

Original Research Article

The Landscape of Khawarnaq: From Reality to Symbol, the Evolution of Narratives About the Landscape of the Sassanid Khawarnaq Palace in Islamic Period Sources*

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Abstract | Khawarnaq is one of the most famous palaces built during the Sassanian era (224 to 651 AD). Its reputation in later historical sources—particularly throughout the Islamic period—was so great that its tales often became intertwined with legend, and the palace, much like the Taq Kasra (Arch of Ctesiphon), became a standard for assessing the grandeur of later architectural works. One of the main objectives of this article is to trace the evolution of Islamic-era narratives from the early centuries up to the Qajar period, focusing on the depiction of the palace's landscape.

A noteworthy point is that these narratives transformed over time. While early Islamic sources treated the palace's displayed landscape as ephemeral, they nevertheless described its qualitative aspects. Thus, this phase of Khawarnaq narratives can be characterized as "landscape depiction rooted in reality". Over time, however, spatial and qualitative descriptions of the palace and its vistas gradually faded. The narratives ultimately reached a point where only the palace's name remained, reduced to a metaphor for lost grandeur and a yardstick for measuring the height and splendor of later structures. By the Safavid era, the original accounts had been entirely forgotten, effectively "consigned to the graveyard".

No trace of the palace's actual landscape remained here, and the structure itself served as a pure symbol and metaphor. This period can thus be understood as one of "symbolic landscape representation". Yet during the Qajar era, narratives of the palace's landscape re-emerged with renewed visibility. These shifting representations demonstrate that Iranian architectural historiography should not be viewed as static or immutable. Rather, these narratives evolve according to each epoch's distinctive characteristics, rendering any reliance on grand narratives formed around Iran's historical architecture.

Keywords | *Khawarnaq, Narrative, Landscape Representation, Realism, Symbolism.*

Introduction | The story of Khawarnaq Palace's construction is intertwined with the legacy of Bahram Gur, the Sasanian king. According to al-Tabari's account, it was as if none of Yazdegerd's children could survive - they all perished. After numerous heirs had died, Bahram was finally born. To ensure this child's survival, due to the clean and wholesome climate of Hira (present-day Kufa), the infant Bahram was entrusted to Nu'man ibn Imru al-Qays, the Lakhmid Arab king who ruled that region. Thereupon, Nu'man ordered his court to find an architect to construct Khawarnaq Palace and raise the

child upon its rooftop, for the air there was purer. They found Sinmmār the Architect, a man of Roman descent, and the king commissioned him to build a structure of unprecedented height - one that would shield the child from 'the heaviness of the earth' while raising him in health atop its summit. The palace rose two hundred "rash" (approximately 120 meters) with an upper pavilion suitable for year-round habitation (Tabari, 1999, 635-636). Sources credit Sinmmār with completing this architectural marvel in sixty years (Qazvīnī, 1994, 242), though narratives vary considerably - some accounts suggest twenty years, while others claim as little as five (Tabari, 1999, 636).

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The significance of Khawarnaq Palace in historical sources is evident from its consistent mention alongside the Arch of Ctesiphon (Tāq-e Kasrā) as one of the marvels of the ancient world. For instance, Ibn Khordadbeh in his “Book of Roads and Kingdoms” (al-Masālik wa’l-Mamālik) stated he knew of no structure built of plaster and brick that surpassed the grandeur of either the Arch of Ctesiphon at Madā’in or Bahram Gur’s Khawarnaq (Ibn Khurdadbeh, 1992, 152). The Hanbali historian and jurist Qutb al-Dīn Mūsā, in his “Mirror of Time” (Mir’āt al-Zamān), composed between 697-711 AH (1297-1311 CE), enumerates thirty architectural wonders of the world. His list includes Khawarnaq Palace alongside such monuments as the Pyramids of Egypt, the Great Mosque of Damascus, the Synagogue of Edessa in Diyarbakır, the Arch of Ctesiphon, and the Palace of Sadīr (Yūnīnī, 2007, 589).

Early Islamic sources present several distinct narratives about Khawarnaq Palace. The first recounts the dialogue between the king and Sinmār, the Roman architect, concerning the royal reward promised for its construction. The second describes the king surveying the landscape from the palace’s rooftop. Over time, this second narrative gradually faded from memory, reemerging in Safavid-era sources in significantly altered form. This study primarily traces the evolution of the second narrative across Islamic historical sources, examining its transformations through later periods. Subsequently, it analyzes the roots of these narrative shifts within broader contextual frameworks, particularly changes in literary styles across these eras.

Research Questions

1. How do Islamic-period narratives describe the landscape of Khawarnaq Palace?
2. Why do accounts of the palace’s landscape not reappear consistently throughout this era?
3. How can these narrative shifts be explained within broader contextual frameworks, such as literary imagery and stylistic evolution?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this article is based on Dr. Shafiei Kadkani’s theory in the book “Imagery in Persian Poetry” (Sur-e Khayāl dar She’r-e Fārsi). According to this theory, Persian poetry in the first three Islamic centuries (up to the end of the 5th century AH) should be considered “Nature Poetry”. During this period, Persian poetry was “outward-looking (extrospective) and objective”, with the poet’s gaze primarily focused on the surface of objects. In this type of poetry, the poet rarely seeks personal emotions or inner experiences beyond the veil of nature and material elements. Instead, like a painter, they replicate nature and external reality (Shafiei Kadkani, 2022, 317). This era corresponds to the “Khorasani style” of Persian poetry. Later, particularly with the rise of the “Iraqi style”, this worldly, objective, and outward-

looking characteristic shifts. Sirius Shamisa, in his book “Stylistics of Poetry” (Sabk Shenāsi-ye She’r), identifies the difference between the Iraqi and Khorasani styles as a move toward introspection, subjectivity, and the inner world—a style that focuses more on the self (anfus) rather than the external world (afaq) (Ibid., 248). Shafiei Kadkani further argues that post-Samanid and Ghaznavid love poetry becomes detached from direct experience. He states that this poetry enters the realm of “abstraction and generalization”, attributing this shift partly to the rise of Sufism, which pushes all expression toward universality and abstraction (Shafiei Kadkani, 1999, 27).

Kenneth Clark, the eminent art historian, in his book “Landscape into Art”, discusses various periods of landscape depiction in European art, notably “realistic landscape painting” and “symbolic landscape painting”. Although the periodization in the present article does not strictly align with Clark’s chronological sequence, the treatment of landscape in different phases of “Khawarnaq Palace’s” existence recalls the two approaches Clark identifies. However, as noted earlier, the historical progression and conceptual treatment of landscape in Western art differ significantly from Eastern traditions of nature depiction. While Clark associates “symbolic landscape painting” with the medieval period and “realistic landscape painting” with the post-medieval era, the depiction of Khawarnaq Palace follows an inverse trajectory in Islamic art: The palace’s landscape was “naturalistic” during early Islamic period, closely tied to observable reality while, the palace’s imagery evolved into “symbolism” during medieval Islamic period, transforming the structure into an abstract entity, detached from its surroundings—a metaphor for the transient world (“dunyā”) and a reminder of the eternal (“ākhirah”). This framework of landscape representation in Khawarnaq aligns with Shafiei Kadkani’s theory on Persian poetry. The outward-looking, objective, and rooted in tangible nature during the early period (Khorasani Style) and the Inward-looking, abstract, and inclined toward subjectivity and metaphysical themes during the later period (Iraqi Style).

Research Background

Most existing research on Khawarnaq Palace has focused on the 15th-century miniature painting by Kamal al-Din Behzad, created for an illustrated manuscript of Nizami’s Khamsa. While this painting depicts the palace’s construction period, it has overlooked the narrative of the palace’s rooftop view mentioned in historical sources, the very subject of the present study, despite Nizami’s poetic treatment of this theme. Even the poetic verses from Nizami’s divan used in the painting’s upper border inscriptions ignore this landscape aspect¹. Consequently, studies based on Behzad’s painting (Gholami Houjehgan et al., 2022; Shirazi, 2003; Namvar Motlagh, 2003) have similarly neglected the rooftop view narrative and its historical evolution.

