

Islamic Gardens in Iran

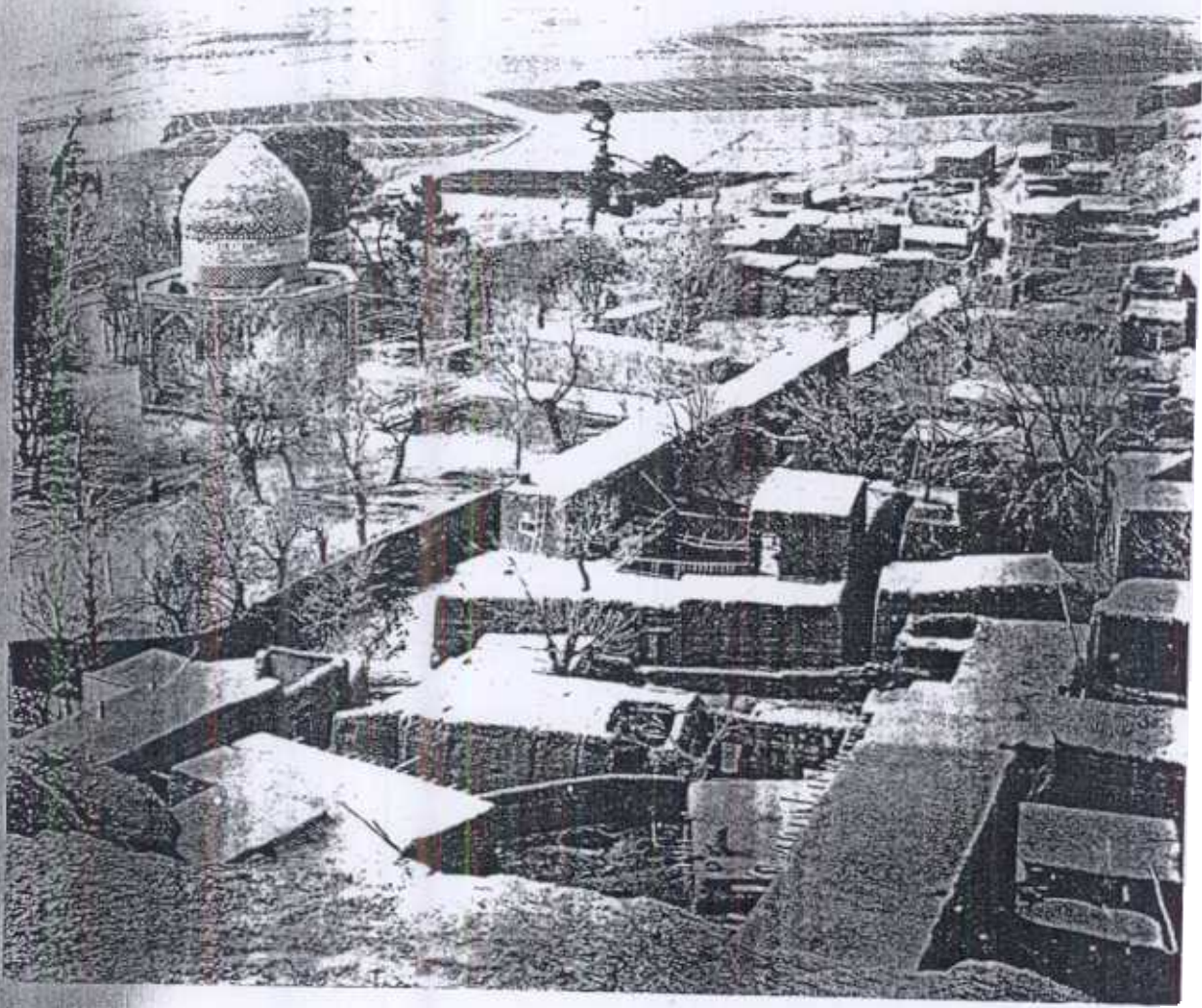
Daneshdoust

When the subject of Islamic gardens is discussed, the question which immediately arises is: "What effect does the Islamic religion have on these gardens?"

