

THE MUSLIM GARDENS OF THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

REPORT BY MR. MOHAMMED HAMMAD

Although the Holy Koran was written to explain the relationship between Man and God and that between human beings, it nevertheless gives us such a vivid picture of the gardens of the time that they can easily be visualised. In Surat 18. verse 31, we read:

"Give them the example of two men, and let one of them own two vineyards, surrounded by palm-trees and other plants between them. Both gardens bear fruit in full, and let a river spring out through it..."

This passage gives us a picture of the Arabian Muslim garden very similar to an Egyptian garden beside the River Nile, such as may be seen in ancient Egyptian paintings, which show vineyards surrounded by mixed hedges of palm-trees and other plants.

This mixed hedge of palm-trees and other plants around the vineyard serves a number of practical purposes. It marks the boundaries of the garden, and it stabilises the soil. It also serves as a screen to filter the air regulate the humidity of the garden. In addition the trees have an economic value of their own.

The palm-trees with their great height give complete shade cover over a wide area, while the other trees and plants in between permit the rays of the sun to penetrate, so that there is a continually shifting pattern of light and shade within the garden. The plants thus have the benefit of the sunlight and at the same time enjoy the shade which they need for protection.

If nature has undoubtedly the determining effect on the type of garden and on the produce grown in it, the influence of neighbouring peoples should also be taken into account. There is no doubt that Arabian gardens were influenced by Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Persian examples.

The Arabian Peninsula lies in the torrid zone, and rainfall is sparse, especially in the central part. In the South and West there is irregular rainfall, with occasional downpours which turn the dry watercourses into raging torrents; the water is carried down to low-lying valleys, where it sinks through the sand to form underground reservoirs, or in some places it runs down to the sea.

Dams were sometimes built to enable the people to make use of the rainwater, and the possibilities of establishing gardens in the Arabian Peninsula were therefore greatest in the South and West, where the rainfall is heaviest, and, above all in the Yemen, both in pre-Islamic times and later.

Although we have no contemporary written evidence of gardens or plantations in pre-Islamic Arabia, a certain amount can be deduced from old writings, from old Arabic names and from the existence of dams in the Yemen and elsewhere. We are thus able to form some sort of a picture of the subject.

Land-owners established gardens on their lands and planted palm-trees and other plants for their crops. Some of these gardens were celebrated for events which took place in them, such as "the garden" in Medina, and the garden of Mosailama the Liar. Mosailama was a very rich man who wanted to elevate himself to the rank of a deity. He therefore named his large fortified garden at Yamama "the garden of Rahman" - this being one of the titles of God. As his garden was spacious and well-fortified, with a strong entrance gate and high walls, he took refuge there when he and his followers were attacked, after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, by the Muhammadan army of Khaled Ibn-el-Walid. Mosailama and many of his men were killed in the battle which was fought in the "garden of Rahman", which became known thenceforward as the "Garden of Death".

The garden of Abu-Talha was also connected with a well-known story from the early days of Islam. Abu-Talha's wife was one of the first women to adopt the Muslim religion. When she refused to marry him, he thought at first that she wanted a richer man... but she told him that money was not the answer. She could not marry a man who believed in a wooden statue and not in the God who made him and the whole world and the tree out of which the statue was carved. On hearing this Abu-Talha adopted the Muslim religion and married her and became a strong believer.

It is said that he was once praying under a tree in his garden, which was large and beautiful, and forgot himself thinking of the beauty of the garden. When he realised what he had done, he went to Muhammad and offered his garden as a public garden for the Muhammad-ans, so that he should be left with nothing to think of but God.

It is said that Riyadh is built on the site of Yamama. It is claimed that Riyadh is the plural of "raudah", and means "pleasant gardens", as there were many gardens on the site in olden times. Others say that "raudah" itself means a grassy or watery place, perhaps a "bostan" or natural garden. At any rate a place cannot be called "raudah" unless it has a supply of water. This is certainly the case with Riyadh, since the rainwater, which now runs through the city in canals, formerly gathered in pools and swamps, enabling gardens to be planted in some parts.

Present-day Riyadh has many gardens in palaces, villas and in some of the new quarters, apart from its public gardens. The most famous public gardens are the Yamama Hotel Gardens, the Fouta Gardens, the Tower Gardens, the Animal Gardens, the Nasria Gardens, and a number of "bostans" (natural gardens) en El-Deira, El-Kharg and elsewhere.

Notwithstanding the number of fine gardens to be found at present in Riyadh and in other parts of the Arabian Peninsula, we believe that for the future we must make use of the most modern techniques offering the possibility of solutions which have hitherto never been put into practice.

The progressive idea of a "sphere town" laid out as a garden city may provide a good solution to the problems of countries faced with unfavourable climatic conditions, such as heat, humidity or air pollution. The "sphere town" is an enclosed sphere, or small globe, insulated from the outside world and ventilated and air-conditioned within on a centralised centrifugal basis, large enough to contain all the necessities of human habitation - dwellings, roads, public parks, playgrounds, hospitals, clubs, music-halls and all the elements of the unenclosed garden city.

This is not the place to describe in full the details of a sphere garden-city. Suffice it to say

that the sphere-town could accommodate 2,000 dwellings, providing living space for 12,000 people in one simple constructional block resting on a relatively small base and growing in volume to a width and height of 180 metres.

Dwellings, service centres and internal rings roads would benefit from being situated in the large cooled and purified air space inside the sphere, which might also enable every dwelling to have an internal garden for cool climate plants and an external garden for hot climate plants.

This new concept of building in hot countries has been developed and elaborated jointly with my colleague Dr. D. Fr. Werkmeister, garden and landscape-architect, of Hildesheim (Germany); we hope soon to have completed our study and to see our plans executed at Riyadh and in other Arabian countries, giving people in unfavourable climatic conditions good housing in sphere garden-cities.

RESUME DU RAPPORT DE MONSIEUR HAMMAD: LES JARDINS ISLAMIQUES DE LA PENINSULE ARABIQUE

Les jardins islamiques décrits dans le Koran ressemblent de près à ceux de l'Egypte antique, étant, eux aussi, caractérisés par la présence d'une clôture de palmiers et de plantes diverses entourant un vignoble central et servant, notamment, à prévenir l'érosion et à créer un micro-climat. Toutefois, cette ressemblance n'est pas uniquement le fait de facteurs climatiques similaires; l'influence directe des jardins de l'Egypte, et aussi de ceux de la Perse et de la Mésopotamie, ne fait pas de doute.

Nous possédons très peu de renseignements concernant les jardins de l'Arabie préislamique; la plupart se trouvaient très probablement dans le sud et l'ouest de la péninsule, où la pluviométrie est la plus élevée et où on retrouve les traces de barrages anciens. La ville moderne d'Er-Riad et la péninsule en général possèdent de très nombreux jardins publics et privés. Toutefois, l'auteur estime qu'une des meilleures solutions aux problèmes climatiques du pays pourrait résider dans la construction de "villes-sphères" climatisées suivant le projet-type élaboré par lui-même en collaboration avec l'architecte-paysagiste H.F. Werkmeister, de Hildesheim (R.F.A.). Il s'agit d'unités autonomes isolées du monde environnant et pouvant recevoir une population de 12.000 habitants.

M. R.