Among these studies, Shirazi and Namvar Motlagh examined

the relationship between Nizami's poetry and Behzad's painting. Shirazi (2003) particularly emphasized how Behzad's work diverges from Nizami's text - a unique departure among contemporary artists who typically maintained strict fidelity to literary sources (Namvar Motlagh, 2003, 51). conducted a comparative analysis of similarities and differences between Behzad's painting and Nizami's narrative, employing semiotic methods to trace poetic symbols within the visual representation. While briefly acknowledging the rooftop view mentioned in Nizami's poem (*ibid.*, 51), Namvar Motlagh interpreted King Nu'man's abdication and departure as a transformation from epic to mystical mythology. He characterizes Behzad's omission of the king from the scene as "Behzad's myth-breaking versus Nizami's myth-making" (*ibid.*, 50). Notably, both artists take creative liberties with historical facts: Nizami relocates Nu'man from Hira (near modern Najaf) to Yemen in his poetic version. The research of Gholami Hoojaghan, Balkhari Qahi, and Sadri explores mystical interpretations of Khawarnaq Palace, linking it to symbolic concepts such as "worldly attachments" and neglect of the hereafter.

In addition to the aforementioned studies, which primarily focus on tracing Khawarnaq Palace in Nizami's poetry and Behzad's miniatures, research such as Attarzadeh (2006) not only examined these sources but also explored archaeological investigations of Khawarnaq, seeking to uncover the palace's actual dimensions. Another study, Baladi et al (2023) analyzed the architectural aspects of Khawarnaq Palace in Nizami's "Haft Peykar". However, this research is not limited to the palace's architectural features—it also extends to the structure of "Haft Gonbad" (Seven Domes), though it only briefly mentions Nu'man and Bahram's viewing of the landscape from the palace's rooftop.

Given the diverse range of sources and studies on Khawarnaq Palace, it appears that most existing research has primarily focused on Kamal al-Din Behzad's miniature depictions of the palace and Nizami's verses in "Haft Peykar". As a result, the evolution of the narrative surrounding the rooftop landscape of Khawarnaq in Islamic-period sources has remained overlooked in prior studies. The present article first aims to examine the transformations of this specific narrative across Islamic-era texts. Subsequently, it seeks to explain the roots of these narrative shifts within broader contextual frameworks, such as literary influences.

Research Methodology

This study employs an interpretive-historical methodology. To answer the research questions, we examined Islamic-era sources that reference Khawarnaq Palace. Given the article's focus on the rooftop narrative of Khawarnaq and its evolution throughout Islamic history, the study utilizes a theoretical framework to analyze the reasons behind these narrative transformations.

• Khawarnaq in Early Islamic Sources

Khawarnaq Palace, like other Sassanian-era monuments, is prominently featured in early Islamic historical sources, where it is frequently mentioned. these sources are Tārīkh al-Rusul wa'l-Mulūk (History of Prophets and Kings), Tha'libi's History, Bal'amī's History, Ibn A'tham al-Kūfī's al-Futūh, Akhbār al-Tiwāl, Ya'qūbī's History, Yamīnī's History, Tabaqāt works, Balādhuri's Futūh al-Buldān, Mukhtasar al-Buldān, al-Tanbīh wa'l-Ishrāf, Murūj al-Dhahab wa Ma'ādin al-Jawhar, Nahj al-Balāgha, Mahāsin Isfahān, and Ibn Khurrādādhbih's al-Masālik wa'l-Mamālik. Of these, the sources that specifically recount the story of the king surveying the surrounding landscape are: 1. "History of Prophets and Kings" by Hamza al-Isfahānī, 2. Tha'libi's History 3. Tabari's History 4. Ya'qūbī's History².

In his account of "Yemeni Kings of Hira," Ya'qubi mentions King Nu'man as the ruler who built Khawarnaq. He describes how one day, while seated in the palace, the king contemplated the Euphrates River, palm trees, gardens, and orchards before him when he was suddenly reminded of death. Realizing the futility of all he surveyed, he abandoned his kingdom (Yaqubi, 2003, 256). Similarly, Hamza al-Isfahani in his "History of Prophets and Kings" identifies Nu'man ibn Imru' al-Qays as the builder of both Khawarnaq and Sadir. According to Hamza, Nu'man ruled for only thirty years. One day, while sitting atop Khawarnaq palace, which overlooked Najaf to the west and the Euphrates to the east, his gaze fell upon the date palms, orchards, springs, sailors, divers, fishermen, and all the wealth, servants, and people of Hira. Deep in thought, he realized: "All these things I own today will belong to someone else tomorrow - so what is the purpose of all this?" He then abandoned everything and was never seen again (Hamza Isfahani, 1967, 105-106). Hamza then quotes a poem by the Arab poet 'Adi ibn Zayd³ addressed to Nu'man, which recounts this very episode of the king's contemplation on the transient nature of worldly things (*ibid.*, 105-106). This same poem appears in both Ya'qubi's and Tha'libi's histories. Its Persian translation reads: "Behold the master of Khawarnaq, who once surveyed all from its heights, contemplating leadership. He delighted in his kingdom and abundant wealth, the sea before him, and Sadir. When he became aware, he declared: 'What benefit has the living, when death awaits before him?' Then they all departed, like dry leaves swept away by the eastern and western winds." (Thaalbi Marghani, 1989, 312)⁴.

In contrast to Ya'qubi, Hamza al-Isfahani, and even Tabari, Tha'libi in his historical work identifies Mundhir (Nu'man's father) as the builder of Khawarnaq and Sadir (*ibid.*, 349). While all previous accounts we have discussed describe the king contemplating the view alone, Tabari presents the king accompanied by his minister. He writes: "Nu'man followed the religion of the Arabs, worshipping idols. He had a Christian minister from Syria who followed the religion of Jesus, son of Mary." When viewing the panorama from the rooftop,

the king, intoxicated by the magnificent sights described in earlier accounts, asked his minister if anything in the world could be more beautiful. The minister replied: “Though this is indeed splendid, its flaw is that it is impermanent.” The king then asked what would endure, to which the minister answered: “The hereafter, God’s religion, and worship.” Thus, the king descended from Khawarnaq and was never seen again (Tabari, 1999, 638-639). We can therefore conclude that the common thread in these four early Islamic historians - Yaʿqubi in “Tarikh al-Yaʿqubi,” Hamza al-Isfahani in “History of Prophets and Kings,” Tabari in “Tarikh-i Tabari,” and Thaʿalibi in “Tarikh al-Thaʿalibi” - is their account of the king’s decision to renounce his throne after contemplating the vast natural landscape, realizing its transience and that it would belong to someone else tomorrow.

The transience of the landscape and even Khawarnaq Palace itself became increasingly evident to later writers as the structure fell into ruin. Like Khaqani’s ode that used the Arch of Ctesiphon (Taq-e Kasra) as a symbol of lost grandeur to admonish his own heart, Khawarnaq too came to embody such concepts of impermanence. One fundamental origin of these narratives about vanished splendor lies in the Muslim conquest of these lands despite their former magnificence. For instance, in “al-Futuh” (also known as “Tarikh al-Futuh” or “Futuh al-Sham”), written by Abu Muhammad Ahmad ibn Ali ibn al-Aʿtham al-Kufi (d. 314 AH/926 CE), the account describes how Khalid ibn al-Walid, commander of the Islamic forces, marched on Hira. There he encountered formidable fortifications and heavily armed warriors. Following a soldier’s counsel, Khalid summoned one of them for negotiations. An elderly man named ‘Abd al-Masih ibn Buqayla al-Ghassani, purportedly two hundred years old, came before Khalid and recited poetry praising the Ghassanid dynasty and their kingdom - the legacy of Mundhir and the Nuʿmanids. His verses lamented: “This was a grazing land where lions never hunted, where panthers drank the elixir of piety, where flocks roamed freely in Hira’s pastures, and birds could fly beneath Khawarnaq’s throne. Yet now it lies ruined, abandoned, degraded. Truly, time revolves inexorably, and this is why they call it the passing world.” (Ibn al-Aʿtham al-Kufi, 1993, 51) Al-Masʿudi in *Muruj al-Dhahab wa Maʿadin al-Jawhar* recounts this episode differently, yet maintains the same essential theme - the impermanence of worldly power and the vanished glory of kings like Nuʿman and palaces like Khawarnaq and Sadir. The poetic lamentation underscores how these magnificent structures became symbols of temporal power’s inevitable decline before the forces of history and time⁶.

Early Islamic sources reveal another distinct approach to Khawarnaq Palace. In this tradition, the palace becomes an archetype—subsequent descriptions of newly constructed buildings by kings or local rulers would invoke Khawarnaq as a hyperbolic benchmark. These comparisons either directly likened new structures to Khawarnaq or used the palace as a

metric to assert the superiority of newer architectural projects. The common points of comparison were typically Khawarnaq’s height, splendor, and grandeur. Notably absent, however, is any reference to the captivating rooftop panorama that had once enthralled Nuʿman—an omission that marks a significant shift in how the palace’s legacy was reconfigured over time. Among these sources, we find Mafarrukhi’s “Merits of Isfahan” (Mahāsin Isfahān), where the gardens of a palace belonging to “Jalal al-Wuzara, Jamal al-Dawla wa’l-Din, Muhammad ibn Shuja’ al-Dawla al-Lanbani al-Isfahani” - known as the Jamal al-Din Palace - are described as “making Khawarnaq’s gardens burn with envy” (Mafarukhi, 2006, 84-85). Another example appears in al-ʿUtbi’s “Yamini History” in the account of Ghazna’s mosque. After conquering India, Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna ordered the construction of a mosque whose beauty “would shame both Khawarnaq and Sadir” (al-ʿUtbi, 1995, 386-387).

