

# The Garden as a Political Statement

## Case Studies from the Near East in the First Millennium B.c.

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The current study criticizes the translated version of " the garden as a political statement" written by David Stronach.

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In this review of the little explored political role of the garden in the ancient Near East attention deserves to be drawn especially to the period between 900 and 500 B.C. It is a period with-in which one or another outstanding monarch, whether Assyrian, Babylonian or Achaemenid, can be seen to have turned to the creation of a great park or garden in order to underscore the accomplishments of his reign. This brief survey will conclude with some reflections on the legacy that is owed to this markedly expansive moment in the history of the garden

### The Mesopotamian Background

Over the course of several millennia the garden came to play not a few different roles in ancient Mesopotamia. From the sixth millennium B.C.

onwards, when irrigation agriculture first began to be adopted in the largely arid setting of central and southern Mesopotamia, it can be assumed that the garden came to epitomize the fertility of the land. From the outset, moreover, such a choice amenity—abundantly watered, fruitful, shaded, and cool—must also have emerged as a unique source of pleasure

and delight<sup>1</sup>.

*1. Historical reports and archaeological works do not provide a clear background about gardening around the globe. The beliefs that garden is a continuation of agricultural life, or if it's a response to the barren nature or a space for pleasure, are known statements that each faced some solid criticisms. Garden as a human-cultural product that brings with it the best of the human mind and its aesthetic choices cannot be regarded as an environmental measure. Also, life in a barren environment is far from reasonable for ancient humans, and researchers seem to have attributed the climatic conditions of today to these lands' ancient past. The pleasure hypothesis can be argued for all human choices thus it cannot be used for the initial cause of gardening.*

These various qualities no doubt served—from a relatively early date—to make the garden a suitable complement to the temple, either as a location for outdoor rituals or, more importantly, as a bounteous ambience in which a god would wish to "walk abroad<sup>2</sup>.

*2. The hypothesis that gardens emerged as temples also has many implications. The sanctity of the elements of the garden and its assignment to particular individuals and times validates this view to a large extent. Garden, acting as a temple*

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*has semantic features of space and landscape related to temple concepts. While the garden as a temple must be a type of temple.*

Equally, a temple garden must have carried still other resonances. That is to say that, in keeping with the physical properties of any temple as such, the quality of a temple garden would have been seen to be representative of both the status of the god that was invoked and the status of the community that had sought to provide the amenity in question. While another separate type of garden, namely a herbal garden, also appears to have been of very considerable antiquity, palace gardens (*kiri ekal limj*) are not referred to in Babylonia until the reign of Adad-shuma-usur (1218-1189 B.C.). Further to the north, the concern of the Middle Assyrian monarch, Tiglath Pileser I (1115-1077 B.C.), for the orchards of his homeland is well documented; but, as far as is known, this royal interest in horticulture was utilitarian, not ornamental.

#### Notes on the Neo-Assyrian Contribution

From the 9th century B.C. onwards the Mesopotamian royal garden comes into its own. Assurnasirpal II (883-859 B.C.), the founder of the Neo Assyrian Empire, is one of the first monarchs, for example, to view the garden as a potent vehicle for royal propaganda. In keeping with one of the evident prerogatives of widespread dominion, Assurnasirpal goes out of his way to record the often exotic trees, cuttings, and seeds which were retrieved on his campaigns and which were then planted within the bounds of his new garden at Nimrud.

It must also be asked if Assurnasirpal's insistence on the fecundity of his garden, and his stress on his active enjoyment of its bounty, was not inspired by something more than the

personal pleasure that this vigorous monarch took in his newly created garden. In other words this same fruitfulness, and the king's clear association with it, may have been meant to underline another aspect of the monarch's public persona: namely, his cosmic role in assuring the fertility and fruitfulness of the land as a whole. With the reign of Sargon II (722-705), Assyrian rulers can be seen to move unquestionably to something beyond a generous provision of water and an apparent ambition to plant the largest possible range of botanical specimens. The departure is attested at Khorsabad where, from 713 to 706 B.C., Sargon was engaged in the construction of a new capital. In an inscription which celebrates the city's foundation, Sargon goes on to refer to "a park like unto Mount Amanus" which was laid out "by its side." Herein stood "every tree" of "the Hittite land" and "the plants of every mountain." A bas-relief found in the northern, private wing of Sargon's palace could very well provide a view of the park in question from this same vantage point. Prominent in the right foreground is a wooded hill with a crenellated altar on its summit while, at a central but more distant point, the design is dominated by a compact pavilion with a two-columned portico (Fig. 1). The building stands above a stretch of water in which two boats ride at anchor.