Before the birth of Islam, gardens, besides being affected by geographical conditions, were influenced by tradition, ritual, and the cultural background of the people. For example, before Islam the figure 4 was representative of the four sacred elements, water, fire, wind and soil; from the days of the Sassanids (224-641 A.D.) onwards it was common to divide hunting grounds into four sections, in the middle of which a kind of mansion was constructed. As a result, when we observe ancient gardens in Iran, or in the territories which were under Iranian influence, we notice this quadruple division, and the older the garden the more distinct it is and the more it determines the basic lines of the design. As time passed the division became more ornamental or subordinate in character, so that where it still existed the original implication was overlooked, and we can sometimes find gardens in which it does not exist at all. There are certain words in the language which relate to the idea - like the word "cheharbag" meaning "four gardens" - but they have completely relinquished their original meaning.

Islam originated in the Arabian Peninsula, a land where water and vegetation are as rare as alchemy. In the Koran, the holy book of the Moslems, it is written that righteous people are promised paradise. Some of the features of this promised paradise as seen in the Koran and its commentaries, which have a bearing on our discussion and have an effect on gardens, should now be mentioned briefly:

1. In paradise there flow streams and canals with golden banks and beds of pearls and rubies, the soil of which has a smell sweeter than musk.
2. There is perpetual shade which is tamed to move according to the will of man.
3. There is no extreme heat from the sun or bitter cold.
4. There are trees which are so green that they appear to be black.
5. Mention is made of the names of trees such as the thornless lotus, tangled myrtle, palm and pomegranate.
6. There are high buildings unique in the world.
7. The dimensions of paradise may be likened to the width of the sky and the earth.
8. There is an extraordinary abundance of unforbidden and perennial fruit which may be freely eaten.



1. General view of "Ghadamgah" garden, laid out on steep grounds.

In the later periods of the Islamic age the main objective in the designing of gardens was to make them as close to this description as possible, and a good garden was always compared with paradise. Many other promises are given concerning the eternal paradise. But it should be noted that, viewed as a garden, paradise is merely an extreme example, much more desirable than what already exists. Gardens in Islamic territories in later ages were influenced by both the Koran and previous tradition. The contents of the Koran had a great influence even on the people who lived in fertile and evergreen lands like those of the north of Iran, though this influence was, of course, much greater in barren and arid lands. But besides the climatic conditions, which were an essential factor, tastes and enthusiasms in certain respects also had a permanent influence. Hence the characteristics acquired by Iranian gardens are the outcome of a variety of factors. Their design was influenced not only by the descriptions of the promised paradise given in the Koran, but also indirectly by the philosophy of Islam and its imposed restrictions which affect the life of the people and their way of thinking. Such restrictions are the veiling of women, the problem of prohibited and non-prohibited relations between men and women, prohibition of wine-drinking, and so on. It should be noted that in the past, gardens were usually private and very seldom were they constructed for public purposes. For this reason the influence not only of the designer's personal character and ideas, but also of those of the owner, is clearly visible. Nevertheless, there are certain features common to all Iranian gardens which can be defined as follows:

