

# PROJECT REPORTS

## ARCHAEOLOGY OF ISLAMIC CITIES

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As mentioned in last year's *Annual Report*, research on the archaeology of Islamic cities at the Oriental Institute began with the subject of Sasanian and Islamic cities in Iran. While active field-work in Iran continues to be postponed, the author was able to participate in the Siraf Congress and revisit that port site (see *News & Notes*, Fall 2004, #183).

### Rayy

The discussion of Islamic cities in last year's *Annual Report* concluded with some notes on the medieval city of Rayy, also known as Rhages in ancient times and the predecessor of modern Tehran. There is a connection to the Oriental Institute in the archaeologist Erich Schmidt, who before he excavated Persepolis, worked for Breasted at Alishar Höyük in Turkey. By 1932 he had established his own project in Iran on the fertile plain south of Tehran. This was the Rayy expedition, which included the prehistoric site of Cheshmeh Ali and Sasanian palaces with their great stucco decorations. My student, Tanya Treptow, and I went to Philadelphia to see their objects from Rayy, but in the end decided to rely on the records and many potsherds in the Oriental Institute collections for an exhibition entitled *Daily Life Ornamented* (May 14–October 14, 2007). While the exhibit is intended to convey a broad sense of Islamic cultural history and the process of archaeology, the specific urban history of Rayy was the main subject.

The tenth-century geographer Muqaddasi epitomized the city of Rayy as one of the glories of Islam and a great metropolis (390). He proceeds to give details on the nature of the population and structure of the city. Thus he states "... the markets are spacious, the hostels attractive, the baths good ... and further that there is a castle and an inner city, [as well as] suburbs with the markets" (391). This description fits the expected model for medieval Persian cities which were often divided into a citadel, and inner city, and suburbs. Further as he describes Rayy, mature and prosperous cities tended to find migration of urban functions into the suburbs (not unlike the modern phenomenon of American cities).

The urban focus of the Islamic city continued to be the Congregational (or Friday) mosque. This structure was located in the inner or oldest part of the city and may be that built by al-Mansur and completed in A.D. 775, where no doubt the future caliph Harun al-Rashid worshipped as a youth. Muqaddasi adds an interesting detail, stating that "the watermelon building is beside the mosque" and comments on "the amazing courtyard of the water melon" (391). In Arabic the names *maidan*

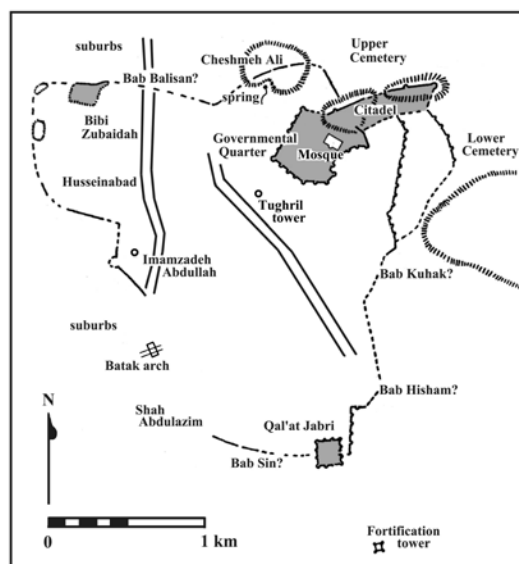


Figure 1. Plan of Rayy (after Kleiss, W. *Qal'eh Gabri, Naqarah Khaneh, und Bordje Yazid bei Rey*, *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 15 (1982), fig. 2)

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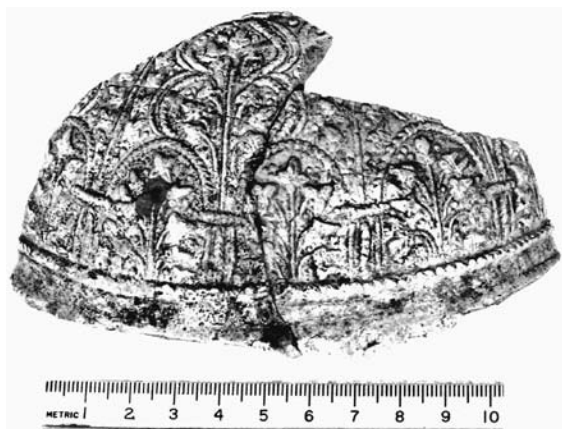


Figure 2. Molded ware juglet from the Ray excavations (OIM 115148)

al-Balkhi, presumably the now-lost world geography which formed the basis of the school followed by Istakhri, Ibn Hauqal, and indeed Muqaddasi himself. Apparently this was but one of its “remarkable books” and would later be used by the philosopher Ibn Sina (known as Avicenna in the West). The library was in the Rudha quarter, near the Surkani canal, and “... in a caravan-serai” (391). This may be another clue to one of the myriad uses for this architectural form and a caution to archaeologists when interpreting the discovery of such buildings. One may further imagine the library set among other buildings in a garden area, such as one finds depicted on molded juglets from the Ray collection (fig. 2).

We know from preliminary reports that Schmidt found the Congregational mosque in the excavations of the inner city. He also excavated in the suburbs now known as Huseinabad, as reported by Keall who examined the excavation records at the Oriental Institute. More recently there have been renewed excavations by Fazeli, the present director of ICAR. What is clear from reading Muqaddasi, and indeed other geographers and historians, is that they may inspire archaeologists with concepts and interpretations and lead to definitive publications of this great city. Appreciation of medieval Iranian culture may be facilitated by these archaeological materials, just as the humble (and often beautiful) potsherds in the Oriental Institute Museum reveal details of lives within Islamic cities.