If it is appropriate to combine the testimony of text, relief, and the probable original setting of the garden, several observations necessarily follow. First, the careful stress on the trees in the sculptured design would seem to offer a visual complement to the force of Sargon's written claim to have gone out of his way to plant trees of Syrian origin within his extensive park. Secondly, since the one illustrated wooded knoll within Sargon's great park (Fig. 1) finds no natural parallel in the

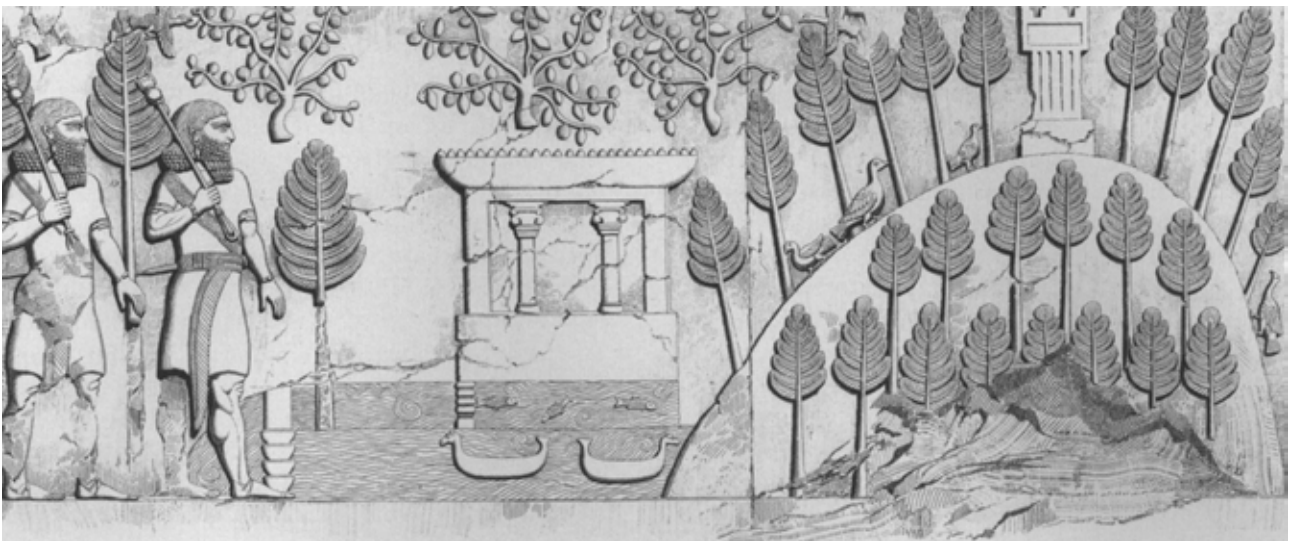


Fig. 1: Drawing of a bas-relief which depicts part of an extensive royal park founded by Sargon II at Khorsabad. Source: Stronach, 1990.

more or less flat landscape which today stretches northwards from the private wing of the palace towards the distant course of the River Khosr, any hillocks in the royal park would appear to have been raised artificially so that they, and the trees upon them, would offer some degree of resemblance to the forested foothills of the Taurus range.

