

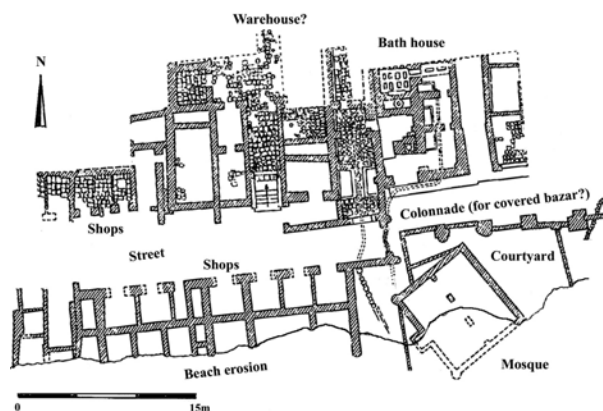
ARCHAEOLOGY OF ISLAMIC CITIES

Donald Whitcomb

As mentioned in the *Annual Report* for last year, research on the archaeology of Islamic cities began with the subject of Sasanian and Islamic cities in Iran. While active fieldwork in Iran continues to be postponed, the author was able to participate in the Siraf Congress (see *News & Notes* No. 191). Siraf maintains a distinction as the best (and longest) excavated port city in the Persian Gulf. The city began as a coastal fortification during the late Sasanian period and grew to a major entrepot in the early Islamic period. By the ninth century, its mosque was large and well

appointed, the focus for an urban community with a suq and large residences in the vicinity. This detailed information on the urban landscape was recovered through excavations. Regrettably the buildings revealed are now engulfed in the modern growth of Bandar Taheri; it was the loss of this urban evidence as well as the celebration of its past which prompted the gathering of this congress for Siraf.

The port of Siraf has a less-known parallel in the archaeological site of Banbhore, not far from Karachi in modern Pakistan. This came to our attention with the visit and lecture of Kaleemullah Lashari, a Pakistani

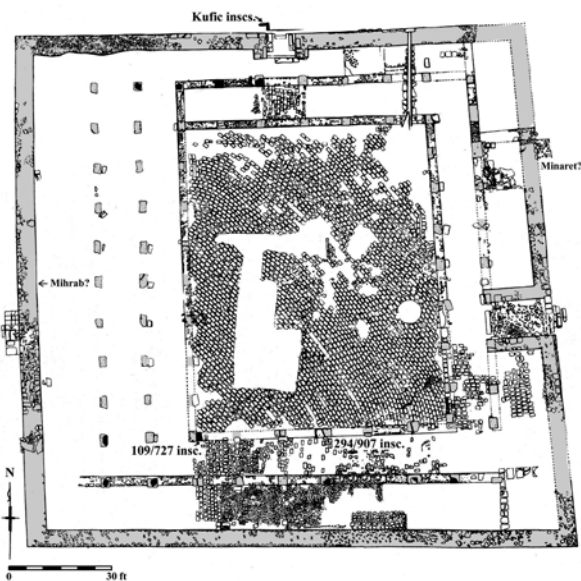


The bazaar or suq excavated at Siraf (after D. Whitehouse, Siraf 3: The Congregational Mosque, and Other Mosques, 1980, fig. 17)

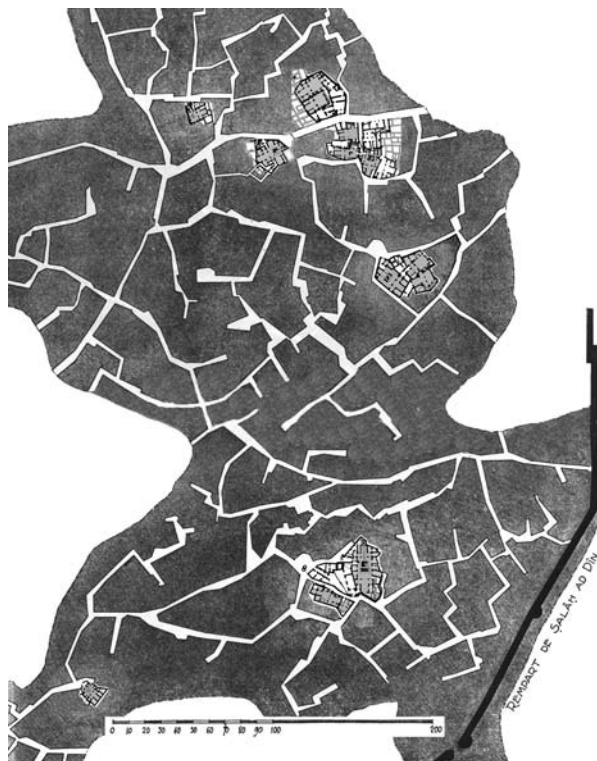
archaeologist who is currently studying the Islamic ceramics from the older Banbhore excavations. The ruins of this city are known from extensive excavations in the 1940s, published as a small book and complemented by isolate studies of the coins and inscriptions. The varied and beautiful range of glazed pottery signals the wealth of information which new study of these ruins will provide for Islamic Archaeology.

