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CHAPTER 6

PERSIAN GARDENS & HISPANO – MUSLIM GARDENS

As we said earlier, I do not agree with the division between between "major" and "minor" arts. I also believe that gardens are indeed an art form.

Not much is available in English on Persian gardens, hence I believe it wise to include a brief chapter on Persian gardens and their relation to Hispano-Muslim gardens.

Certainly gardens are not peculiar to Persia, but are well known in much of Europe. There is a journal called "The English Garden" and another called "Garden Design". Though obviously there are similarities, in fact the the typical Persian garden is in some ways quite distinct from any sort of typical European garden.

The English word "paradise" come from the Old Persian and Avestan *pairi daeza*, (Modern Persian *ferdous*), meaning "a walled space, in this case a garden.(1)

The above indicates the antiquity of the garden in Persia, and also hints at a basic difference in concept between Persian and European gardens.

In general, European gardens are meant to be part of the landscape, of the woods and meadows. Indeed, there is a style of European garden called "informal", "natural" or "woodland" which stresses precisely the appearance of being a part of the natural

environment, blending into it.

With the exception of the Caspian coast and a few other areas, Persia is mainly arid or semi-arid and barren. Ergo, in Persia the garden is meant to stand in stark contrast to the surrounding landscape, an oasis or island of verdure in a sea of aridity. The etymology of our word "paradise" indicates this; the Persian garden is, almost by definition, walled in order to keep out the desert or steppe.

Gardens certainly existed in Spain in pre-Islamic times. Due to their love of color and expertise in agriculture and herbal medicine, we may assume that the pre-Roman Celts were great gardeners. Gardens certainly existed in Spain during the Roman, Byzantine and Visigothic periods, though we know virtually nothing about them. So, in Spain the Muslim conquerors found a tradition of gardens and gardening already in existence.

Though there is much semi-arid land in Andalusia, Extremadura, La Mancha, Murcia and Aragon, yet Spain as a whole cannot compare in aridity with the Iranian Plateau. Hence, the Spanish garden of whatever period will far less often have the sense of being an "oasis" or "island of verdure in an arid vastness".

By far the best preserved Hispano-Muslim gardens are those of the Alhambra of Granada and its environs, notably the Generalife. Granada is located where the last foothills of the Sierra Nevada give way to the flat Vega of Granada, an ancient lake bed. The Alhambra itself is situated on one of the last spurs of the Sierra Nevada, between the Rio Dauro and the Rios Genil. The Dauro joins

the Genil a very short distance downstream from the Alhambra.

The spur on which the Alhambra sits is wooded. Therefore, the gardens of the Alhambra and the Generalife blend in with the landscape in European fashion, and this was even more true in Muslim times, when the woods of the Alhambra were more extensive than they are today.

Medina az-Zahara sits where the Sierra Morena gives way to the broad valley of the Guadalquivir, a beautiful and verdant setting. Certainly the gardens of Medina az-Zahara blended with the landscape in European fashion rather than standing in stark contrast to it in the Persian manner. The same would have been true of Hispano-Muslim gardens around Seville, in the Valley of the Ebro and in the *huertas* of Valencia and Murcia. In much of Western Andalusia, for much of the year - not only a few weeks in Spring - the wild flowers form an exquisite, multicolored "Persian carpet" or natural garden.

Though it is likely that there were cases of Hispano-Muslim gardens forming an "oasis" or island of verdure in an arid landscape, this was no doubt the exception rather than the rule. In this important respect, most Hispano-Muslim gardens followed a European tradition probably indigenous to Spain, perhaps dating back to the pre-Roman Celts.

Pools of water are frequently used in European gardens, indeed, "water gardens", consisting of a pool of water containing lotus or water lilies and other other aquatic plants as well as fish, are becoming fashionable. Ponds as reflecting pools or

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water gardens are an element in the overall design or visual effect.

In most parts of Persia, not only is the landscape arid or semi-arid, but summers are extremely hot and dry. In the typical Persian garden as in many European gardens, water is used in the form of reflecting pools or as water gardens, which form part of the overall design or visual effect.

However, in Persian gardens water is almost always an element, and used in a way in which it is rarely used in Europe outside Spain. In the typical Persian garden, the rushing and tinkling of flowing water; Persian gardens delight the ear as well as the eye.(2)

Muslim Spain contained much less arid or semi-arid land, and water was far more abundant than in the Iranian Plateau. However, in Andalusia, La Mancha, Murcia, Valencia and the Valley of the Ebro (at the Battle of the Ebro in the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39, even a Muslim soldier from the Spanish Sahara died of heat stroke), summers are torrid and in most places extremely dry.

I remember how, during my years in Granada, in the summer I loved to go to the gardens of the Alhambra and simply listen to the tinkling, gurgling and rushing of flowing water. In the hot, dry conditions, this sound was extremely soothing. In a later period at least, Hispano-Muslim gardens, like the typical Persian gardens, delighted the ear as well as the eye with a sound which is extremely soothing in torrid, dry weather. To this day, many private gardens and patios in Andalusia make use of the sound of

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running water to soothe a brain fevered by heat. In Andalusia, this tinkling, rushing and gurgling sound of running water is often called *Musica Mora*, meaning "Moorish Music".