It is striking, moreover, that many elements in the architecture of Khorsabad also appear to have drawn their inspiration from further west. Sargon took pride, for example, in building a bit hilani within his new capital. He also introduced column bases of a type familiar from contemporary Syria<sup>15</sup> and, last but not least, his elevated garden pavilion (Fig. 1) can be seen to have possessed columns with volute capitals of a type long familiar in a more western context. In short, such highly visible Syrian motifs—including the name given to his spacious park—were almost certainly intended to underline the now firm extension of Assyrian power to the west of Euphrates. One further "political message" may also be contained in the architecture of Sargons celebrated royal garden. This monarch's westerly campaigns were not of course confined to the Levant: they also penetrated to the vicinity of the Cilician Gates. In this respect the kind of garden pavilion that is shown in figure 1 (and which no doubt had close counterparts in north Syria), may also have been to some extent representative of a type of pavilion that was employed yet further afield—perhaps even in Anatolia proper, the evidence for this last speculation is admittedly slight. Nothing is known, for example, of ancient garden construction in Phrygia, even if the name of King Midas—himself a contemporary of Sargon II—is associated with a rose with no less than sixty petals. At the same time, however, the discovery of the finely dressed stone foundations of a small building of Lydian date at Sardis are of very conceivable relevance. Minimal as these remains are, it is at least possible to take the view that they represent all that is left of an elevated royal garden pavilion with a two-columned facade.<sup>18</sup> Such a building—such a possible "gazebo of Croesus"—could represent in other words the one extant vestige of a type of Syro-Anatolian garden pavilion which is otherwise only known to us from the bas-reliefs of late Assyria.

Inscriptions of Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.) indicate that, in the course of enlarging and embellishing his new capital, Nineveh, this considerable monarch directly followed his father's example in laying out "a great park like unto Mount Amanus." The very repetition of Sargons initiative is instructive. Sennacherib may have felt bound for various reasons to relocate the capital, but this second member of the Sargonid line apparently still found it politic to recreate—with the very same name—this widely visible symbol of foreign conquest.

If this notable royal park does indeed stand depicted in a mid-seventh century relief from the palace of Assurbanipal (Fig. 2), it is of some relevance to note the nature of the innovations which Sennacherib chose to introduce. Not only

did the king's garden pavilion come to be situated on the top of a dominant wooded knoll (where it was flanked by both a crenellated altar and a royal stele), but it also received its own supply of water from the bed of a tall stone aqueduct rather than from a less conspicuous river or canal. Whatever the remaining "Syrian" characteristics of the Vegetation or the pavilion may have been, the king was determined, in short, that his "great park" would proclaim the unexcelled engineering achievements of his time.

Whether or not Sennacherib also went so far as to construct stone water channels and basins within his gardens is not known. Such channels would obviously not have been suitable on the steep slopes of a wooded hillock (where, in the relief, only earth-lined channels are visible), but such conduits could have been introduced on more level ground. At all events, it is worth noting that Sennacherib's labor force possessed the necessary skills to construct permanent stone conduits. On the one hand it was the sudden availability of mass-produced finely jointed masonry which made stone aqueducts a practical addition to the king's major irrigation works, and on the other hand it is known that Sennacherib took pride in providing stone horse-troughs (each composed of sets of three tightly jointed limestone blocks) for the chariot horses of his army.

### Notes on the Neo-Babylonian

As I have suggested elsewhere, the familiar explanation for the construction of the famed "Hang-ing Gardens" of Babylon is probably not to be taken exactly at face value. Appealing as it may be to suppose, with Berossus, that Nebuchadnezzar II (604-562 B.C.) of Babylon took pains to create a garden of mountainous character in order to please his Median consort who "longed for mountainous surroundings," and clear as it



Fig. 2: Detail of a bas-relief (BM 124939) from the palace of Assurbanipal at Nineveh. The landscape depicted in the relief may illustrate a garden of Sennacherib, the grandfather of Assurbanipal. Photo: Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

must be that the king himself would have wished for the ease and comfort that a garden of exceptional quality would provide, there can be little doubt that such considerations do less than describe the whole story.

