

Review Article

## Gardens through the Lens of History and Archaeology

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**Abstract** | Garden design has its roots in the art and beliefs of ancient Iran. Over time, it has continued in the Islamic era of Iran and started being exported to the Islamic world. Many gardens of the Safavid era were built on the remnants of Sassanid gardens, and the Iranian garden tradition, with the three sacred elements of water, plants, and places of worship, was shaped based on the worship of the elements of nature. Gradually, the gardens of tombs and sacred places emerged in the Islamic era. The remnant of the Iranian-Islamic gardens from the past to the present includes water in the form of fountains, ponds, and springs, fruit and shade trees, and beautiful, fragrant, and healing flowers. Also, the four-arched pavilion building, which is known as 'Shahneshin' in the government gardens. Therefore, the garden has religious roots in the beliefs of the people who prayed in the heart of nature and at the foot of mountains, springs, and old trees, to the extent that they also made sacrifices for these symbolic sacred elements. The prayer to Anahita, the goddess of fertility, blessing, and pure waters, is mixed with the symbols of the sacred tree and spring. The transformation of ancient rituals and beliefs is evident in the Iranian-Islamic Garden.

**Keywords** | *Garden, History, Archaeology, Epic.*

**Introduction** | In the mythological millennia and historical centuries, the garden has a holy and mystical meaning and significance whose understanding requires more examination and analysis. The most popular place for humans since the beginning of creation, and intellectual growth and development has been the garden. Likewise, the entire life of the Iranians has been associated with gardens and parks and the praise of nature.

The oldest written documents available about the flower garden are the inscriptions of the library of the powerful Assyrian ruler Ashurbanipal, who is mentioned in Gilgamesh, the powerful ruler of the city of Ur. He was a demi-god who, after the death of his friend Enkidu, set out for a garden where a goddess resides, guided by the elders, seeking a way to achieve eternal life. Until then, no human had been to this garden. The name of this goddess was "Sidor," who had many vineyards in her garden. When Gilgamesh reached the garden after going through many stages while taking many risks, he finally

entered the garden with insistence and showed strength, and asked the god of life for the secret of eternal life. The goddess of the vine said: Gilgamesh, where are you rushing to! You will never find the life you are looking for, because when the gods created mankind, they also wove death into his nature and kept eternal life for themselves (*The Epic of Gilgamesh, 1960/2003, 147*). Seeing Gilgamesh's excessive insistence, the goddess told him that the only human to whom the gods granted eternal life was a person named "Untapishtim" who lives on a distant island across the sea. Gilgamesh reached the island after enduring many hardships, and when meeting with Untapishtim, he heard from him that achieving eternal life was impossible and said: I myself am amazed how the gods have granted this great blessing to me and my wife (*ibid., 153*). After hearing those words, Gilgamesh returned to his birthplace and ruled the people of the land of Ur with justice as long as he lived<sup>1</sup>. The important and notable point in this narrative is that Gilgamesh's meeting with the goddess takes place in a garden, while the gods

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were on mountains, in ziggurats, and in their temples and palaces. It seems that Eastern satirical thought has always considered the praise of nature, and especially the Iranians, who have been pioneers in creating gardens and parks, have always shown the place of gods and kings in gardens. This holds true as well in the Epic of Gilgamesh. The civilization and art of Mesopotamia, which preceded Iranian civilization, took shape after the Achaemenids, who inherited them, came to power, and their art and culture were a combination of Iranian art and beliefs and those of their subordinate nations. Therefore, the garden, as a sacred place and the place of kings who represented the gods, was always in place. Pasargadae was the first Iranian garden and palace, a model for Sasanian gardens which emerged in gardens of the Islamic era (Mehrabani Golzar, 2016). Apart from the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, which were created by Queen Semiramis, may have been inspired by the construction of the ziggurat with a cover of sacred trees. The model of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon is completely different from the Iranian garden, but the idea of creating a garden was formed based on naturalistic and sacred beliefs. The important issue is the historical Garden of Eden (Paradise) in the Torah (The Torah, 1962/1977, Genesis 6), which states: God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And...a river went out of Eden to water the garden, and from where it was divided into four. The name of it is Pishon, which flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; and the gold of it is good, and there are onyx stones and jasper. The name of the second river is Gihon, which flows around the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Hadad, which flows toward Assyria. The fourth river is the Euphrates. So God created Adam and put him in the Garden of Eden.