Khawarnaq in Seljuk and Ilkhanid Period Sources

• Khawarnaq in Seljuk and Khwarazmian Sources

Seljuk-era sources mention Khawarnaq Palace without any references to the story of the king sitting on its rooftop and contemplating the view. These texts occasionally cite Khawarnaq when mentioning the palace’s architect. Like early Islamic sources, they either use Khawarnaq as a benchmark to evaluate contemporary structures or employ the palace’s lost splendor and the glory of its legendary kings as moral lessons about worldly transience and the futility of material attachments.

Seljuk-era sources that mention Khawarnaq Palace include: Iqd al-Uyūn li’l-Mawqif al-Alā by Afḍal al-Dīn Abū Ḥamid Aḥmad ibn Ḥamid Kirmānī, Lubāb al-Albāb by Muḥammad Awfī, Kashf al-Asrār wa Uddat al-Abrār by Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Maybudī, Tārīkh-i Bayhaq by Ibn Funduq, Mujmal al-Tawārikh wa’l-Qiṣaṣ, and Maqāmāt-i Ḥamīdī. Poets who referenced it are Qaṭrān Tabrizī, Amīr Muizzī, Athīr Akhsikātī, Jamāl al-Dīn Abd al-Razzāq Iṣfahānī, Sūzanī Samarqandī.

Among these sources, the first two works consider certain structures as surpassing Khawarnaq in grandeur, maintaining its use as a comparative standard. For example, Afḍal al-Dīn Kirmānī describes the city of Bardsīr as so elevated that “Khawarnaq would pale beneath it (Kermani, 1977. 130). Interestingly, while Afḍal al-Dīn recounts sitting on the rooftop of a governor’s palace near Bam called “Dārīn,” where he admired “expansive vistas, orderly farmlands, and flowing rivers” (ibid., 129), he draws no connection between this experience and Nuʿman’s legendary contemplation at Khawarnaq - despite their striking similarity.

As mentioned earlier, Muhammad ‘Awfī, like Afḍal al-Dīn Kirmānī, used Khawarnaq as a benchmark to evaluate contemporary works. He described the poetry of “Abū’l-Muʿayyad Rūnqī Bukhārī” as making Khawarnaq’s gardens envious (Awfī, 1982, 513). ‘Awfī also cites a verse by Shihāb

al-Dīn 'Amaq al-Bukhārī (5th-6th century AH Persian poet) where Khawarnaq appears as a simile: “The gardens and orchards are all like Khawarnaq’s designs, The plains and mountains are all like Sthabraq’s carpets” (ibid., 673). Here, gardens and orchards are metaphorically equated with Khawarnaq—a connection undoubtedly rooted in the palace’s legendary aesthetic splendor and opulent ornamentation.

Al-Maybudi, author of the third source “Kashf al-Asrar wa ‘Uddat al-Abrar”, follows the same approach as the previous two sources when interpreting a verse from Surah Hud. He mentions Khawarnaq and Sadir alongside other ruined cities - Ghumdan, Silajin, Bariq, Marib, and ‘Imad of ‘Ad - as former glorious cities now reduced to ruins. Their era of splendor has passed, leaving only desolate remains. But why were they destroyed? Because they incurred divine punishment and perished, serving as moral warnings for others. In this work, Maybudi recounts a narrative about a religious scholar who passed by Khawarnaq and Sadir. Of those magnificent structures, he saw nothing but collapsed arches and layers of dust covering the ruins. Gazing upon them with contemplative sorrow, he cried out: “Where are your inhabitants? Where are your neighbors? {...}” Then he heard a voice from the unseen proclaiming that the passage of centuries had destroyed these edifices. On one wall, he read the fate of people who left no trace behind, having turned to dust in their graves (Al-Maybudi, 1992, 439-559).

In “Mujmal al-Tawarikh wa-l-Qisas” (The Compendium of Histories and Tales), as in “Tarikh-i Bayhaq” (Bayhaq History), the verse “Ahl al-Khawarnaq wa-l-Sadir wa Bariqis” . However, the anonymous 6th-century AH author’s purpose in quoting this line is to introduce “Sindad”, whom he identifies as the builder of “Dhu al-Shurafat Palace” (Possessor of Terraces) and one of the Iranians who ruled over Arab lands (Anonymous Author [6th c. AH], 1939, 179). Earlier in the text, the author attributes Khawarnaq’s construction to Nu‘man al-Mundhir, classifying him among the Arab kings and as an ancestor of the Prophet of Islam (ibid., 15).

In the late 6th century AH, nearly contemporaneous with the Khwarazmian dynasty, the rooftop vista narrative resurfaces in Nizami Ganjavi’s “Haft Paykar”. This mathnawi (one of Nizami’s five famous epics collectively known as “Khamasa”) was composed in 593 AH/1197 CE for Ala al-Din Korpe Arslan, ruler of Maragheh (Safa, 1990, 803).

Following Nizami, Yaqut al-Hamawi⁷ provides another account of Khawarnaq and its prospects. In his “Mu’jam al-Udaba”, he recounts how Caliph Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik (r. 724-743 CE) toured a vast meadow that spring rains had transformed into a verdant paradise blooming with colorful flowers. As his entourage erected tents for leisure, one companion narrated a tale of “ancient kings” - how a predecessor had similarly strolled through Khawarnaq and Sadir during identical spring conditions. When the boastful young king asked if anyone had ever enjoyed such wealth and comfort, a courtier

reminded him of life’s transience. Yaqut then cites the famous verse by ‘Adi ibn Zayd, noting how Hisham, moved to tears, immediately ended his revelry and returned to his palace (Yaqut al-Hamawi, 2002, 523-525).

In his “Mu’jam al-Buldān”⁸, Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī presents for the first time two accounts of the panoramic view from Khawarnaq - the first immediately after its completion, and the second leading to the king’s abdication. According to Yāqūt, when the architect Sinnmār finally completed Khawarnaq after sixty years of construction, King Nu‘mān ascended to the rooftop. He first gazed toward the sea, observing its swimming fish, then turned to survey the desert behind the palace with its lizards and the gazelles roaming the palm groves. Marveling at the sight, Nu‘mān told Sinnmār he had never seen such an extraordinary palace. The architect then revealed a fatal secret: “If I remove just one brick from this structure, the entire edifice will collapse - and I alone know which one.” To ensure this vulnerability remained undiscovered, the king immediately ordered Sinnmār’s execution (Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, 2004, 253). The second account in this book describes the vista as follows: “One day, the king sat in his chamber atop Khawarnaq, gazing westward at the lands of Najaf with its gardens, palm groves, and surrounding rivers, and eastward at the Euphrates flowing behind the palace. The river coiled around the hill of ‘Aqūl like a moat, and the view of the gardens, verdant fields, and waterways pleased him greatly.” (Ibid., 325).

The final pre-Mongol textual reference to Khawarnaq appears in Ibn al-Athīr’s “al-Kāmil fī’l-Tārīkh” (The Complete History), which covers events from Creation until 628 AH/1231 CE. Ibn al-Athīr recounts: “One spring day, Nu‘mān sat in Khawarnaq Palace, looking down upon Najaf and its surrounding gardens and canals, enthralled by the beautiful vista...”⁹ (Ibn al-Athīr, 1992, 273). Following the Mongol invasion of Iran and a subsequent multi-year gap in historical records, Khawarnaq reemerges in written sources during the Ilkhanate period. This revival coincides with Hülegü Khan’s establishment of the Ilkhanid dynasty in 651 AH/1253 CE, when he was charged with consolidating Mongol control over Iran and western Asia.

• Khawarnaq Palace in Ilkhanid-era sources

References to Khawarnaq Palace in Ilkhanid-era sources fall into three categories: 1. “Āthār al-Bilād wa Akhbār al-İbād” by Zakariyā al-Qazwīnī 2. “Akhbār-i Saljūq-i Rūm”, “afar-nāma”, and “Waṣṣāf al-Ḥaḍra” 3. “Naftat al-Ṣudūr”

Āthār al-Bilād wa Akhbār al-İbād” (completed 674 AH/1275 CE) stands as the sole Ilkhanid-era source preserving the narrative of a king contemplating Khawarnaq’s vista, with his vizier or companion remarking on its transient nature (Qazwīnī, 1994, 242). Notably, this account omits all specific geographical markers of Najaf, the Sawād of Iraq, even the Euphrates River, retaining only generic references to a sea, a desert, and gardens.