A soldier and statesman of marked ability, Nebu-chadnezzar was in addition a royal architect of unusual ambition and imagination. It is only logical to presume, therefore, that he would have felt impelled to create not only a capital and a palace that would be entirely worthy of the unrivalled condition of his rule, but also a form of royal garden that would proclaim the same proud message. It is apparent, moreover, that in designing and building at least one garden with an expressly "mountainous" motif Nebuchadnezzar continued to look to a broad category of garden design which had come to represent, for at least a century before his accession, a prime expression of wealth and power. Seen in this light, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon stand as an ultimate witness to the prestige that was attached to the concept of a "landscaped" royal garden during the first half of the first millennium B.C.

### The Royal Garden at Pasargadae

In founding Pasargadae, the first monumental capital of the Achaemenid Persians, Cyrus the Great (559-530 B.C.) took steps to lay out a highly unusual "hub of empire." In a site replete with novel features, nothing is perhaps so distinctive as the importance that was given to the garden. While Classical descriptions of the tomb of Cyrus have long been seen to place it within a luxuriant garden, archaeological excavations have recently served to show that the adjacent palaces of Cyrus were themselves located amidst a series of contiguous garden spaces.

In the present context it is the innermost garden of the palace area - a garden defined by stone-lined water channels and by the surviving remains of Palace and its two adjacent garden pavilions (Fig. 3)-which is of prime interest, indeed, while the disposition of the buildings at Pasargadae was once compared to the organization of a nomadic encampment, the various elements in the surviving plan of this inner or "royal" garden do as much as anything else to underline the formal, more or less geometrical nature of the designs that were adhered to.

The water channels are 25 cm wide and their broad stone margins must have once stood flush with the adjacent ground surface. They stand punctuated at each corner, and otherwise at 13 to 14 m intervals, by deep square basins c. 80 \* 80 cm in size. Built from tightly jointed, well dressed limestone blocks, such stone-lined channels offer, needless to say, a more than appropriate complement to the fine limestone masonry of the adjacent palaces.

Of further note is the overall character of the Royal Garden at Pasargadae. In particular, the way in which Palace and its satellite pavilions were placed in the very midst of a welcoming garden ambience' is something that already appears to presage a later architectural formula. More precisely, such

arrangements do much to recall a type of large garden estate which came to contain a palace and a number of subordinate pavilions and which is referred to in literary sources, from at least the eleventh century a.d. onwards, as a bagh.

The stone water channels that have come to light to date also describe a plan of a new type. As was already noted several years ago, they appear to define the outline of two contiguous rectangular garden plots and the limits of a broad pathway that once bordered the central space. Beyond such excavated evidence, however, the presence of the monarch's fixed throne seat at the mid-point of the principal portico of Palace P32 has now been seen to call for the presence of a corresponding line of sight down the long axis of the garden<sup>3</sup>.

*3. There is a great deal of doubt regarding the accuracy of the author's perceptions of the previous title (neo-Babylonian empire) and the beginning of this title (Pasargadae), since most of them rely on author's assumptions which he presents at the end of an archaeological or historical reality without mentioning sources or providing any evidence and reasons. Almost none of the assumptions about the gardens of Assyria, Babylon, and Pasargadae have any strong evidence. At the same time, it is not possible to prove another hypothesis that opposes the writer's claim and there is a need for a body of evidence. At the same time, the claim "the need for an appropriate view of the perspective on the authority of the longitudinal axis of the garden" has caused great uncertainty due to the placement of the throne at the center of the main porch of the palace. From these writings, it is deduced that the preparation of the front view was a secondary response and it is for the king's accession to the throne. While it is more reasonable to assume that the formation of the main road in the garden was a precedent act, and the palace's porch has been located later on according to the main road. This is due to the importance of the element of the street/road in Iranian gardens. Without it, the garden will lose its structure, and the roads' name also confirms the essence of the space and its dependence on water, not the king's throne.*

When combined with the rest of the plan of the inner garden, such a line of sight emerges as a critical feature. That is to say that its very presence not only illustrates the fact that there must have been four separate plots (each wholly in consonance with the proportions of the garden as a whole), but it goes a long way to suggest that Cyrus should be credited with that most fundamental of configurations in later Persian garden design, namely that of a chahai bagh or a "fourfold garden"<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 3).