### An Overview of The Garden

In mythological beliefs, the Garden of Heaven is located approximately on an island between Iran and Bahrain (The Epic of Gilgamesh, 1960/2003, 148), and in the Jewish religion, the Garden of Heaven is known as Mesopotamia. In Zoroastrianism, Paradise is located near the sacred mountain Alborz (Herbazayti), a place that has always been sacred in Iranian mythology, such as the place where the Simorgh raised the acorns on the top of the Alborz Mountain. "One of the infamous mountains, Alborz, is close to the sun and far from the group. That place was the nest of the Simorgh, which was a house of aliens" (Ferdowsi, 2004). The place of permanent captivity of the cruel Zahhak Mardush was also Mount Alborz. In Zoroastrianism, the Chinud Bridge was located on the top of Mount Alborz, where, on the Day of Judgment, sinners will be overthrown

when they cross it and go to the depths of hell, but believers can easily cross it and be immortalized in heaven forever. Therefore, Paradise in Zoroastrianism is located in and around the sacred mountain Alborz (Avesta, 1991, Visperad 7). In the Christian religion and according to their beliefs, heaven is located in the sky and on the border beyond the tangible world. In European terminology, heaven means both heaven and paradise. In the book of the "New Testament" in the four gospels of Luke, Matthew, Mark, and John, it is stated as follows. In the religion of Islam, the place and status of heaven are not mentioned, and only its blessings for the success of believers are mentioned. And the garden refers to the place of the garden (gods). However, the concept of the garden is different according to a theory in Iranian mysticism. For example, Rumi (2000, Vol. 4) says in the Masnavi:

*A Sufi in a garden, from the vast ocean of Sufism, laid his face on his knees,*

*Then he started talking to himself, being tired of that, he slept more.*

*Hear the command of the Truth, who has said: "Look, Turn your gaze toward these signs of mercy, if you are aware.*

*He said: "Its signs are the heart, O seeker of idle desires; These outward signs are but signs, and nothing more."*

*Gardens and meadows exist within the very soul; Their outward forms are like reflections upon flowing water.*

*Had there been no reflection of that lofty cypress of joy, God would not have named this world the Abode of Delusion.*

*The belief in paradise in the Islamic era is reflected in artistic motifs and in the text of carpets, tiles, and Iranian miniatures*

Such sayings and interpretations have been common for many years and have not been revised until recently, and they are still recurring in sayings and writings, in classrooms, and in art circles. But in another sense, the Iranian miniature is a relic of the Iranian-Islamic Garden, and not the images presented in the Holy Quran of paradise. From the beginning to the contemporary era, art has always been realistic and has depicted what has been in the Iranian garden, pavilion, and courtyard. What flowers, plants, fruit trees, and blossoms in the Iranian garden can be clearly seen in the miniature with a realistic form and aligned with nature<sup>2</sup> (Javadi, 2004).

### Iranian Garden

In the historical era, gardens were more widely displayed in different dimensions, such as the place of the ruler and his close relatives, a place of worship, and a pleasant green space called paradise-pardis, which was later referred

to as Firdaws, meaning heaven in Islamic culture. For example, a complete example of it can be seen in the palaces of the Achaemenids. Persepolis included a palace, the tomb of Ardashir II and III, a place of worship for holding Nowruz and Mehrگان ceremonies, and this place had a religious and pilgrimage aspect, and was not the palace and permanent residence of the Achaemenid kings. The reliefs and religious symbols on the body of the Apadana staircase and elsewhere support this theory. For example, the lion's image, which lovingly paws the neck of a cow, is a symbol of Mehr and Anahita, and some consider this image to be the victory of the great summer over winter. Therefore, the lion is also said to be a symbol of Mehr and a symbol of light and brightness. And the cow is a symbol of flowing waters and a symbol of Anahita. The Persian Garden was the place of residence of the ruler, the harem, the extensive green space, and the place of worship. The discovery of stone buildings three kilometers from Persepolis clearly shows the extent and scope of the green space. In the Sassanid period, the Taq-e-Bostan complex also had the same characteristics, in which there was a place of worship, extensive green space, and a resting place for the ruler with his relatives and the people of the harem, and it was also the hunting ground of Khosrow Parviz. Even today, petroglyphs of deer and boar hunting have remained on the side walls of the large arch. Also, the scene of Khosrow Parviz's coronation by Ahura Mazda with the presence of the goddess Anahita can be seen on the middle wall of the large arch. Outside the arch and in the open space, next to the boiling spring and the flowing stream, the relief of Ardashir II between Ahura Mazda and Mithra is in place and stable, which shows the coronation scene or receiving the divine crown and the ring of sovereignty from Ahura Mazda and with the presence of Mehr and Anahita, indicating the sacred place and shrine of Mehr and Anahita in this place. An important part of the Taq-Bostan complex was