In the second category of works, as previously mentioned,

Khawarnaq continues to serve as a benchmark for evaluating contemporary constructions. For example, when describing the “Jaʿfariyya Palace of Samarra,” Hamdallah Mustawfi references a pavilion that: “Made Sadir and Khawarnaq seem like bathhouses, When placed before it, as if they were mere ovens” (Hamdallah Mustawfi, 2005, 189). Similarly, in “Akhbār-i Salājiqa-yi Rūm,” there is mention of a royal order to architect Saʿd al-Dīn Kūbak to construct a building whose beauty would eclipse Khawarnaq and Sadir (Ibn Bibi, 1971, 147).

In the final work of this category, “Waṣṣāf al-Ḥaḍra,” the author describes Badr al-Dīn Luʿluʿs palace in Mosul as “Khawarnaq-nigār” (lit. “Khawarnaq-painted”), comparing the ruler’s palace to Khawarnaq in terms of its beauty and intricate designs (Waṣṣāf, 2009, 363). This mirrors the same comparative approach seen earlier in Shihāb al-Dīn ʿAmāq al-Bukhārī’s poetry.

The third narrative type, found exclusively in “Naft al-Maṣdūr,” discusses the transience of Khawarnaq’s glory. The author reflects on how this palace, once built by mighty kings, was ultimately destroyed over time by nothing more than a spider’s web (Nasawī, 1991, 74).

• Khawarnaq in Timurid and Safavid Period sources

While all three narrative types about Khawarnaq Palace, descriptions of distant vistas followed by reflections on worldly transience, its use as an architectural benchmark, and laments over its lost glory, persisted during the Ilkhanid era, the first type (the rooftop vista narrative) disappears entirely by the Timurid and Safavid periods. Notably, even in earlier sources, these landscape descriptions were never merely about aesthetic appreciation but served as moral allegories for the impermanence of worldly attachments.

Khawādamīr’s account (who lived contemporaneously with Shāh Ismāʿīl’s reign) of Numān, the builder of Khawarnaq Palace, represents the narrative’s culmination. His version maintains key elements from earlier traditions, Yazdegerd entrusting Bahrām to Numān’s care, and the construction of Khawarnaq in a scenic location by the architect Sinnmār (Khawādamīr, 2001, 233). However, Khawādamīr’s account differs markedly from earlier narratives that described the natural vista Nuʿmān observed from Khawarnaq’s heights, where either his Christian-inclined vizier’s prompting or his meditations on the scene’s impermanence led him to renounce his throne. He has completely forgotten this narrative. In Khwandamir’s account, there is no longer any mention of the Khawarnaq Palace and its view, and this time, the view of Khawarnaq Palace plays no role in making the king aware of the transient nature of the world and its impermanence. According to Khwandamir’s account, one day, Nuʿmān and his minister, ʿAdī ibn Zayd, were walking in the cemetery of Hira. The minister asked the king, “Do you know what these buried people are saying?” Nuʿmān replied, “No.” Then, the minister, speaking on their behalf, said: “O you who dwell on the earth and constantly strive to fulfill your desires, we were

once like you, and soon you will be like us.” The king was deeply disturbed the first time and turned back. But when they returned a second time, the minister again spoke on behalf of the dead, warning of the world’s deceit and its fleeting nature. This time, Nuʿmān abandoned everything and took to the wilderness. (Ibid., 260).

Although the first type of narrative—the depiction of Khawarnaq Palace as a morally instructive spectacle—is entirely forgotten in Timurid and Safavid sources, the second type of narrative, which mentions Khawarnaq as a symbolic benchmark, does appear in the works of this period. In these accounts, Khawarnaq is referenced in relation to the construction projects of powerful rulers such as Timur, Shahrukh, and Shah Abbas. However, in these narratives, Khawarnaq is relegated to secondary importance, overshadowed by the grandeur of contemporary buildings described by the authors. Unlike the earlier tradition, there is no mention of Khawarnaq’s “view” or any architectural resemblance to it in terms of its moral lesson. Instead, the sole points of comparison—or superiority—are the height, splendor, and magnificence of the newly constructed edifices. For example, Wasifi describes the “Chaharbagh-e Mir Kalan” (a garden complex near Herat built during the time of Amir Ali-Shir Navaʿi) as humiliating the prestige of Khawarnaq (Vasifi, 1970, 404).

Fazlullah ibn Ruzbihan Khunji, who wrote his book around the years 914 and 915 AH in Bukhara and Herat—approximately contemporaneous with Wasifi, who also lived in these two cities—described a structure built by Muhammad Shaybani in “Kangil,” a summer retreat near Samarkand, as follows: “They laid the foundation of such a lofty edifice that the palace of Khawarnaq would appear low in comparison to the height of its structure.” (Khunji, 1976, 292). He also described the dome of the mausoleum of Khwaja Ahmad Yasawi as so towering that neither Sadir nor Khawarnaq could rival it, which is why the mausoleum “hurls the stone of rejection” toward these two palaces (ibid., 256).

In general, it can be concluded that over time, with the advent of the Safavid period, we once again observe a trend of neglecting worldly landscapes due to the transient nature of the material world. Traces of transforming natural, earthly scenery into a metaphysical realm and the emergence of an imaginary, otherworldly, and celestial world can be seen this time in the descriptions of the Sassanian palace “Khawarnaq” preserved in Islamic sources from later periods.

• Khawarnaq in Afsharid, Zand, and Qajar Period sources

If Jaʿfari, the author of “Tārīkh-e Yazd” (15th century CE), mentioned Khawarnaq to compare it with the garden of “Mihter Ali-Shah Farash” to assert the superiority of the latter⁹, and if the author of “Tārīkh-e Jadīd-e Yazd” (from the same century) made no mention of Khawarnaq at all, the author of “Jameʿ- e Jaʿfari”—which chronicles the history of Yazd during

the Afsharid, Zand, and Qajar periods—once again brings up the scenic view from Khwarneq’s rooftop. Although, like earlier historians, his intention is merely to use Khawarnaq as a point of comparison to elevate the status of a contemporary structure, this time he does something almost unprecedented: he compares the “landscape views” of Khawarnaq and the “Hashti Pavilion” of Dowlat-Ābād Garden (a building from his own time). Unlike previous historians, who mostly compared the two in terms of “grandeur and height”, he writes: “Had Sinmār (the legendary architect) not been killed and had he seen the Hashti of Dowlat-Ābād Garden, he would have died of envy. Regarding Nu’mān, had he gazed upon that view, he would never have uttered the names of Sadir or Khawarnaq again” (Nāinī, 1974, 354).

Although, like the narrators of earlier periods, he does not provide a complete account of Nu’mān gazing at the view or the presence of his pious vizier beside him, his own narration about Sinmār is also fragmentary. His mere reference to Sinmār’s death—being thrown from the palace rooftop by the king to prevent him from replicating such a structure elsewhere for another ruler—indicates his familiarity with earlier accounts. Thus, his brief mention of Nu’mān “casting his gaze upon that scene” once again evokes the narrative of Khwarneq’s rooftop vista—a motif that, as observed earlier, had faded into obscurity during the Timurid and Safavid eras. In contrast to Nāinī, who used the view from Khawarnaq for comparison, Muḥammad Taqī Khān Sipihr in his work “Nāsikh al-Tavārikh” revives the story of Nu’mān and his Christian minister sitting atop Khwarneq’s roof. However, unlike early Islamic historians such as Ḥamza al-Isfahānī, Yaḳūbī, Tha’ālibī, and Ṭabarī, he makes no mention of Khwarneq’s vast panoramic views that allegedly stretched for kilometers, reaching as far as the city of Najaf. In Sipihr’s account, the king turns to his vizier and declares: “In this world, I know of no place so fine that overlooks such abundant greenery and flowing waters” (Sipihr, 2006, 754). That is, he claims to know no other place in the world with such a splendid view of lush vegetation and running streams. The narrative then continues with Nu’mān descending from Khwarneq’s roof and ultimately renouncing his throne to become a dervish.