1. A garden is laid out on steep ground.

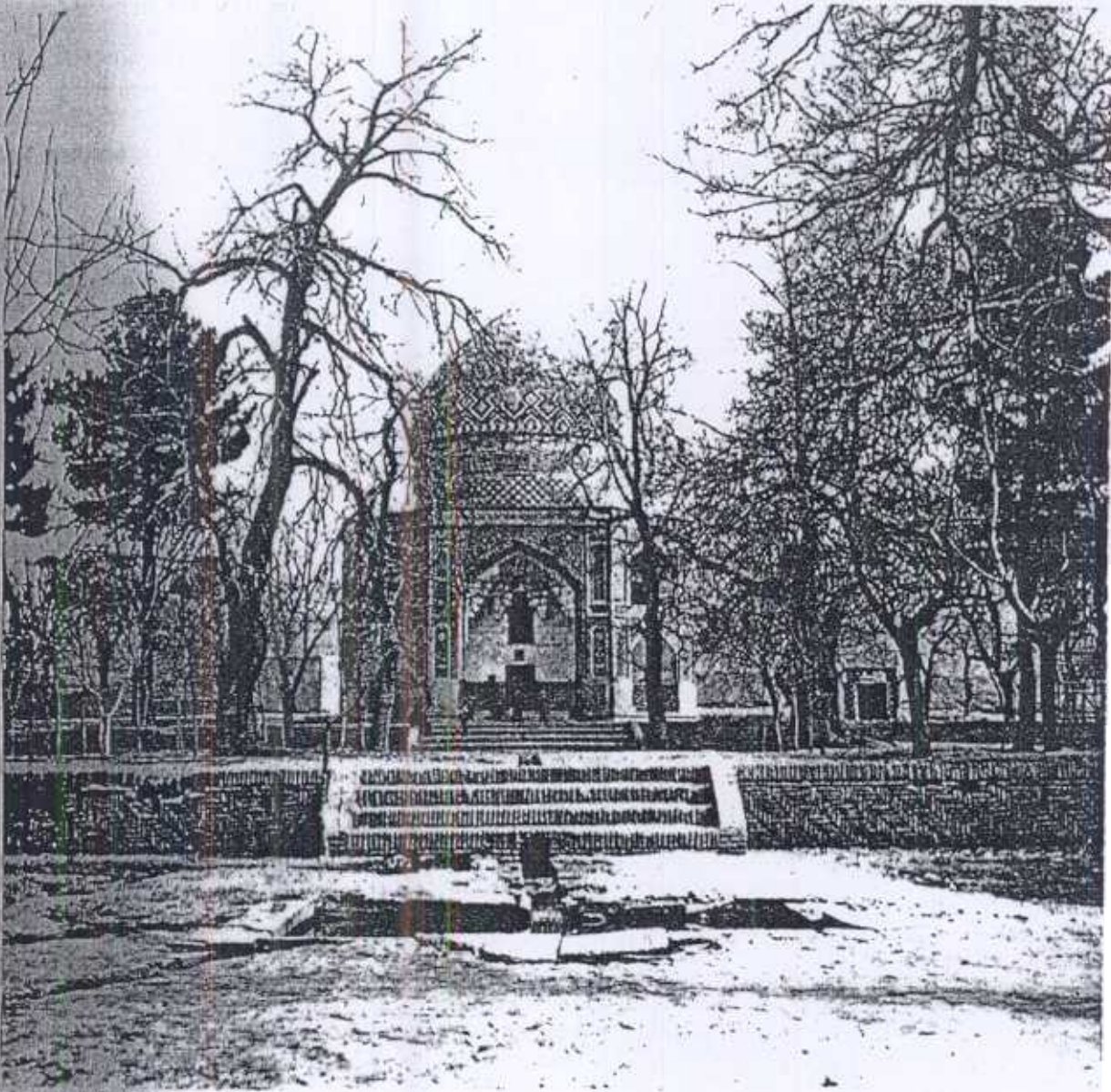
2. The area of the garden is surrounded by a wall.
3. There is a main canal in it.
4. The area of the garden is divided into four.
5. There is a mansion or palace in the middle.
6. The planting of rose-bushes is frequent.
7. A close relation with nature is obtained in a simple manner and there is no interval or boundary line between the mansion and the rest of the garden, so that it cannot be seen where one begins and the other ends.
8. A large number of trees are planted for the sake of shade, and as a result the garden contains narrow walks.
9. Canals are so designed that the flow of the water produces a sound.
10. The design of the garden is based on the use of straight lines.
11. Provision is made for the flow of the water to be visible, and grooves are cut in the bottom of the canals to cause the water to flow roughly as if it were flowing over rocks.
12. There are a large number of fruit-trees; the bigger the garden the more fruit-trees are planted.

If we now go on to discuss gardens designed mainly for religious purposes, we must keep in mind that such gardens will of course be greatly influenced by religious factors.

