Gardens and Garden Carpets: an Open Problem

He told the Chamberlain of the Morning Breeze to spread out the emerald carpet and, having commanded the Nurse of Vernal Clouds to cherish the daughters of plants in the cradle of the earth, the trees donned the new year's robe and clothed their breast with the garment of green foliage, whilst their offspring, the branches, adorned their heads with blossoms at the approach of the season of the Roses.

Sa'di, *Gulistan*

The garden plays a fundamental role in the culture of the environment in the Near and Middle East, especially in Persia and India. There are extremely old traditions regarding the garden, based on the simple observation of natural phenomena, that is, of how an abundance of water creates better conditions of life. In mainly arid regions, the sudden and sometimes unexpected flowering of a garden is an event that smacks of the supernatural. The divinity is often envious of this, so that God's messenger sometimes acquires the singular virtues of the parcher. It therefore becomes a conditioned reflex that is easily understandable, to attribute ritual connotations to a garden: the spring, that is the renewal of life after the winter standstill, is laden with sacred meanings of resurrection, of the defeat of death, so dear to the universal substratum of civilizations, no matter whether they be more or less evolved. And the garden, far more important than a mere island of restoration, will, through the centuries, retain these characteristics, which one could almost call "magic". In its history we shall sometimes manage to see the complex symbological vocation precisely reaffirmed even over and beyond simple appearances. These general introductory statements are necessary because they briefly indicate some of the reasons why gardens — as an architectural institution — spread and diversified, at the variuos social levels (from the back garden to the imperial park), and why their persistence through the centuries has been more lasting than some ephemeral fashions, which sometimes occurred.

The essential element of any oriental garden is water, not only as source of nourishment for trees, flowers and lawns, but in itself. In Persia, the key region in elaborating a culture of the landscape in which the garden finds its precise reference, water has always been regarded as one of the most precious gifts. Bearing testimony to this are the thousands of *qanat* scattered throughout the country, a highly evolved system of water supply, the outcome of many centuries of well tried and tested hydraulic engineering. From a religious point of view, we recall that in ancient Persia water plays a foremost role. Near lakes and natural springs (the sacrality of the latter is universal and often borne out in place names) there arose important places of worship such as fire altars. The events concerning Takht-i Sulayman in the west of Iran, a very ancient (and much reused) site around a very deep little lake of volcanic origin, are paradigmatic. Analogous events are those of Taq-i Bustan and Bisutun, both places of importance, where the presence of water is neither complementary nor casual, but an essential condition. Such examples could continue. Alongside water — whether ponds, springs or streams — grow trees: always cypresses, evergreen trees, dear to the followers of Zoroaster, and then, more and more, also the tall plane trees. In this way life, continuity, the fruit of the hierogamic union of heaven/water and earth. Xenophon describes to us how Cyrus the Great planted trees, certainly alongside stretches of water, in neat rows to form a garden. In this way an idea of Paradise is consolidated, from the biblical acceptance onwards, which will remain the same without appreciable variations: a place with water, trees and lawns. An idea destined to be embraced by various religious cultures, a concept that draws together civilizations of different sorts. Paradise, on earth or in heaven, is a great park with lots of water, a place of restoration, eternal spring time. These images are codified, taking on fresh legitimation, also in the written sources which take up the biblical description of Eden and, as we shall see, in the Koran. The function of the garden as a sacred place charged with the reaffirmation of life, paradise, is understood also as a projection of a harmony and equilibrium with the surrounding world and hence as control, power over the elements, which is reflected inevitably in political power. In this optic we can therefore see the mania — not only of naturalistic type — of certain sovereigns to construct gardens, a tangible sign of civil and religious power. It is quite interesting to note that it is at moments of the expansion of power (Timur at Samarkand, Shah 'Abbas, Akbar) that gardens are laid out on a large scale.

It is precisely love for gardens or the need for legitimation represented by them that introduces the theme of the garden carpet as a substitute (but perhaps something more) for the real garden. The tradition of carpets made "like gardens" is once again very ancient. Historical sources (from Plutarch to Tabar) are concerned about letting us know this; in the great hall of Ctesiphon, there was a very special carpet possessed by Khusraw I (531-579) (in those times, paradise gardens of 300 acres are recalled) and called the Spring Carpet of Khusraw. We will leave aside the question of whether it was a carpet knotted in the ways that we know, or otherwise, and concentrate out attention on its use.

Two circumstances appear certain: that the carpet was laid out in the audience chamber and that the term "Spring" was given to it from the particular structure that recalled gardens. Intersecting streams (simulated by hard, precious stones) with squares of emeralds and other precious parts. The interesting thing to note is that the sovereign held audiences on this object

THE "FIGDOR GARDEN CARPET", MUSEUM OF APPLIED ARTS, VIENNA

depicting the garden idea, conferring thereon a very lofty dignity. In our view this stems not so much from an aspect of luxury or nostalgia for a particular condition, as from a preordained and not a casual symbology. The garden (and the garden carpet as its image) as the terrestrial expression of Paradise is figured as not a secondary attribute of royal power.
An interesting artistic representation, in this context, is provided by a Saşsanid silver plate in the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad. This represents the sovereign seated on what appears to be a carpet of floral type. The floral typology is clearly related to that of garden carpets and this bears out the ritual importance of these objects. The paradise/garden/garden carpet/royalty relations is thus attested clearly in the East of pre-Islamic age, having already gone through various phases (from the spontaneous one of the spring/lake with related temple of fire, to the codification of the garden determined by two water courses at right angles).
In the Koran there are many of these ancient traditions and this assuredly gave an impetus to the making of gardens. Quotations in the Koran referring to paradise/garden are numerous, but among them Sura LV seems to us of particular importance. This runs as follows (we omit the verse in between which is as follows: "*Which then of the bounties of your Lord will you deny?*"):