In addition to the narrative of the Khawarnaq landscape, its name also appears in conventional Qajar-era historiography in the second sense—that is, as a standard for measuring buildings. Furthermore, due to the literary “Return” (Bāzgasht-e Adabi) movement, some poems from earlier centuries, such as those by poets like Manuchehri, were revived with slight modifications during this period¹⁰. For example, “Khavari”, in the book “Tarikh-e Zol-Qarnayn” (“History of Dhul-Qarnayn”), refers to a palace built by the daughter of Fath-Ali Shah Qajar in the village of “Gerdouyeh” in Shemiran in this manner: “Her Highness Fakhr al-Dowleh constructed a royal palace in that estate, which made the famed names

of the palaces of Sadir and Khawarnaq fade into oblivion.” (Khavari Shirazi, 2001, 1010).

Findings

The narrative of the rooftop view from the Khawarnaq Palace and King Nu’man’s contemplation of it has been repeated in Islamic sources across different periods. However, this narrative has not remained static—it has undergone changes, sometimes fading into complete oblivion before being revived after long periods of neglect. These variations can even be observed among different accounts within the same era. The following section explores these discrepancies, which highlight how narratives are not fixed or transhistorical but rather evolve over time. Such transformations are also evident in the accounts of the Khawarnaq rooftop landscape throughout the Islamic period. For this reason, we can trace an evolutionary trajectory for these narratives—one that sometimes unfolds over even shorter spans than the rise and fall of dynasties.

Variations in Narratives Across Different Periods

The evolutionary trajectory of the narratives about the rooftop view of Khawarnaq throughout the Islamic period can be categorized as follows:

1. Sources from the Islamic period up to the Seljuk era
2. The Seljuk period
3. The Khwarazmian period
4. The Ilkhanid period
5. The Timurid and Safavid periods
6. The Afsharid, Zand, and Qajar periods

In Islamic sources prior to the rise of the Seljuks, the narrative of the king gazing at the view from the rooftop is mentioned. Among these sources—listed in chronological order—are: *Tarikh al-Yaḳubi* (Yaḳubi’s History), *Tarikh al-Payambaran va Shahān* (History of the Prophets and Kings), *Tarikh-e Tha’ālabī* (Tha’ālabī’s History), and *Tarikh-e Tabari* or *Tarikh-e Tarikh-e Bal’ami* (Bal’ami’s History). Another poet, *Adi ibn Zayd*, composed a poem about the Khawarnaq Palace, referencing the tale of the rooftop view. His verses are cited in all three of the following works *Yaḳubi’s History*, *Tarikh al-Payambaran va Shahān*, and *Tha’ālabī’s History*.

In the oldest historical account, *Yaḳubi’s History*, the king gazes at the landscape alone, and it is unclear from where he does so. Similarly, in his poem, *Adi ibn Zayd* does not mention the king sitting on Khawarnaq’s rooftop—a point of alignment with Yaḳubi’s narrative. However, in the accounts of *Hamza al-Isfahani* and *Bal’ami*, the location of the king’s observation is explicitly identified as the Khawarnaq Palace. Additionally, in both Yaḳubi’s and *Hamza al-Isfahani*’s versions—as well as in *Adi*’s poem, which *Tha’ālabi* solely cites—the king views the landscape alone. This detail changes in *Bal’ami’s History* (a translation of “*al-Tabari’s History*”), where King Nu’man is described as admiring the rooftop view of Khawarnaq in the company of his vizier.

These sources also differ in how they describe the landscape. Yaḳubi only mentions the king overlooking the Euphrates River, while Hamza al-Isfahani adds Najaf to the description. Given that the distance between Khawarnaq and al-Hirah is recorded as three miles, the vista described by Hamza al-Isfahani—dominated by the king—would have covered a relatively vast expanse. A similar but slightly altered version appears in Balāmi’s account, which, instead of Najaf, refers to the “Sawād al-Iraq” (the fertile lowlands of Iraq).

The final source from the early Islamic period that mentions Khawarnaq Palace is Thaʿālabi’s History. As previously noted, in his account of the Khawarnaq landscape, Thaʿālabi relies solely on the poetry of Adi ibn Zayd¹¹. In his poem, Adi does not mention the Euphrates River, Najaf, or Sawād al-Iraq—features repeated in the three earlier accounts. Instead, he refers to Sadir and a sea that lay before the king’s eyes. But what exactly did he mean by this “sea”? Later sources, including Yaḳut al-Hamawi’s “Mu’jam al-Buldan” (written in the early 7th century AH/13th century CE), shed light on this. According to Yaḳut, al-Hirah (a city known as Najf in his time) was located three miles from Kufa. He further states that the Persian Gulf extended all the way to al-Hirah (Yaḳut Hamawi, 2004, 253). Therefore, it is likely that Adi’s reference to the “sea” was in fact the Persian Gulf.

From the last early source—Thaʿālabi, likely compiled before 412 AH (1021 CE)—until the late 6th century AH (12th century CE), which covers the Seljuk period, no historical accounts mention the rooftop view of Khawarnaq. The narrative re-emerges around the reign of Sultan Muhammad Khwarazmshah, when Nizami Ganjavi introduces it in his “Haft Paykar”. After Nizami, Yaḳut al-Hamawi also references the Khawarnaq Palace’s view in two of his works, Mu’jam al-Udaba (“Dictionary of the Learned”) and Mu’jam al-Buldan (“Dictionary of Countries”). However, his descriptions in these two books differ significantly. In Mu’jam al-Udaba—written when Yaḳut was twenty years old (thus likely dating to the late 6th century AH)—he does not mention the king sitting on Khawarnaq’s rooftop. Instead, his account suggests the king was strolling outside the palace, implying a completely different context. In this regard, his narrative in Mu’jam al-Udaba resembles that of Yaḳubi, which was mentioned earlier in the section on sources of the early Islamic period. The reason why Yaḳut’s account in Mu’jam al-Udaba lacks a specific geographical context and shows no trace of the view from the roof of Khawarnaq can also be attributed to the fact that he was likely unfamiliar with Tarikh al-Payambaran va Shahān (The History of Prophets and Kings) by Hamza al-Isfahani at the time of writing this book. Yaḳut mentions Hamza al-Isfahani in both of his works, Mu’jam al-Udaba and Mu’jam al-Buldan, and in one part of Mu’jam al-Buldan, he describes Hamza al-Isfahani as a “renowned lexicographer” (Yaḳut al-Hamawi, 2001 24). In Mu’jam al-Udaba, he also acknowledges Hamza as a figure famous for his virtue and

knowledge, who authored commendable works. Yet, despite this, Yaḳut considers him frivolous and weak-minded. Additionally, according to Yaḳut, no one knew Persian better than Hamza, and he lists his books—yet among them, he does not mention The History of Prophets and Kings, where the account of the view from the roof of Khawarnaq is narrated (Yaḳut al-Hamawi, 2004, 517). However, in the book “Mu’jam al-Buldan”, unlike in “Mu’jam al-Udaba”, his account is geographically situated, and the king observes the view from the palace of Khawarnaq. As previously mentioned, this book is the first to narrate two accounts of the king witnessing the scenery. These two accounts differ in terms of the descriptive quality of the landscape. The first occurs immediately after the completion of the palace, and the second takes place sometime later, leading to the king’s abdication. The descriptive quality of the first landscape resembles the poetry of Adi ibn Zayd because, as noted earlier, Yaḳut mentions that the Persian Gulf extended as far as Hira. When Nu’man ascended to the roof immediately after the construction was finished, he saw the sea and its fish. Then, moving to the rear section, he observed the desert, the palm groves behind the palace, the lizards of the former, and the gazelles of the latter—and he told Sinimmār that he had never seen a palace like this.

In the second account from Mu’jam al-Buldan, the qualities of the landscape are described with striking similarity to the scene narrated by “Hamza al-Isfahani”. However, unlike Hamza’s version, the king is not alone this time—he is accompanied by his vizir. This latter detail makes Yaḳut’s account resemble that of Balami’s History. The scene Yaḳut describes suggests the king’s commanding view over the land of Najaf, its gardens and palm groves to the west, and the Euphrates to the east. The only difference between Yaḳut’s description and Hamza al-Isfahani’s is that while Yaḳut places the Euphrates to the east of Khawarnaq, he also states that the river lay behind the palace. Thus, we can conclude that this palace faced west, with its back to the east.