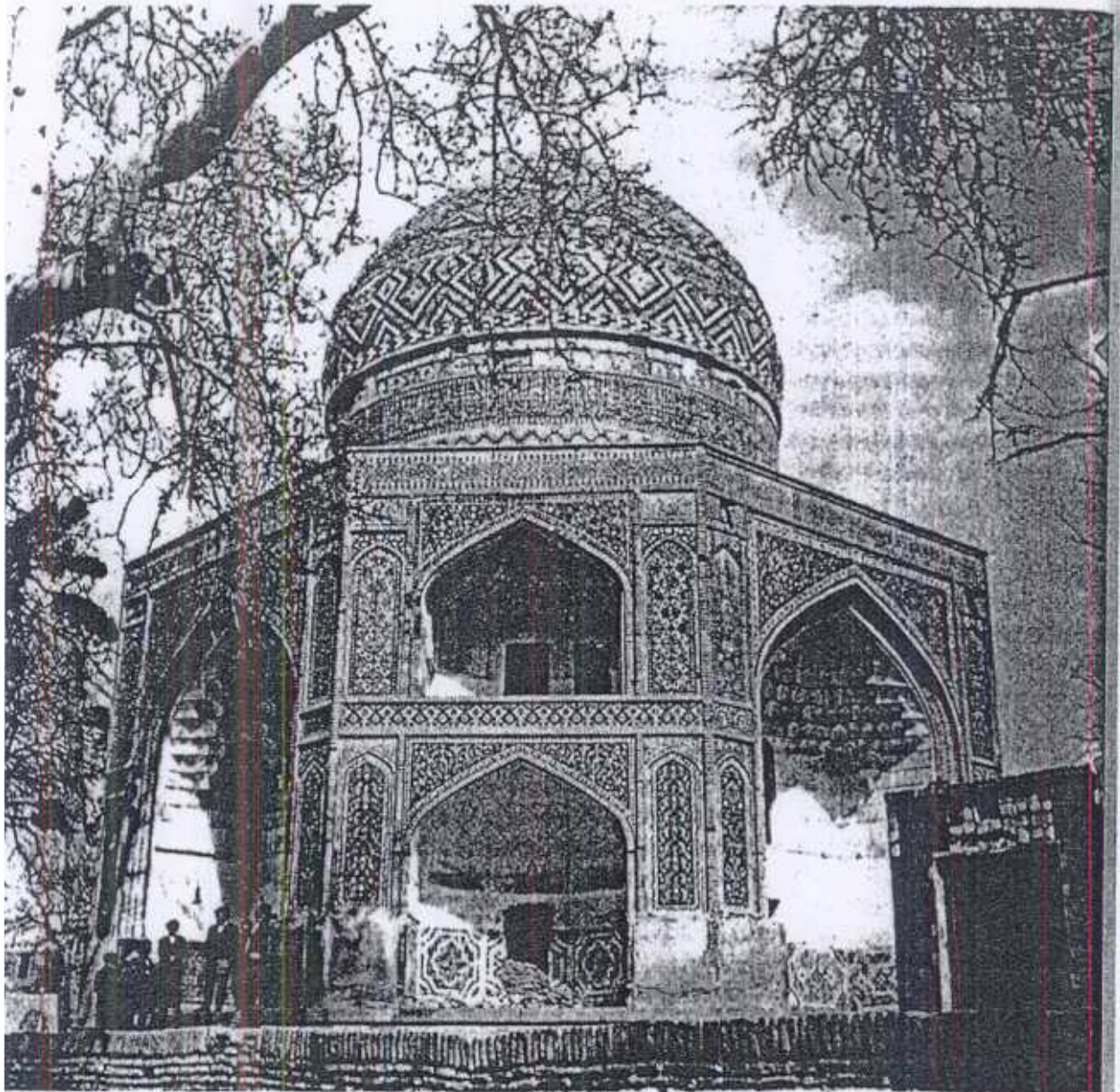
Such a garden was laid out during the time of the Safavid dynasty. This garden is unique in two ways:

1. It was laid out in a religious precinct, and
2. It was a public garden.

The garden is 25 km. from Nishaborr, and is called "Qadamgah" ("footing") because on the left-hand side, in a southern portion of the wall inside the



2. *Garden around the mansion in winter time.*



3. *The mansion—the entrance to the spring is seen on the right.*

mansion, there is a piece of black stone on which two footprints have been carved. It is believed by the common people that these footprints belong to Emam Reza, the eighth successor of the Holy Prophet in the Shi-ite sect of Islam. The fact is that Emam Reza came to this place during his tour of Mashad, and the people carved footprints on the stone, years later, as a remembrance of his setting foot in the place. The "Qadamgah" garden is composed of the three sections which are described below.