## Baalbek

“A farsakh from Istakhr is the theater of Sulayman, to which one ascends by handsome stairs cut in the rock. Here are black pillars, and statues in niches, and remarkable constructions like other theaters of al-Sham .... When a man sits in this stadium, the villages and the farms are all before him, as far as the eye can see” (Muqaddasi 444).

Muqaddasi’s visit to Persepolis seems to have sparked a nostalgia, a memory of “other theaters of al-Sham (greater

*al-Batikh* and *dar al-Batikh* may have been nicknames (*laqabs*?) and not a central produce market. There are interesting parallels from other early Islamic cities: the *dar al-imara* on the *qibla* side of the great mosque in Damascus was named the Dar al-Khayl, the “house of horses” (stables); likewise, next to the mosque of Ramla was the Dar al-Sabbaghin, the “house of dyers,” a profession of noxious smoke and odors. No doubt there were other examples which may bear references to colors or decorative elements for administrative centers.

Another feature of Ray which attracted Muqaddasi’s attention was the library. Here he claims to have examined a manuscript of

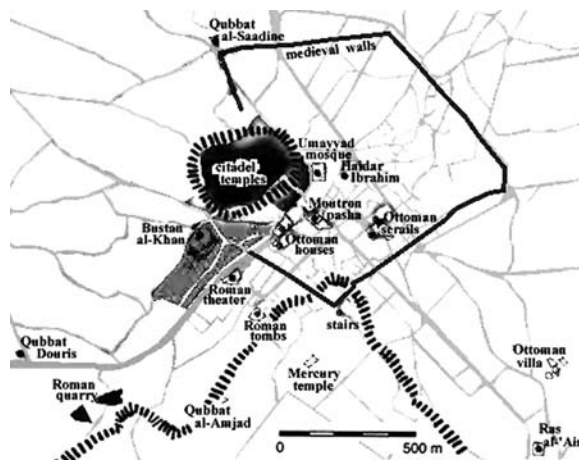


Figure 3. Plan of Baalbek (after Lebanonatlas.com/sriArcheological/map)

Syria),” which was his homeland. In his mind, he would sit amidst the great ruins of Solomon and look out on the beauty of vast villages and farmlands. Muqaddasi mentions Baalbek as “... an ancient city of Sulayman ibn Da’ud, with remarkable ruins” (160). This year I was able to visit for the first time the great monuments of Baalbek in the Biqa’ Valley of Lebanon with my student, Rana Mikati, as my cicerone (as recounted in *News & Notes*, Fall 2006, #191). These ruins have completely changed their character since the Crusades (and after al-Muqaddasi’s time). The great hill of classical temples was enclosed in medieval fortifications, not unlike Crusader castles, in the early twelfth century. Saladin appointed his father, Najm al-din Ayyub, its governor and inaugurated a Middle Islamic prosperity, reflected by new archaeological surveys of the Baalbek region.

The archaeology of Baalbek demonstrates a continuing prosperity during the early Islamic period when it had a mint of regional importance (as the excavations in Beirut are testifying). The archaeological remains have been investigated by German archaeologists, included Friedrich Sarre who in 1898 may have been the first Islamicist included in a classical excavation; renewed research by the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut presents sophisticated reconstructions as well as a welcome interest in the Ottoman remains. Unlike the city of Rayy, Baalbek does not seem to have hit an apogee during the Abbasid period and had to endure the violence of the Crusades. Baalbek was renewed under the Zangids and Ayyubids with fortification of the classical buildings, as mentioned above, and walling of the lower town. This prosperity of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is, somewhat ironically, exactly contemporary with the wonderful artifacts displayed in the Rayy exhibition at the Oriental Institute Museum.

The later encrustation of medieval facade, towers, and walls recalls later occupations at the Temple of Bel in Palmyra (the medieval Tadmor). Before these fortifications, the temple was almost certainly the *qasr* mentioned by al-Muqaddasi and said to have been built by Sulayman ibn Da’ud. Indeed the classical remains in Amman, Jordan, were yet another example of “... a stadium of Sulayman” (Muqaddasi 175). Some years after al-Muqaddasi, the great geographer al-Yaqt commented that “when people wondered at buildings and did not know who erected them, they always attributed them to Solomon and the Jinns ...” This cynicism was anticipated by the Arabian geographer al-Hamdani, a contemporary of Muqaddasi, who states, “Just as the Arabs ascribe all ancient [remains] to ‘Ad, so do they attribute all colossal buildings to Solomon” (135).

The wonders of antiquity were only curiosities and the geographer al-Muqaddasi was clearly not an archaeologist; rather his interests were focused on contemporary people and products, and above all, the locational structures of their settlements, particularly the contemporary cities.



Happily his account is chronologically situated between the glories of the Abbasid caliphate (he notes the decline of the vast capital of Samarra in Iraq) and the revivals from the twelfth century onwards. For Islamic archaeologists this is a fortunate guide to the crucial understanding of urbanism and indeed settlement history in the Middle East. Comparison of Rayy and Baalbek is more than intriguing, beyond the common references in Muqaddasi. The search for patterns of cultural development is fundamental to the advance in understanding of medieval Islamic civilization pursued through the under-utilized evidence of archaeology.

**Figure 4.** A glazed sherd of the twelfth/thirteenth century from the Rayy excavations, similar to those recovered from Baalbek. See Verena Daiber, “Islamic Fine Wares from Baalbek,” *BAAL* 7 (2003): 135–38.