He also mentions the river’s winding path around the hill of ‘Aqul—a detail not found in any previous sources. Another notable observation from comparing Yaḳut’s two landscape descriptions in Mu’jam al-Buldan is that in the first account, the king sees the sea on one side and the desert on the other, while in the second account, he contemplates a different view: the land of Najaf to the west and the Euphrates River to the east, which lay behind the palace. Although Yaḳut doesn’t use cardinal directions in the first account—referring only to the sea in front and the desert behind—one might infer he likely had a north-south orientation in mind. The assumption that he might have mistakenly used “sea” instead of “Euphrates River” seems incorrect, as he explicitly describes the Euphrates’ position behind the palace in the second account, whereas in the first account, the desert is said to be behind the palace. Thus, from these two descriptions combined, we can conclude that Yaḳut al-Hamawi may have been depicting a 360-degree

or, so to speak, panoramic view—something unprecedented for its time.

The final historical source from this period that mentions the rooftop view of Khawarnaq is Ibn al-Athir's "al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh" (The Complete History). In his account, he only refers to the commanding view over Najaf and its surrounding gardens and canals, making no mention of the Euphrates or the hill of 'Aqul—features that Yaqut had described years earlier in *Mu'jam al-Buldan*.

Moving to the Ilkhanid period, as previously noted, only one source references the Khawarnaq rooftop panorama: Zakariya al-Qazwini's "Athar al-Bilad wa Akhbar al-'Ibad" (Monuments of the Lands and History of God's Servants). Unlike contemporary accounts from the reign of Muhammad Khwarazmshah—including works by Yaqut al-Hamawi and Ibn al-Athir—or even earlier Islamic sources, this later text makes no reference to Najaf, the Sawad of Iraq, or even the Euphrates River. Instead, it only vaguely mentions the sea, desert, and gardens. The significance of earlier sources specifically mentioning Najaf, the Sawad of Iraq, or other distant locations lies in their demonstration of the remarkable visibility range from Khawarnaq's rooftop. These geographical references prove how extraordinarily far the king's panoramic view extended from the palace.

With the arrival of the Timurid and Safavid periods, the narrative of the view from the roof of Khawarnaq was entirely forgotten. The peak of this oblivion can be seen in Khwandamir's account of the story of King Nu'man. As mentioned earlier, although Khwandamir describes Nu'man as the builder of Khawarnaq Palace—intended to shelter the young Bahram Gur—and also praises Sinnimar, the palace's architect, he completely omits the famous rooftop panorama and the breathtaking sights that had once astonished Nu'man. Instead, he tells a different tale. Nevertheless, the moral he draws from his version aligns with the earlier accounts of the Khawarnaq rooftop view: the transience of this world. In Khwandamir's retelling, Nu'man and his vizier are strolling through the graveyard of Hira when the king asks his minister, "What do the people of the graves say? The vizier responds by speaking of the impermanence of worldly life.

This trend underwent another shift in the post-Safavid era, particularly during the Qajar period, when—as noted earlier—the narrative of the view from Khawarnaq Palace re-emerged. Even in this period, while some sources followed a tradition dating back to early Islamic times by using Khawarnaq as a benchmark to measure the splendor of contemporary constructions (thereby asserting the superiority of newly built structures over the legendary palace), they no longer relied solely on height and proportions as criteria. Instead, they introduced scenic beauty and vistas as new standards for claiming superiority, as seen in works like *Jāmi'ī-i Ja'farī*. The revival of the Khawarnaq rooftop panorama motif in the Qajar era can be attributed to several factors. One key reason

was the flourishing of translations and commentaries on classical texts. For instance, Zakariya Qazvini's "Āthār al-Bilād wa Akhbār al-'Ibād"—previously noted as the only Ilkhanid-era source referencing Khawarnaq's view—was translated in 1268 AH (1851/ 52 CE) by Jahāngīr Mīrẓā Qajar¹², who also added his own annotations. Where the original text briefly mentions Hira's past proximity to the sea, Jahāngīr Mīrẓā elaborates that, at the time of his translation (1268 AH), the reappearance of the sea's traces—due to the resurgence of the "Bāh-r-i Nahriyya" channel—had allowed boats and ships to navigate the area for over thirty years (Qazvīnī, 1994, 241). One of the reasons behind the re-emergence of the Khawarnaq rooftop vista narrative can be traced to the Qajar-era sources' heightened attention to landscape descriptions, particularly in travelogues. Take, for instance, the travelogue of Mehdi Qoli Hedayat (Mokhber al-Saltaneh) to Japan, which includes vivid depictions of Japanese landscapes. Describing "the Osowa Temple" in Nagasaki, Hedayat writes: "There is a temple on the heights. From there, the city and harbor are visible all around"¹³ (Hedayat, 2010, 25). Similarly, Naser al-Din Shah Qajar, in his travelogue documenting his visit to Mazandaran and the Safavid-era Safiabad Palace (built under Shah Abbas II), marvels at the palace's vistas: "The panorama visible from there defies description—it cannot be captured in writing. Lush green mountains and plains stretched endlessly, the sea glimmered in view, the elongated estuary of Miankaleh, and the island of Ashuradeh appeared in the distance... I peered through my telescope incessantly" (Naser al-Din Shah Qajar & E'temad al-Saltaneh, 2010, 123).

One of the other structures built during the reign of Shah Abbas II in Mazandaran was called "Homayun Tepe" (Vahid Qazvini, 1329, 169). This building shared features with the Safiabad Palace, including its location on a hill, which framed a distant view of the sea. Reza Qoli Khan Hedayat, a historian of the Qajar period, mentioned the prominence of this elevation over the sea and the plains¹³. Masoum Ali Shah describes the scenery and quality of this palace: "In short, the Caspian Sea can be thoroughly admired from there, and with a telescope, its entire surface is visible, allowing foreign ships near the coast to be discerned." (Masoum Shirazi, 1970, 657). However, the Safavid narrative of Homayun Tepe does not mention the view from this structure or the king observing it. This account belongs to Vahid Qazvini and is found in his book "Abbasnama", which chronicles the life of Shah Abbas II of the Safavid dynasty. The historian of Abbasnama makes no mention of the sea's view from the roof or even inside Homayun Tepe. The only place where he speaks of the sea and its distance is not due to its scenic beauty from within the building or the garden grounds, but rather to exaggerate the qualities of the garden structure and the artificial lake surrounding it—out of the sea's envy: "The sea, in eternal bitterness, laments, why has a lake encircled it? Fate denies their union, so in despair, it gazes from afar with a longing stare. (Vahid Qazvini, 1329, 284).

Unlike the scene of Khawarnaq, the Safavid king is not depicted gazing at the view while speaking to himself or his vizier about its grandeur. It is as though, just as King Nu'man—in the Safavid narrative recounted by Khwandamir—went to the graveyard, leaving no further trace of the Khawarnaq vista, the scenic aspects of structures also receive little attention. References to death, the grave, and the transience of the world are recurring themes in Timurid and Safavid inscriptions, frequently emphasizing the fleeting nature of earthly life (Necipoglu, 1398, 165). For example, around the lattice window above the main entrance inscription of the Darb-e Imam mausoleum in Isfahan—built during the reign of Jahanshah Qara Qoyunlu in 857 AH (1453 CE)—the following verse is inscribed: “This is an allusion to the celestial sphere’s rotation, Be pure like a glass, and fear no one’s reprobation. Seek no loyalty beneath this worldly roof’s domain, neither rejoice at its rise nor grieve at its wane.”

Similarly, the muqarnas-adorned entrance inscription of the tomb of Shad-i Mulk Agha (773–785 AH / 1371–1383 CE) in the Shah-i Zinda complex in Samarkand also alludes to this impermanence, juxtaposed with the splendor of its gilded patterns and lofty ceilings¹⁴. Vaez Qazvini (1027–1090 AH / 1617–1679 CE), too, speaks in a ghazal of the fleeting glory of kings and their magnificent structures—even mentioning the palace of Khawarnaq in one couplet: “Upon each brick of Khawarnaq is inscribed, where are Nu'man and his two-faced, obedient line?” (Vaez Qazvini, 1980, 66).

Differences of Narratives Across Literary Styles

The evolution of the narrative of the Khawarnaq rooftop landscape throughout the Islamic period has undergone certain changes. This transformation can be summarized as follows: its narration in early periods, its disappearance in the middle periods, and its re-emergence during the Afsharid, Zand, and Qajar eras. This evolution bears similarities to the changes in literary styles—styles that scholars such as Malek al-Sho'ara Bahar and Sirous Shamisa have discussed in their works on stylistics. From the perspective of Persian poetic stylistics, based on its own developmental trajectory, it is divided into the following styles: the Khorasani style, the Azerbaijani style, the intermediary (or Seljuk-era) style, the Iraqi style, the transitional style between the Iraqi and Indian styles, the Indian style, and the “Bazgasht” (Return) period style¹⁵.