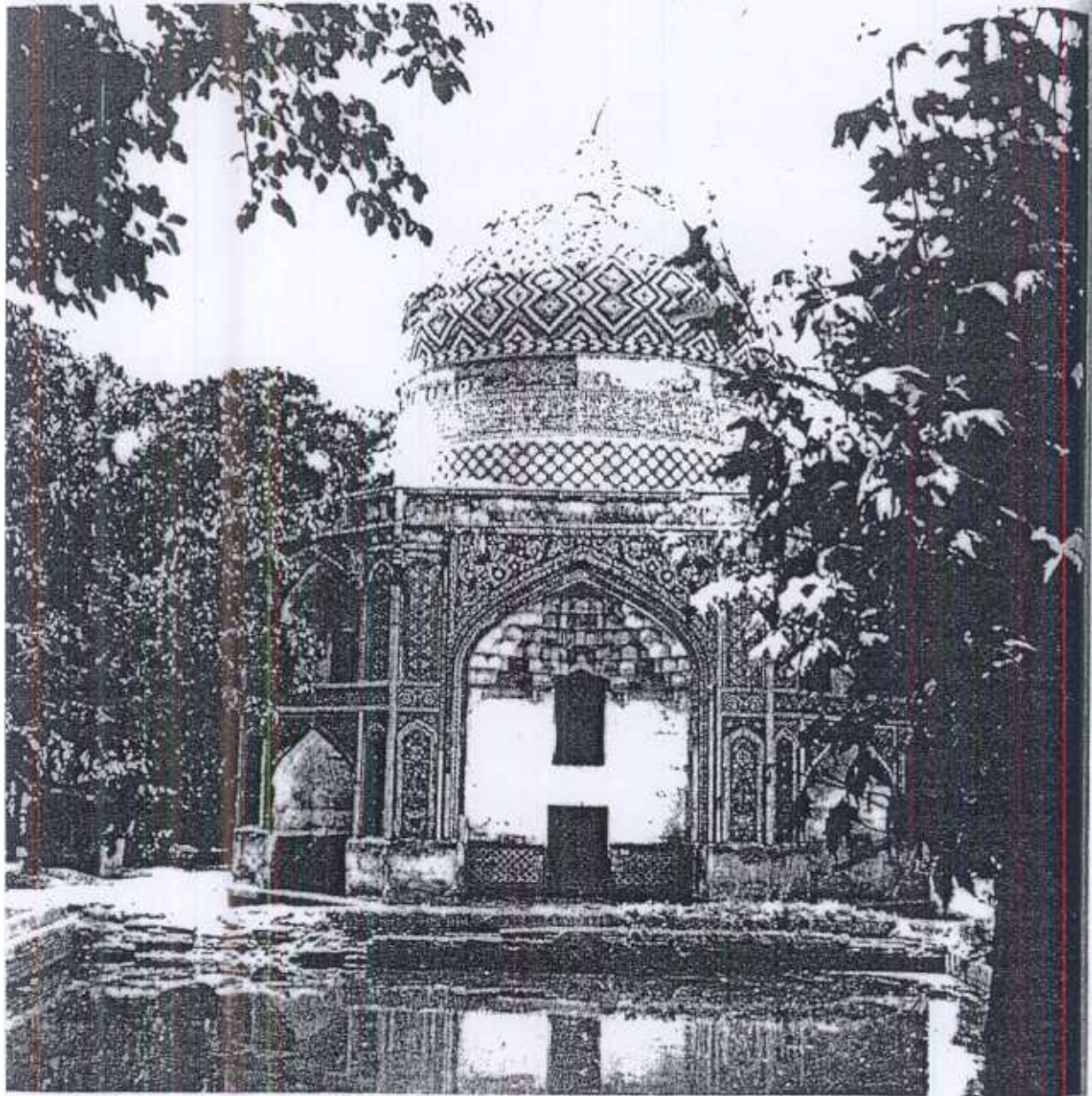
a. The space surrounding the mansion: This area is rectangular in shape and measures 102 by 115 metres. It is surrounded by walls. A canal which waters the garden enters from behind the mansion and, after filling a pool measuring 13 by 16 metres and flowing on through several channels and four smaller pools around the building, takes its course along the main axis of the garden. The large pool is also used as a reservoir. All the sections of this garden are on steep ground and it therefore consists of several different levels which are connected to another by stairs.

The mansion, which is decorated with glazed tiles, "kashi" stands a little way from the centre of the garden, on the linear axis. Except for a few apricot trees, the area is planted only with plane trees and pines. The fruit from the apricot trees, after being dried, used to be sent to various people as a token of blessing. There is a spring beside the mansion, which is believed by the common people to have gushed forth when Emam Reza inserted his staff into the spot. Its water is believed to be sacred and blessed. The garden in this area is very plain, since most of the attention has been given to the mansion and the decoration of its surroundings.