built during the time of Khosrow Parviz, who came to this place with his family and relatives during the hot season of Ctesiphon-Paitakht to rest in the suitable and pleasant weather and a relaxing atmosphere, and went for walks and hunts. The garden in ancient Iran consisted of a palace and a temple that contained a complex with plants, springs, and holy water. The oldest example of this kind is the Pasargadae-Achaemenid Garden, the remains of which contain the first model of an Iranian garden (Mehrabani Golzar, 2016). The garden of temples and the garden and pavilions were called Pardis (Paradise) during the Sassanid period, which included the hunting grounds of the Sassanid kings. Among the most famous of these sacred places, hunting was an important and sacred matter in ancient Iran, where kings had to prove their skill and courage to be worthy of receiving the divine blessing. An example of sacred places is the hunting ground of Taq Bostan-Kermanshah, where signs of the prayer of Mehr and Vanahita are evident, as evidenced by the petroglyphs found at the site. The complex of the Sassanid Takht-Shuyez temple palace in Takab, as well as the garden of temples that became a tomb garden in the Islamic era, which became the burial ground of saints, including the descendants of Imams, scholars, and Islamic mystics, which are still in place and established in different parts of Iran today and are places of pilgrimage for all Shiite and Sunni Muslims. Among these is the great tomb garden of Bidukht in Gonabad-Khorasan Razavi, which is attributed to the Nematollahi dervishes, and special ceremonies continue to be practiced at this site, preserving elements of ancient Iranian rituals. Other examples of these tomb gardens can be seen throughout Iran, especially in Mazandaran and Gilan, where the history of these places dates back to ancient times and the sanctity of water and plants, and the connection of these natural elements with the gods, Mehr and Anahita (Figs. 1 & 2) ( see Mansouri & Javadi, 2018).



Fig. 1. The garden collection of Shah Nematollah Vali's tomb, Kerman. Source: Mansouri & Javadi, 2018, 190.



Fig. 2. Gadamgah Tomb Garden, Neyshabur. Source: Mansouri & Javadi, 2018, 183.

## Safavid Gardens

In the Islamic era, the Safavids succeeded in unifying the parts of Iran for the first time by establishing a powerful central government, and in such a context, the position of the garden as in the pre-Islamic era is clearly evident. Its features include a palace complex, a harem, a place of worship, and extensive green space. Examples of these gardens include the Ali Qapu complex, Naqsh-e Jahan Square, the Shah Mosque, and the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque for the women of the harem. Many gardens of the Safavid era were built on the remains of Sassanid gardens, of which the obvious examples include the Behshahr National Garden and the Abbas Abad complex in Mazandaran. Kashan's Fin Garden and the "Chartaghi" Mansion, the Soleimanieh Spring, the Ali Damghan Spring complex, including the old plane tree and the holy spring, and the Chartaghi, which are related to the Sassanid period and were restored and revived during the Safavid and Qajar periods (Figs. 3 & 4). The gardens and pavilions of Chehelsotun and Hasht Behesht of Isfahan are also Sassanid-Safavid examples. Many others of this kind can be mentioned throughout Iran. This Iranian-Islamic garden pattern continued during the Qajar era, and its traces can still be seen in various parts of this region.