One of the most important characteristics that distinguishes the Iraqi and Indian styles in Persian literature from the pre-Mongol invasion Khorasani style and the Bazgasht (Return) style of the Qajar period (which, at least in its panegyrics, follows the Khorasani style) is the introspective nature of these two styles. In reality, Persian poetry in its first three centuries of emergence—that is, until the end of the 5th century AH (Khorasani style)—is considered poetry of nature, as the poetry of this period is outward-looking and

extroverted (Shafiei Kadkani, 2022, 317). The poet's gaze in this era mostly flows across the surface of objects, seeking little emotional or spiritual depth beyond the veil of nature and the material elements of existence. Like a meticulous painter, the poet dedicates their effort to replicating nature and the external world¹⁶. This perspective gradually faded with the dominance of the Seljuks and later the Mongol invasion, particularly with the emergence of the Iraqi style in poetry. A similar shift can be observed in how early pre-Seljuk sources describe the Khawarnaq rooftop scene. In these sources, the narrative focuses on the king witnessing the rooftop view and its qualities, much like the Khorasani style, entirely worldly and extroverted. However, under Seljuk rule, references to the Khawarnaq rooftop disappear from texts—only to reemerge around the reign of Sultan Muhammad Khwarazmshah in Nizami Ganjavi's Haft Peykar and later in Yaqut al-Hamawi's Mu'jam al-Udaba and Mu'jam al-Buldan. These variations align with three literary styles noted in the 6th century AH: the continuity of the Khorasani style, the Azerbaijani style, and an intermediary style bridging the Khorasani and later Iraqi styles. The rooftop scene resurfaces in Nizami's poetry (Azerbaijani style) toward the end of this period. This revival can be attributed to the great poets of this style—like Khaqani and Nizami—who were deeply engaged with pre-Islamic Iran and its lore. Khaqani lamented the lost glory of the Arch of Ctesiphon (Eyvan-e Madāen), while Nizami revived the Khawarnaq rooftop motif. Scholars suggest such sentiments stemmed from these poets' anger toward Turkic dominance, as reflected in Khaqani's verse: “The kingdom of Persia is now prey to barbarian Turks. Would any wise man lay down the mat of desire? Though the body begs bread and roast meat from them, how could the sun's favor fall on Atsiz and Bughra?” (Shamisa, 2014, 135).

During the Ilkhanid period, with the sole exception of the book *Āthār al-'Ibād wa Akhbār al-'Ibād*, no mention is made of the Khawarnaq rooftop and its vista. By the Timurid and Safavid eras, when the narrative of the Khawarnaq rooftop had been entirely forgotten, the Iraqi and Indian styles successively dominated the literary scene. Shamisa identifies the distinction between the Iraqi and Khorasani styles as lying in their inward focus—the Iraqi style prioritizes subjectivity and the inner world, directing its gaze more toward the self than the external horizon (*ibid.*, 248). Shafiei Kadkani, in another context, characterizes post-Samanid and Ghaznavid love poetry as detached from lived experience. He argues that this poetry drifts into the realm of abstraction and universality, attributing this shift partly to the rise of Sufism, which channels all expression toward generalization and abstraction (Shafiei Kadkani, 1999, 27).

The narrative of the Khawarnaq rooftop scene reemerges in the Qajar era after centuries of dormancy and oblivion. The poetic style of the Qajar period is known as the “Literary Return (Bazgasht) movement¹⁷”. In his work “Stylistics,” Malek

al-Sho'ara Bahar attributes the emergence of this movement to several factors: The Afghan invasion of Iran and the plundering/sale of books from the royal Safavid library in Isfahan—which reportedly contained many ancient texts, Nader Shah Afshar's invasion of India and the repatriation of valuable Persian manuscripts collected by the Persianate Mughal rulers, which later entered public circulation (Bahar, 1976, 316–317). Another contributing factor was the establishment of the opulent Qajar court, where poets gathered to compose panegyrics for Qajar kings, mirroring the Ghaznavid and Seljuk traditions¹⁸. The ideological content of Return-style poetry echoed the conventional themes of Ghaznavid/Seljuk qasidas and the ghazals of Hafez and Saadi. Thus, the revival of the Khawarnaq rooftop motif after its hiatus during the Qajar period can be linked to the Literary Return movement's stylistic resemblance to pre-Mongol Khorasani poetry.

Reading Narratives Through the Evolution of Landscape Depiction

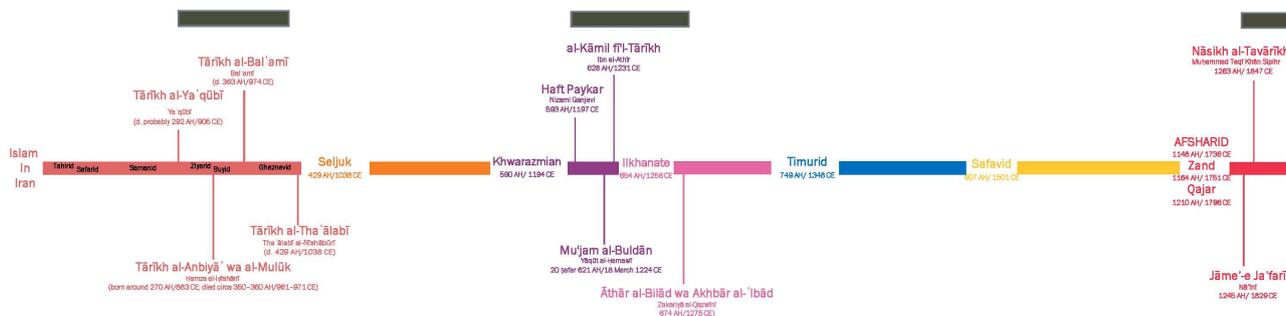
Kenneth Clark, in his book "Landscape into Art", categorizes the various types of landscape depiction in European art as follows: "Symbolic Landscape," "Realistic Landscape," "Fantastic Landscape," "Ideal Landscape," and "Naturalistic Approach," which respectively cover the period from the Middle Ages to the late nineteenth century.

The "Symbolic Landscape" stems from the medieval artist's perspective and their attempt to seek symbols of spiritual truths or events behind every material object. According to Clark, this approach emerged from their distrust of nature and belief in the degeneracy of emotions (Clark, 1991, 23-24). This stands in contrast to Renaissance artists, particularly early Flemish painters, who sought to depict realities. Their landscapes were realistic and could hardly be considered products of memory work. The artist often became so enamored with nature that they would not rest until achieving a precise, mirror-like representation of it (ibid., 45, 47-48). In the narratives describing the landscape of Khawarnaq Palace, we can observe these two stages of landscape depiction, but with this distinction: during the early Islamic centuries, writers, much like realist artists, described landscapes that were real.

From the palace's vantage point, they could see palm trees or garden trees, springs, seas, deserts, and even living creatures. Though writers likely employed hyperbole to symbolically emphasize the king's power and dominion over surrounding landscapes through the magnificent Khawarnaq Palace, they nevertheless paid attention to phenomena like distant vistas - an attention that would later fade during medieval periods. The cemetery that replaced Khawarnaq at the peak of this landscape's oblivion recalls a symbolic landscape depiction.

Conclusion

This article examined the narratives surrounding the landscape of Khawarnaq Palace throughout the Islamic period, revealing that these accounts underwent significant fluctuations over time. In the early Islamic centuries, the story appears, though details vary across sources. During the medieval period, with few exceptions, the narrative fades into oblivion, and by the Safavid era, it undergoes a complete transformation. Finally, in the Qajar period, the tale of the palace's rooftop vista reemerges (Fig. 1). The findings of this study demonstrate that narratives in Iranian landscape and architectural history are temporally bound, resisting overarching, transhistorical metanarratives that could apply uniformly across all periods. Moreover, a parallel emerges between the shifts in Khawarnaq's landscape narratives and the evolution of Persian poetic styles. For instance, in the Khorasani style, poets engaged directly with external nature, much like early narrators who meticulously described Khawarnaq's rooftop vista and its surroundings. During the medieval period, as the Iraqi style prioritized abstraction and spiritual introspection, the Khawarnaq narrative gradually vanished, mirroring poetry's inward turn. By the Safavid era, kings and ministers no longer gazed from Khawarnaq's heights but visited cemeteries instead, amplifying themes of worldly transience. The Literary Return (Bazgasht) movement of the Qajar period reversed this trend. As poets revived Khorasani style naturalism—evident in historiography and travelogues—the palace's landscape resurfaced in descriptions. Khawarnaq's early landscape depictions, with their focus on tangible nature, align with what Kenneth Clark termed the "realistic landscape" of Renaissance art. Conversely, its later transformation into a



The Evolution of the Narrative of the Khawarnaq Palace Landscape in Islamic Period Sources

Fig. 1. Chart of the trend of changes in the narrative of the Khawarnaq Place's landscape in sources from different periods after the advent of Islam. source: Authors.