*4. The analysis of the Cyrus House's plan clearly shows that the main porch is located on a broad area on the front side of the palace, and the assignment of the other three axes to the palace, as Stronach later stated in his writings, was more*

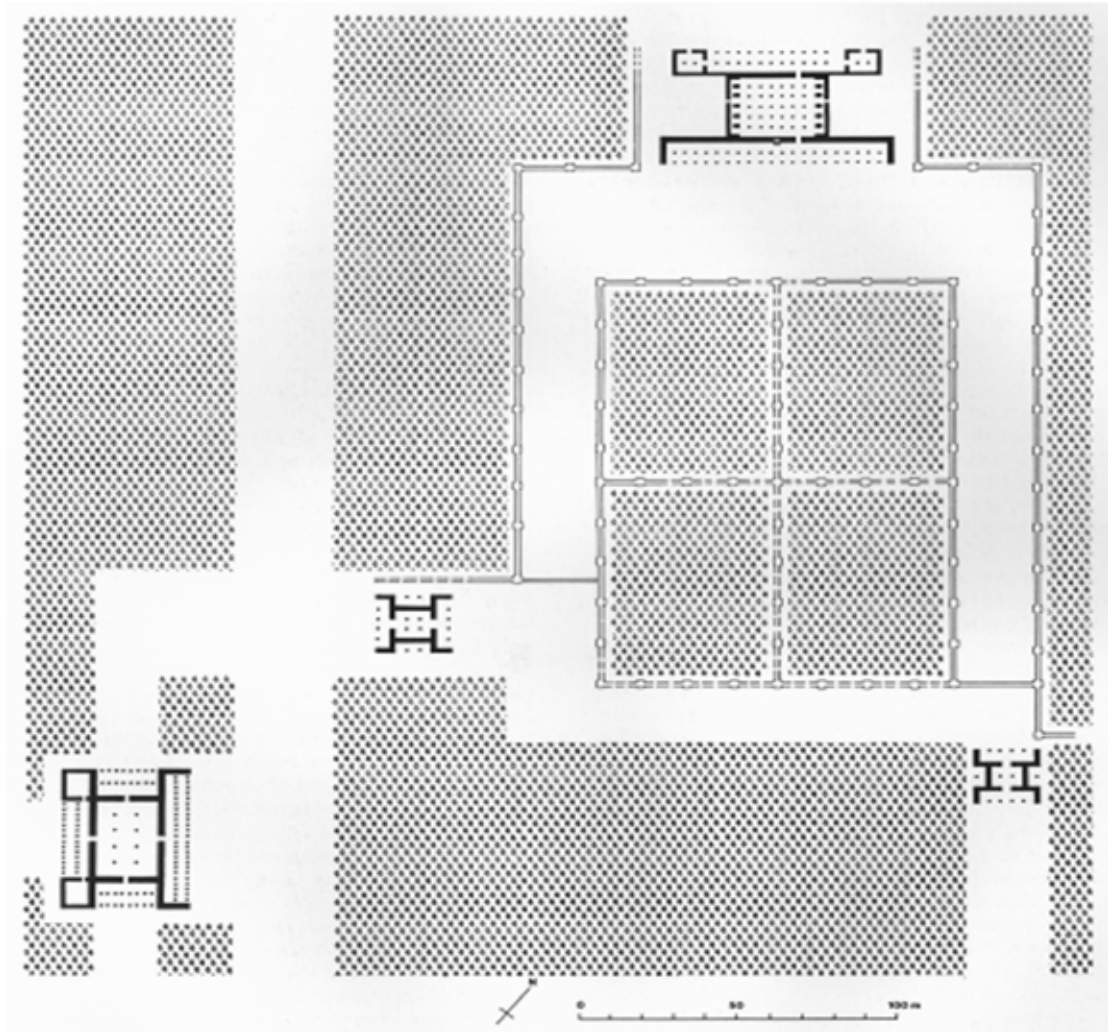


Fig. 3: Pasargadae. Sketch plan of the Royal Garden. Source: Stronach, 1990.