The main and key element in these Iranian-Islamic gardens is water, its meaning and its sanctity, which have been the cultural-religious heritage of ancient Iran, and in the Zoroastrian religion and in the Islamic era, are based on the Holy Quran and narrations, was recommend keeping water sacred and clean. The flowing water in the streams and rivers that flow into the ponds, and sometimes its manifestation and display can be seen in decorative waterfalls, dove nests, and pigeon nests. Near the water, old and sacred trees that symbolize birth, fertility, and life have also been praised by Iranians. In other places in the Iranian garden, there were fruit



Fig. 4. Behshahr National Garden, a Sasanian garden that was later transformed into a Safavid garden. Along either side of the central watercourse leading toward the pavilion (chahartaq), Sasanian stone paving bearing Sasanian carving marks is visible. Source: Author's archive.

gardens and medicinal herb gardens. As Pirnia (2015) says in the book of *The Stylistics of Iranian Architecture*: «Everything in the Iranian garden has been fruitful. Therefore, water and plants are inseparable elements of the Iranian-Islamic garden and are considered archetypes of gardens and parks. The pattern of the regular Iranian-Islamic garden has spread from this border to other places in the Islamic world, including Islamic Spain-Andalus, North Africa, and the gardens of the Islamic era in India, which have had changes in the plants in each land according to the climate and environmental conditions. What is striking and magnificent in the Iranian garden is the presence of water and its circulation in the garden, and the splendor and grandeur of water. Other gardens in Iran include the Delgosha Garden and the Eram Garden in Shiraz, the Golshan Garden-Tabas, and the Qajar-era tomb gardens of the Mushtaqiyeh Tomb in Kerman and the Shah Nematollah Vali Tomb Garden in Mahan, Kerman. Many of the ancient cemeteries in Iran that have survived to this day include the tombs of the old Seyyeds in Mazandaran, and according to the words of the noble people, they contain religion and morality, and in honor of these respected people, martyrs and elders are buried in these holy places today. The old cemetery of Shah Abdul Azim and the Parrot Garden, the shrine of Imamzadeh Abdullah in Shahr-e Ray, and many others show the sanctity of gardens among Iranians from the earliest times to the present day. The huge garden of the Bidakht shrine in Gonabad, which is today the shrine of the Dervishes and Sufis of the Khorasan region, is a shrine located in a large, clean garden with water and old trees, where special ceremonies are held every Sunday and Tuesday. Between the Maghrib and Isha prayers, they recite the Mantiq al-Tayr and the Tazkirah al-Awliya attar while sitting in a circle. This ceremony is a reminder of the religious ceremonies of ancient Iran and pre-Islamic believers.



Fig. 4. Ali Damghan spring. Source: Mansouri & Javadi, 2018, 169.

## Conclusion

The tradition of garden design in the East has been common in the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, Iran, and the Far East, but with different attitudes towards nature. The Iranian-Islamic garden pattern, with its regular geometry and the predominance of water and its circulation in the garden, the proportion of plants including trees and flowers, and the combination of these two elements with a pavilion or pavilions, has been exported from Iran to the gardens of the Islamic world. The gardens surviving from the Safavid period are often formed on the remains of Sasanian gardens, the most prominent of which is the Behshahr

National Garden in Mazandaran, where huge Sasanian stones are visible on the sides of the main waterway of the garden. The ancient garden-temples of Iran have been transformed into gardens of tombs during the Islamic era, which usually include the tombs of religious and mystical figures and the descendants of Imams. Springs and old trees are also present in these places and are revered and used by believers in various parts of Islamic Iran.

## Declaration of No Conflict of Interest

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest in conducting this research.

## Endnotes

1. The Epic of Gilgamesh was written and codified in the third millennium BC and certainly existed and was told orally in the centuries and millennia before that.
2. Nine Iranian gardens were registered at the 35th session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in Paris on July 26, 2011, which

is noteworthy. 1 Remains of the ancient Pasargadae-Achaemenid garden in Marv Dasht, Fars. 2 Eram Garden, Shiraz. 3 Chehelsoton Garden, Isfahan. 4 Fin Garden, Kashan. 5 Akbarieh Garden, Birjand. 6 Abbas Abad Garden, Behshahr. 7 Dowlat Abad Garden, Yazd. 8 Pahlavan Pour Garden, Mehriz, Yazd. 9 Shazdeh Garden, Mahan, Kerman.

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