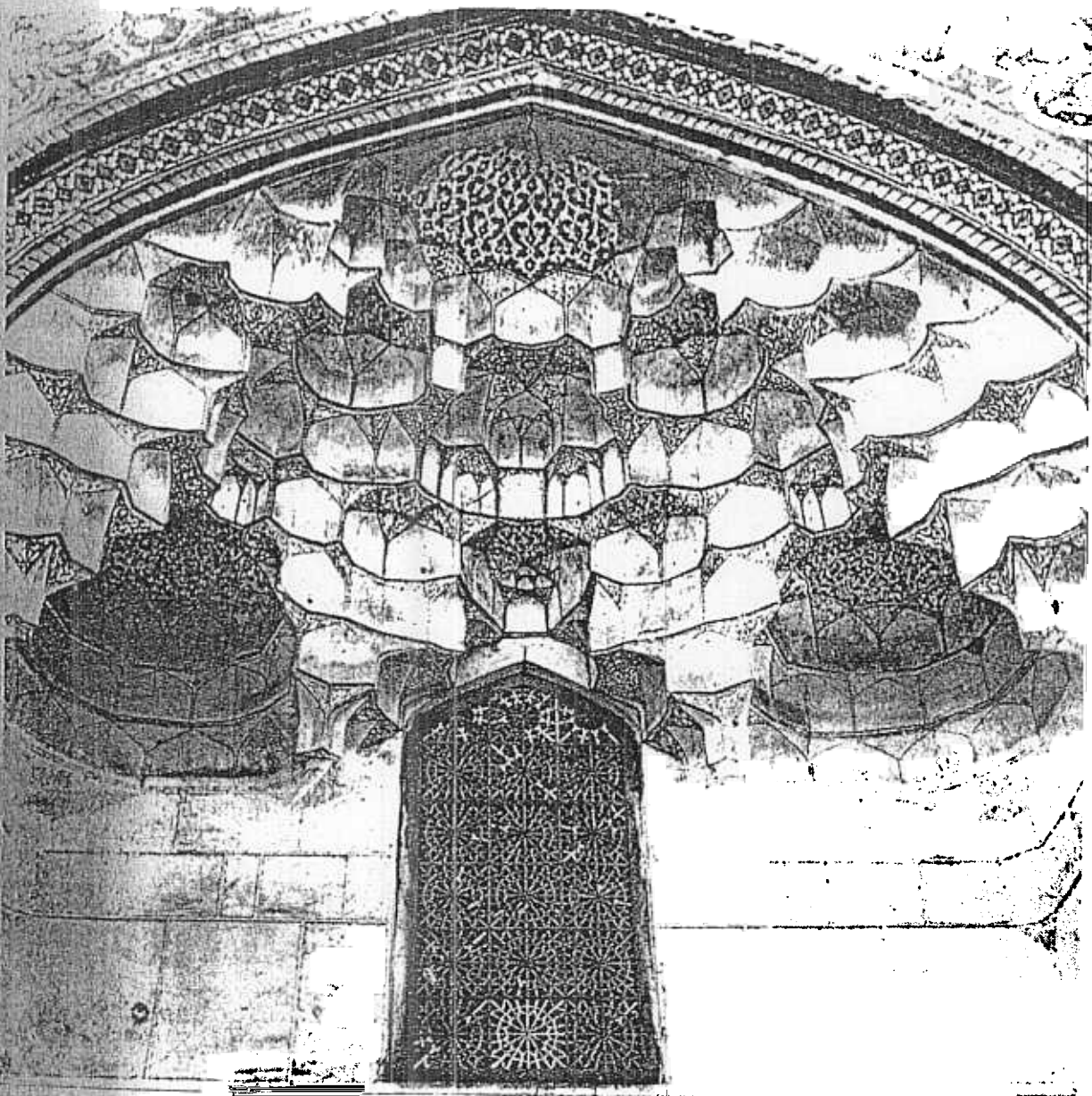
b. The general area of the garden: This area is laid out on both sides of the axis in a symmetrical manner and on each side there are twenty booths for the use of caravans of pilgrims. The trees in this part are mostly mulberry, which, according to the common belief, were planted only for charity, so that everyone was free to eat their fruit. The axial canal continues through this area, and, after passing between two huge plane trees, enters a pool measuring 11 by 8 metres. When this has filled, it again flows as a narrow canal along the axis. The mulberry trees are planted in three distinct rows. The middle one, being a double row, lines both sides of the axial canal, providing shade in accordance with Iranian taste. The other two rows are planted in front of the pilgrim booths. The booths are constructed on two different levels and are of two categories. Those of the first category, which are situated on the lower level, are spacious enough to lodge pilgrims for a longer period and have a fireplace and some recesses in their walls. Those in the second category rather resemble a decorative arch which could serve for short rests and could actually have contained garden seats.