*prejudiced about the shape of the Pasargadae gardens than the expression of the truth. Various articles have been written about the origin of the Charbagh in Iranian garden (... several examples) and according to the history of Iranian gardens, it has been proven that Charbagh is an uncommon example in Persian gardens and, contrary to the loose taste of the "Several Orientalists", it is clear that the main element in Iranian garden was its road.*

With this knowledge in hand, various questions deserve to be raised. Was such a plan no more than an expression of the new, geometrical articulation that is manifest at Pasargadae? Or no more than a demonstration of the constant Achaemenid delight in paired or balanced elements? Or was it perhaps intended to spell out some more specific, political message?

Might such a quadripartite garden plan have been intended, at least in one sense, to stand for all the Achaemenid domin-

ions—and for the fertility that was expected of each part of the monarch's estate? Or, to phrase the question in yet another way, were the four plots of Cyrus' stone-channeled garden designed to represent "the four quarters of the world"? Needless to say such a concept would have been instantly familiar to many of the tributary peoples of the empire— and by no means unfamiliar to the Persians themselves.

Yet whether or not any such specific connotation was intended, there are other indications, I believe, that Cyrus followed prior Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian practice in exploring the political messages that could be conveyed through the medium of royal garden architecture. First, Cyrus' wish to underline the distance of his capital from any hostile boundary may have been one of a number of factors that led him, quite exceptionally, to place his palaces in the undefended setting of a series of gently sloping gardens; and, secondly, Cyrus' evident desire to make optimal and very visible use of the new standards of stone working that were available to him follow-

ing his conquest of Lydia may have been one of the chief factors which inspired the novel introduction of finely dressed stone water channels and basins<sup>5</sup>.

5. All these stifling hypotheses are used for attributing a trait that does not bear any truth. Persian Garden is not Charbagh, which needs to be justified by mentioning its intangible nature among the Iranians. why Stronach persists in assigning a particular atmosphere of Charbagh pattern to Persian Garden and Cyrus? In the Vahid Heydarentaj's article (Heidar Nattaj, 2017), quoted from the root of the Charbagh in the Old Testament. Maybe there is a relation between this quotation and the former persistence.

### Echoes of the Garden at Pasargadae

Possibly in order to stress certain elements of continuity while at the same time relocating the seat of the dynasty, Cambyses II (530-522 B.C.) appears to have had the characteristics of his father's "garden capital" very much in mind when he laid out his own new gardens and palatial buildings on a choice stretch of land close to the River Pulvar and only a few kilometres from the future site of Persepolis. Furthermore, the regularities in Cyrus' original design can be assumed to have found telling echoes in many of the royal or satrapal estates situated far beyond Fars. Certainly this appears to have been

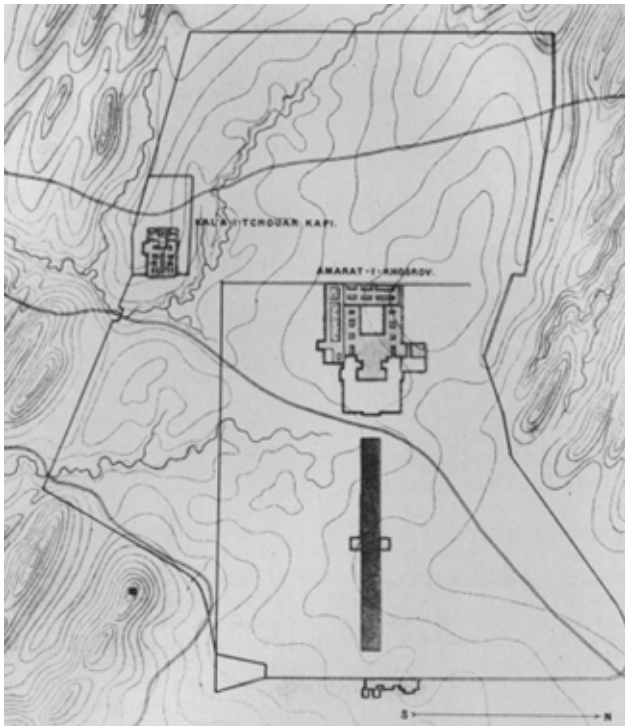


Fig. 4: Pasargadae. Sketch plan of the Royal Garden. Source: Stronach, 1990.

the case with respect to the park of Cyrus the Younger in the environs of Sardis—a park where Lysander, the Spartan admiral, marveled at the trees "finely and evenly planted" and at the way everything was "exact and arranged at right angles".

