have followed two paradigms, whose generalizing and essentialist character has drawn criticism from different scholars over the past years. The first argues for an ancient Persian origin of the concept and the type of gardens in the Islamic periods, known however, only from the fifteenth century onwards, and thus presupposing the idea of a continuous tradition. The second is an understanding that brings together gardens from different Islamic ruled regions, an extremely large and disparate geographical area, as 'Islamic' gardens.

Yet, there remains a huge gap of knowledge in the scholarly literature on 'Islamic' and 'Persian' gardens in Western Asia. While archaeology has tended to focus on ancient pre-Islamic gardens and art history has focused on existing gardens from the early modern periods in Iran and India, the medieval periods, which are crucial for the paradigm of 'continuity', rest in the void. Responding to this significant lacuna, this dissertation proposes an examination of royal gardens from Mesopotamia to the Indus River between the ninth and the mid-thirteenth centuries, based on both textual and archaeological evidence. The dissertation will firstly make use of Arabic and Persian primary sources that have so far been largely absent from scholarship on medieval Western Asian gardens, in order to examine the interrelation of formal and functional features. The findings from the texts will allow for a fresh reading of the published archaeological evidence with a view to garden features, which has not been done systematically before. The analysis will provide a typological study of formal and functional features of garden architecture in the region and periods based on the correlation between textual and archaeological evidence, instead of interpolating from later gardens of the early modern periods.