Archaeological excavations from many decades ago not only provide inspiration, but may also be reassessed in light of new models. In last year's *Annual Report*, a hypothetical reconstruction was presented for the structure of the *khittat*, tribal settlements in Fustat (the predecessor of modern Cairo). The resulting model suggests that the Ahl al-Raya, or central district around the mosque of 'Amr, might be considered a *qasaba* or town, and that further expansions of two new *qasabat*, al-'Askar and al-Qata'i, resulted in the early Islamic *misr* or metropolis. If one returns to the evidence of excavations, those of Scanlon and Kubiak in the 1970s and, more particularly, those of Bahgat and Gabriel in the 1920s, new details emerge to explain the "riddle" of the earliest foundation.

Many of the new foundations after the Islamic conquest were divided into *khittat*, each of which seems to have had its own center and mosque, watch tower, and cemetery, suggesting the *misr* was a cluster of villages in organization. Recent studies of early Islamic villages suggest evidence of patterns of sedentism and subsequent infilling of vacant areas. This spacing is ethnographically confirmed by Cribb and suggests changes in the acceptable density of occupation. Preliminary analysis of the excavations at Fustat may benefit from the landscape methodology developed by Tony Wilkinson, in which non-site features are analyzed and organized into landscape signatures. In application of this methodology to urban organization, one is drawn to consider the location and frequency of water systems (sanitation), road and alley systems, suqs and stables, parks and gardens, and above all cemeteries and ruins.



The great mosque at Banbhore (after F. A. Khan, Banbhore, a Preliminary Report, 1963, 19)



Excavated houses in Fustat (after A. Bahgat and A. Gabriel, Fouilles d'al Foustat, 1921, fig. 3)

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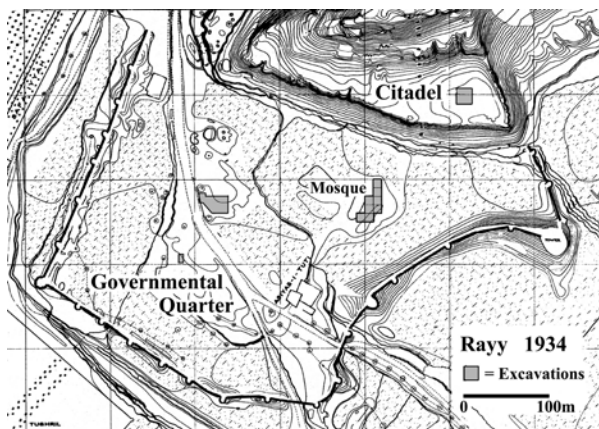


Figure 4. Plan of Rayy (after E. Schmidt, *Flights over Ancient Cities in Iran*, 1940, pl. 39A and B)

While this methodology for urban landscapes may provide indications of the structure of the original Islamic foundation, it is a more powerful tool for interpretations of the nature of mature cities. Thus, this analysis was presented in a conference in Granada on “densification” of Islamic cities. Such cities are more typical than not and unfortunately (for the archaeologist) blend into studies of ongoing, contemporary cityscapes. The first example mentioned, Siraf, is now overcome with the development of Bandar Taheri. On a smaller scale, our excavations at Hadir Qinnasrin have been limited through the recent expansion of the town of Hadir in

northern Syria. Examples could easily be multiplied but what is increasingly evident is the crucial role of archaeological research in determining any understanding of the physical nature of these specific urban histories.

A final example may illustrate this potential: the medieval city of Rayy, also known as Rhages in ancient times and the predecessor of modern Tehran. In the 1930s while he was engaged in uncovering Persepolis for the Oriental Institute, Erich Schmidt also investigated the extensive remains of this important Islamic city. Famed as the birthplace of Harun al-Rashid and home of Avicenna, this metropolis offered a formidable archaeological challenge, one that Schmidt attacked with his usual systematic abilities. The results of these efforts have been generally forgotten and buried like the site itself, now an industrial suburb of Tehran. Recently a graduate student, Tanya Treptow, has uncovered a large treasure of beautiful glazed sherds and documents from Rayy in the basement of the Oriental Institute. The challenge of the archaeology of Islamic cities is not confined to the field or urban neighborhoods, but to the history of archaeological research embodied in museums, whether in Karachi, Cairo, or Chicago.