6. Interestingly, in Lysander's wonder, from visiting the garden of Cyrus the Younger in Saard, the order of the trees and the right-angled appearance of the garden are mentioned, but there is no speak of Charbagh. This is the garden which Stronach believes is inspired by Pasargad, which is defensible regarding the natural process of garden's construction and landscaping; But if this garden does not have any indications from charbagh, it can be said that at the source of its inspiration there was also no consideration of Charbagh.

The degree to which the principal characteristics of the Achaemenid palatial garden were then subsequently preserved—at least in Iran—for many centuries following the fall of Persepolis in 331 B.C. is something which cannot only be attributed to the undeniable simplicity and elegance of Cyrus' seminal design. It must also be explained, needless to say, by the wish of many a later ruler to be associated with a once universally recognized and prestigious emblem of kingship. The substantial late Sasanian remains of the 'Imarat-i Khosrow and those of yet another palace at Qasr-i Shirin combine to reveal, for example, an undiminished concern for precise geometric planning and a continued close association of palace, pavilion, and garden. At the same time, however, it is possible to detect an important departure. This departure was an ever greater emphasis on the sheer length of the garden. In this respect the dominant feature of the garden of the early seventh century 'Imarat-i Khosrow appears to have been a 500 m long channel or pool (Fig. 4). Such a channel was marked at the halfway point by the foundations of two structures—conceivably pavilions—which may well have marked the line of an important transverse vista<sup>7</sup>.

7. The Qasr-e Shirin, with its visible archeological works, has no chance of being a Charbagh; where the length and width of the pool are carefully measured, and there is much evidence from the minor parts of the garden. Stronach's persistence in attributing a straight line on the main direction (the main road of the garden) hints at the existence of a strong motive. This motive, of course, is not based on a baseless personal model, because a precise explorer such as Stronach will not sacrifice his dignity to the illusion of taste. Another reason is his belief or decision to assign Charbagh as a mythic pattern to the Iranian garden. What is the origin of this belief or decision? This can be partly explained by Returning to Vahid Heydarentaj's article.

And while such a vista could have marked the midpoint of a colossal four-garden plan, logic also suggests that this same

transverse vista could have defined the junction between two four-garden plans that were disposed, one after the other, on the line of the longitudinal axis of the garden. Support for this suggestion is not only to be found in the way that much later Safavid and Moghul gardens came to consist of multiples of the four quarters, as often as not with a major pavilion or reservoir at the centre of the design<sup>8</sup>. It is also to be found, far more immediately, in the axial plan of a ninth century Caliphal garden at Samarra, where a "fourfold garden" was apparently reproduced, not once but twice, along the line of the principal garden vista (Fig. 5).

8. As mentioned before, the main reason why the Iranian garden is not a Charbagh is its past. Examining hundreds of samples of the remaining gardens in Iran and their designs in paintings indicate that rare examples of Persian gardens are made in the form of charbagh. Famous examples are often monuments, which are due to their architectural form and function.

#### Epilogue: The Eight Gardens of Paradise

The configuration of the "eightfold garden" of the Bulkawara Palace at Samarra (Fig. 5) raises a further point of interest: namely the extent to which the apparent doubling of the fourfold garden may or may not be related to the concept of the "eight gardens of Paradise." In the past it has been taken for granted that a garden such as that in the Bulkawara Palace would have drawn its inspiration from this Koranic conception. Yet while this remains a valid speculation with regard to the purposes of the ninth century designers of the garden, an intriguing question still remains: from where did the concept of the eight gardens arise in the first place<sup>9</sup>?