Endnote

This article is based on my Master's thesis, "One-Point Perspective and its Impact on Qajar Landscape Architecture" supervised by Dr. "Saied Khaghani" and advised by Dr. "Seyed Amir Mansouri". The thesis was defended on February 19, 2023, at the Faculty of Architecture, College of Fine Arts, University of Tehran, Iran.

1. Polish and wealth—its head (tip) I've glued with milk, now mirror-like, it reflects images built. Through night and day, with haste and delay, like a bride, it rose in three hues' display From these three shades, a fourth you'd derive, Turquoise, white, and gold, alive.
2. Among these works, the oldest is likely "Tārīkh al-Yaqūbī" (The History of Yaqūbī) by Ibn Wāḍiḥ Aḥmad ibn Abī Yaqūb Ishāq ibn Jafar ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Kātib al-Akḥbārī al-Abbāsī al-Iṣfahānī (Yaqūbī, d. probably 292 AH/905 CE).** Next comes *Tārīkh al-Anbiyā wa al-Mulūk* (The History of Prophets and Kings) by **Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī** (born around 270 AH/883 CE; died circa 350–360 AH/961–971 CE), followed by *Tārīkh al-Balamī* (The History of Balamī) by **Abū Alī Muḥammad Balamī** (d. 363 AH/974 CE), and *Tārīkh al-Thaālabi* (The History of Thaālabi, likely composed before 412 AH/1021 CE) by **al-Thaālabi al-Nishābūrī** (d. 429 AH/1038 CE).
3. And reflect upon the Lord of Khawarnaq, when one day He gazed, lost in contemplation for guidance's maze.
4. His wealth delighted him, and all he owned, the sea spread wide, the canals intoned. (Source: Pasha Zanus, & Ramazan-Khani, 2012, 102).
5. Hark! O heart that sees life's lessons—let your eyes now learn! Behold! The arch of Ctesiphon—a mirror where truths burn! {...} You ask, 'Where now are those crown-bearing kings of yore?' Lo! Eternal womb of earth nurtures them forevermore." (For full access to this poem by Khāqānī, see: Khāqānī, 2003, 358-360).
6. Mas'udi writes: "Should we expect anything from the two Mundhirs beyond what transpired at Khawarnaq and Sadiir? The tribes of Sawwān fled in fear of a roaring lion, avoiding those lands. Behind. Nu'mān's cavalry, the gardens between Marrah and Hafir have turned to pasture {...} Such is the nature of time, and such is the mutability of power: its face is fair, but its days are foul." (Source: Mas'udi, 2023, 100).
7. Researchers have recorded Yāqūt's birth in Byzantine territory in 574 or 575 AH (1178-1179 CE), and his death in 626 AH (1229 CE) at a caravanserai outside Aleppo. For further details, see: Translator's Introduction in Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, Yāqūt ibn 'Abdullāh. 2001: 1
8. Yāqūt commenced Mu'jam al-Buldān in Merv (615 AH/1218 CE) and finalized it in Aleppo (20 Ṣafar 621 AH/18 March 1224 CE). See: Translator's Intro in Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī. 2001: xiii.
9. Barren remains his garden, drained of streams, While Khawarnaq—in envy—dons' dust as its crown. (Source: Ja'fari, 2010, 171).
10. For instance, in "Tajribat al-Ahrār wa Tasliyat al-Abrār" by Maftūn Danbali, we find the following verse, strikingly similar to Manūchihrī's poetry: "Rise, O heavenly maiden! Bring forth the wine-cup's glow, turn this world to Paradise, as yesterday's Heaven did show. Every garden now mirrors Khawarnaq's design, every plain and mountain, a carpet like Satbarg's divine." (Maftūn Danbali, n.d.: 74), Compare this to Manūchihrī's original: "The desert seems transformed to Khawarnaq's frame, The orchard takes on Satbarg's hue and name." (Manūchihrī Dāmghānī, 1959, 171).
11. In "Tārīkh al-Yaqūbī", another renowned poet named "al-Aswad ibn Yafur al-Tamīmī" is mentioned—one who likewise referenced the palace of Khawarnaq in his verses. Though his poetry does not, like Adī's, directly describe a king gazing upon the landscape, it follows the same thematic arc: the transience of the grandeur enjoyed by the inhabitants of Khawarnaq, Sadīr, Bāriq, and the crenellated palace of Sindād (the architect of

these structures). These palaces and their sovereigns—whose territorial markers the winds have since erased—serve as emblems of impermanence. (Source: Yaqūbī, 1977, 283–284).

12. Jahāngīr Mīrzā was the third son of Abbās Mīrzā, the Crown Prince (Nāyib al-Salṭana), born in 1225 AH (1810 CE) and deceased in 1269 AH (1853 CE). (For further details, see: Editor's Preface in Qazvīnī, Zakariyyā ibn Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd. 1994. *Āthār al-Bilād wa Akḥbār al-Ibād*. Translated with additions by Jahāngīr Mīrzā Qājār, edited and supplemented by Mīr Hāshim Muḥaddith. Tehran: Amīr Kabīr Publications.)

13. "On a knoll near Bāgh-i Ashraf, overlooking the sea and plains, by imperial decree (of Shāh Abbās II), a mansion, lake, and flower garden bursting with colorful blooms were completed. It was named 'Humāyūn Hill.'" (Source: Rawḍat al-Ṣafā, vol. 8, 206).

14. This vaulted ceiling adorned with muqarnas; this gilded archway's hue – Their splendor proclaims: 'Behold! The Creator's grace shines through.' Every ornament and art your eyes discern in earthly frame, Flows from the bounty of God, the Originator's name. {...} Set not your heart on this fleeting world's display, For only Heaven's arch and peaks endure – thus Truth doth say." (Source: Necipo lu, 2019, 165).

15. The Khorasani Style encompasses Persian poetry from the mid-3rd century AH (9th CE) through the 5th century AH (11th CE). The 6th century AH (12th CE) then saw the emergence of three distinct poetic schools: 1. "Continuation of Khorasani Style" in works by poets like Mu'izzi and Adib Saber 2. "Azerbaijani Style" emerging in Arran with representatives such as Khaqani and Nizami 3. "Transitional/Seljuq Style", bridging Khorasani and what would later become the Iraqi Style. By the 7th century AH (13th CE), both Khorasani and Azerbaijani styles had faded, replaced by the "Iraqi Style," which dominated for 300 years until the early 10th century AH (16th CE). With India becoming the new center for Persian poets, the "Indian Style" (Sabk-i Hindi) then superseded both Khorasani and Iraqi styles from the early 11th century AH (17th CE) through mid-12th century AH (18th CE), lasting approximately 150 years. This was followed by the "Return Style" (Bazgasht), which began mid-12th century AH (late Afsharid period) but only became fully established during Fath-Ali Shah Qajar's reign (1797-1834) (Source: Shamisa, 2014, 21, 101, 246, 297-298).

16. The term "description for description's sake" is also employed to characterize this literary practice (Source: Shafiei Kadkani, 2022, 317).

17. In his work Stylistics of Poetry (Sabk-shināsi-ye Shi'r), Shamisa identifies the literary "Return Movement" (Bazgasht-i Adabi) as originating in the latter half of the 12th century AH (late 18th century CE), corresponding to the late Afsharid period. While the movement gained some development during Karim Khan Zand's reign (1751-1779), Shamisa emphasizes that its full flourishing and widespread adoption occurred from the Qajar era onward, particularly under Fath-Ali Shah (r. 1797-1834). (Source: Shamisa, 2014, 297-298).

18. Fath-Ali Shah awarded Fath-Ali Khan Saba forty thousand "mithqals" of gold for composing the "Shahanshah-nameh" (Book of the King of Kings), and paid forty thousand "tomans" from the state treasury to settle the debt of Mo'tamed al-Dowleh Nash'at. The commissioning of the "Shahanshah-nameh" in this era paralleled the patronage of Ferdowsi's "Shahnameh" under Mahmud of Ghazna, though notably, the Ghaznavid ruler left the great poet of Tus unrewarded. This deliberate comparison served to position Qajar monarchs as superior to their Ghaznavid predecessors. A similar rhetorical strategy appears in the poetry of Fath-Allah Khan Sheibani, who contrasted Naser al-Din Shah Qajar with Mahmud of Ghazna: while Mahmud conquered India by sword, Naser al-Din Shah engaged Europe through intellect. (Sources: Aryanpur, 2008, 15; Shamisa, 2014, 298-299).

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