One exceptional feature of this part of the garden is the fact that there is no wall or gate at its entrance.

c. The portion between the mansion and the general area: The upper part of the general area contains a comparatively big courtyard with no trees. This courtyard serves as a forecourt where one may stop before entering the mansion yard to say prayers or wait for one's turn. The facade of the mansion and the subordinate buildings are in fact the nerve-centre of the whole. A remarkable aspect of this garden is that



4. *A view of the mansion from the uppermost parts shows how the building and garden are combined.*



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5. *The stalactites and decoration of the mansion by having harmony with the garden, they associate the nature.*

it has never had a private owner and the main purpose in laying it out was to cater for the comfort of the pilgrims and create a suitable place where they could stop and rest on a warm day; as a result the main object was not to achieve idealistic beauty, and most attention was paid to the mansion and to creating an atmosphere of comfort for the pilgrims. Incidentally, it possesses all the characteristics of an Iranian garden already mentioned above, except for the quadruple division, which is not very distinctly noticeable in its plan; however, the descriptions given in the Koran of a paradise garden have had no influence on its design.

Most of the features described in the Koran are financially out of the question in a garden meant for public purposes, and only some of them can be seen in the royal palace gardens.

The gardens which have come into existence since the Safavid Dynasty have been influenced to a greater or lesser extent by other parts of the world, especially Europe, owing to the development of closer contacts with other nations in more recent times. Unfortunately these changes have been effected without any allowance for local conditions and have proved to be unsuitable to warmer climates. It is true that with the expansion of international relations everything is becoming more universal in form, and such revolutionary changes are unavoidable; but we must consider local geographical conditions as the essential and permanent factor and believe that observation of this principle in all parts of the world is an absolute necessity.

Résumé : jardins islamiques en Iran

Les plus anciens traits des jardins iraniens apparaissent avant l'introduction de l'Islam, dès la Perse achéménide; la division des jardins en quatre parties (selon les quatre éléments) est déjà affirmée à l'époque sassanide (224-641). A ce premier fonds vint s'ajouter l'idée du jardin contenue dans le Coran et diffusée par les Arabes: jardin irrigué, planté d'arbres fruitiers, où l'ombre joue un rôle important.

L'auteur souligne les traits essentiels du jardin iranien islamique: installé sur un site en pente, le jardin est clos de murs. Son tracé utilise des lignes droites, il est divisé en quatre parties et un canal court selon l'axe central. Le palais, ou la maison, est au centre du jardin. Beaucoup d'arbres sont plantés, pour assurer de l'ombre, surtout des arbres fruitiers et de nombreux buissons de roses. On doit voir courir l'eau et entendre son bruit. De petites chutes sont ménagées, à cet effet, à la fin des canaux.

Un jardin de l'époque safavide nous est présenté en détail: Il s'agit d'un jardin public, situé à 25 km de Nishabour et appelé "qadamagah", consacré au souvenir d'un descendant du Prophète, Emam Reza, et destiné à recevoir des pèlerins. Le jardin comprend trois parties principales. Autour de la maison, un jardin rectangulaire clos de murs, planté de platanes, de pins et d'abricotiers. Des canaux et plusieurs bassins assurent l'irrigation. Puis deux autres jardins, situés, de part et d'autre de l'axe central, occupé par un canal. Vingt cellules ont été aménagées, dans chacun de ces derniers jardins, pour abriter les pèlerins. Le canal débouche sur un grand bassin (11 x 8 m) qui alimente ensuite un canal plus étroit, toujours dans l'axe du jardin. Des mûriers y sont plantés en trois rangées: l'une ombrageant les bords du canal, les deux autres faces aux cellules. Les visiteurs pouvaient manger leurs fruits. Entre ces deux jardins publics et l'enclos entourant la maison est une vaste cour, sans arbre, qui servait de lieu de passage et d'attente.