9. Such contradictions are the result of symbolic views and previous dogmas in attributing a particular numerical symbolic quality, to a cultural product which has been constructed during historical conflicts. When there can be no relations between the Qur'an as the source of the formation of the Bulkowara Gardens and the number eight, it seems that an important question appears that might undermine the first assumption! Even the Qur'an is not the source of the formation of the garden. It is necessary to look for something beyond the historical process and superior to the Qur'an as the justification for the Hasht-bagh's appearance. This kind of questioning is not a question-driven research. This is the product of a dogmatic researcher who does not seek truth in his research but seeks to justify his previous mentality.

For many years a convincing explanation for the number eight has been elusive. The traditional view, expressed in a recent study, is that this number may have been meant to stand for absolute perfection "for it surpasses the number of the seven spheres and is larger than Hell which has only seven sto-

ries." With the new finding that the chahar bagh motif almost certainly extends back to the sixth century B.C. (and with the related possibility that the elongated, courtly gardens of the seventh century A.D. were not seldom characterized by eight rather than four parterres) it is clear, however, that a more compelling explanation deserves to be considered. In a word, an eightfold ordering of garden space in certain of the more prominent gardens of the mid-first millennium A.D. may have provided a concrete foundation, at least in a historical sense, for the singular image of the "eight gardens of paradise"<sup>10</sup>.

10. Because number eight is greater than seven, which is equivalent to the seven heavens and seven levels of hell, so it is the symbol of absolute perfection. following this logic, the number 9 of Baha'is will sit at a higher plain than 8, and consequently Baha'ist's 9 pedaled lily temple in New Delhi, is a more complete symbol of Hasht-bagh in Bulkowara which is superior to the Chaharbagh of Isfahan and Charbagh is above the traditional Iranian garden, which has only one main street.

When Attending the loose logic of prominent and hard-working explorers such as Stronach and deviations in their dog-

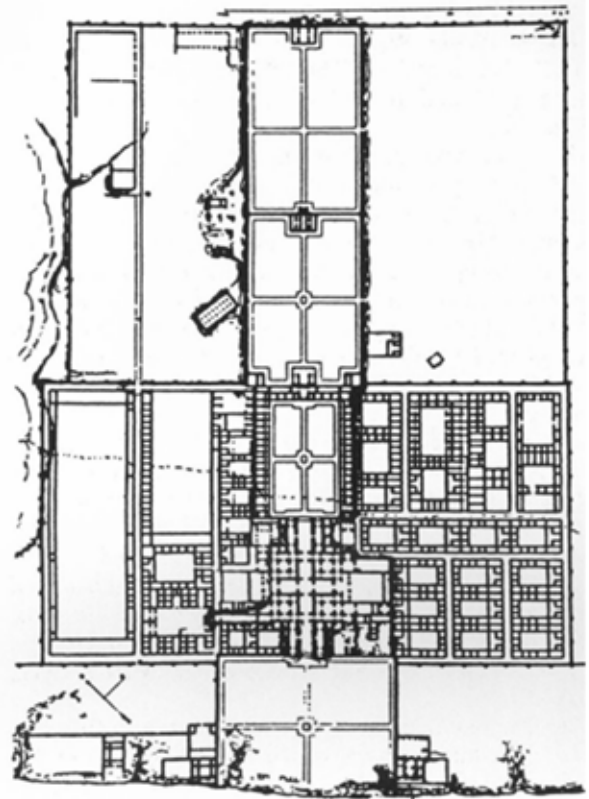


Fig. 5: A plan of the ninth c. a.d. Bulkawara Palace at Samarra, showing the doubled four-garden motif beyond the limits of the palace proper. Source: Stronach, 1990.

matic and perhaps political views in *The world of art theories*; it is clear that One should distinguish between the value of their archeological findings, provided that they are based on scientific reports and not speculation, and the interpretation of their findings, especially where they enter philosophical and judgmental contexts.

Their documented and scientific reports are undoubtedly valid sources that should be taken into consideration frequently, but their baseless interpretations should be regarded as their interest in a particular version and it should not receive excessive attention.

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