The above recalls what the 19th century Swedish traveler Sven Hedin said of the Beh-i-Golshan gardens at Tabas in Khorasan:

"Tabas is a paradisaical village . . . the murmur of the (water) channels in this garden, in this dry land, is the most wonderful melody possible."(3)

It is well to note that Khorasan is not the driest region of Persia, and certainly not the hottest, but the idea is clear, and I understand it perfectly.

Another characteristic of the Persian garden is the typical plan called *chahar bagh*, literally "four gardens".(4) Archaeological evidence shows that this plan was used in Persian gardens in Achaemenian (5) and Sassanian (6) times. Evidently, not only is the garden very ancient in Persia, but in some respects at least there is a great deal of continuity and respect for tradition in the layout of the Persian garden.

The *chahar bagh* garden is sometimes square, usually rectangular. Water flows in open channels all around the perimeter. In the centre is a pool or pond, with four channels leading to the midpoints of the sides, dividing the garden into four equal parts, hence the name *chahar bagh*. The pool or pond in the middle may or may not contain a fountain, and very often is a water garden in its right, containing fish and water lilies. In the case of very large central ponds, these may even contain ducks

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or swans. Rarely, the central pond may be covered with a pavilion, kiosk or gazebo. It is obvious that the *chahar bagh* plan facilitates irrigation as well as the use of the sound of flowing water to add to the charms of the garden. A very large garden complex may contain a number of *chahar baghs*. The *chahar bagh* plan is repeated over and over in the Alhambra and the Generalife of Granada (7), as well as in countless private gardens and patios throughout Andalusia. Though the Alhambra mainly dates from the 14th century, I personally have seen evidence that the *chahar bagh* plan was introduced to Spain long before. Not far outside the city of Murcia are the ruins of the 12th century Muslim Palace of Castillejo. Said ruins are now somewhat difficult of access, though one may take a bus to within about a half mile of it. Some high school boys were doing a term paper on this stronghold, and together we climbed the hill on which it sits. The stronghold was remarkably well preserved, and the remains of a large garden which followed the *chahar bagh* pattern were clearly visible.

There is little evidence that Hispano-Muslim garden made much use of reflecting pools, as Persian gardens do. The Patio de los Arrayanes in the Alhambra does indeed make use of a reflecting pool; however, in this case we have not a garden but a large interior patio surrounded by buildings, low hedged being the only vegetation.(8)

Nevertheless, in the Alhambra do have a case of a garden with a large pool and a pavilion at one end with a second story where

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one may sit and look out over the pool and the gardens. This complex is known as the Torre de las Damas.(9) This feature is common in larger Persian gardens, though it is not possible to trace it before the Safavi period.(10)

This chapter is necessarily brief, because our knowledge of the plans and layouts of Hispano-Muslim gardens is very scanty. Though the on-going excavations at Medina az-Zahara may yet yield information on Hispano-Muslim gardens of the period of the Caliphate of Cordoba, at present we really have only the gardens of the Alhambra and the Generalife, a few archaeological remains, and what we may deduce from numerous private gardens and patios throughout Andalusia.

Also, we really know little of the plans and layouts of Persian gardens before the Safavi period, except that they made use of the *chahar bagh* plan and the sound of running water. It is risky to generalize about Persian influence on Hispano-Muslim gardens basing ourselves on Persian gardens of the 19th and 20th centuries, as even our knowledge of Persian gardens of the Safavi period is scanty.

In general we may say that, as one might expect, Hispano-Muslim gardens always had characteristics in common with the typical European garden. However, at a date which at present we are unable to determine, Hispano-Muslim gardeners adopted very typically Persian elements, namely the use of the sound of running water, the *chahar bagh* plan, and the custom of having a large pool with a two storey building or pavilion at one end from which one

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could contemplate the pool and the surrounding garden. Thus, we may confidently speak of Persian influence on Hispano-Muslim gardens.

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NOTES

- 1.) The Persian Garden: Echoes of Paradise by Mehdi Khansari, M. Reza Moghtader and Minouch Yavari, Washington, D.C., 1998, pp. 29-31.
- 2.) Ibid., p. 71, Persian Gardens and Garden Pavilions, Donald Nevin Wilber, Washinton, D.C., 1979, p. 15.
- 3.) Khansari, The Persian garden ..., p. 111.
- 4.) Khansari, The Persian garden ..., pp. 34-35., Wilber, Persian Gardens ..., p. 12.
- 5.) Khansari, The Persian Garden ..., p. 38.
- 6.) Khansari, The Persian Garden ..., pp. 49, 55.
- 7.) El Libro de la Alhambra, Luis Seco de Lucena Paredes, Leon, Spain, 1975, pp. 14-15.
- 8.) Seco de Lucena Paredes, El Libro de la Alhambra, pp. 44-46.
- 9.) Seco de Lucena Paredes, El Libro de la Alhambra, pp. 68-69.
- 10.) Khansari, The Persian Garden ..., pp. 77, 81, 83-84, 93, 97, 101, 106, 117, 127, 132. Wilber, Persian Gardens ..., pp. 50-51, 96-99.