46 And for him who fears to stand before his Lord are two gardens
48 Having in them various kinds
50 In both of them are two fountains flowing
52 In both of them are two pairs of every fruit
54 Reclining on beds, the inner coverings of which are of silk brocade; and the fruits of two gardens shall be within reach
56 In them shall be those who restrained their eyes; before them neither man nor jinni shall have touched them

. . . . . .

62 And besides these two are two (other) gardens:
64 Both inclining to blackness
66 In both of them are two springs gushing forth
68 In both are fruits and palms and pomegranates
70 In them are goodly things, beautiful ones
72 Pure ones confined to the pavilions
74 Man has not touched them before them nor jinni
76 Reclining on green cushions and beautiful carpets.

Thus, here we have the quoting of carpets or materials of similar use, in connection with the paradise/garden: full assimilation, therefore, in Islam, of these traditions and a reaffirmation, indeed a rendering sacred there of through the Book and its dissemination among believers. In fact, the use of the garden is documented from the very earliest Islamic era: traces of channels for irrigation have been found in the "desert castles", as they are called, of Omayyad epoch and around the buildings of Samarra. Gardens must therefore have immediately become an element of considerable importance in the Islamic social status, whatever the ultimate function of those famous "villas" might have been. The main obstacle to a full recognition of this important architectural function of the garden lies in the difficulty, with traditional methods of archaeological investigation, of establishing the morphology of these broad spaces which have been several times transformed.
Another important consideration is that relating to the conceptual diversity between European garden and Islamic garden, which in this context must be noted and explained. The western garden is seen as the complement to a building (save very rare exception), a surround or extension of an architectural structure to which it is intimately linked; on the contrary, in the East, (and by this we mean Islam, above all Iran and India) it lives and has its own individuality. The pavilion, when there is one, only stresses certain features of the garden; it is an important but a complementary element, designed to embellish the park (or integrating it), and not other way round. This is a distinction of a certain importance because it reverses the perspective of the observation and releases the subject of our study from considerations linked with monumental architecture. The layout of the garden and the arboreal and floral materials are fundamental, on a par with the "fabricated" structures.
We have already noted the fact that the regions where the cult of the paradise/garden is most widespread are Persia and India. The most splendid ages, as far as we are concerned are the Safavid and the Mogul epochs, respectively. Suffice it to think of such a city as Isfahan and its urban equipment willed by the great Shah 'Abbas in the image and likeness of an immense garden. The unusual abundance of water helps towards a precise urban planning design in which gardens play a fundamental role: juxtaposed one against the other just as is done with carpets which overlap and integrate each other in a complex ornamental pattern. Water enjoys a position of importance also inside the buildings (note the little cascade brought to light during the restoration works on the pavilion of Hast Behesht, a motif largely repressed — in all senses — in India), as well as in front of them (Chetel Sutun). With the Safavids the Persian garden/paradise seems to reach its apex: what refinement could be attained is in part exemplified — in spite of the degradation — by the Bagh-i Fin near Kashan. This was visited in 1504 by Shah Ismail, in 1587 by Shah 'Abbas and in 1652 by Shah 'Abbas II, while the present structures, especially the architecture, must date from the period of Fath 'Ali Shah (1799-1834). The scheme, a very simple one, is that of several canals at right angles with small cascades (although the difference of level is minimum) and with tree-lined avenues of majestic cypresses and flower beds. Other interesting gardens are, apart from those at Isfahan,

the Shrine of Shah Ni' Matullah at Mahan (not far from Kirman), at Shiraz (the 18th-century ones are most famous), at Tabas famed for its Bagh-i Gulshan, at least until the ruinous earthquake of 1979, and at Tabriz, where the park of Shah Gölü had actually been made into a camping place. D. Wilber in his book on Persian gardens also recalls that the Qasr-i Farahabad (constructed at the commission of Muzaffar ad-Din Shah) had probably been made as a response to the Trocadero in Paris. The Indian situation is better, especially in Kashmir, where there are numerous gardens still existing in a good state (although many have unfortunately been irremediably lost), even is not always retaining the original structures.

In India, water under control in a pond or a pool plays an important and recurrent role in local culture. The history of the subcontinent seems to have the recurrent, peculiar theme of the endeavour — not always successful — of reconciling different cultures, including but not only artistic cultures: the work of Akbar is, for istance, well aimed in this direction.

But the real problem facing us in these notes is whether it is possible, through a provisional comparative chronology of garden carpets and gardens, to establish precise historical relations. Unfortunately we are withouth any sistematic survey of both these aspects: no inventory of the carpets exists, nor any reliable chronological list of the gardens. For this reason we have to make do with pointing out lines of investigation which a subsequent, more accurate study could perhaps confirm.

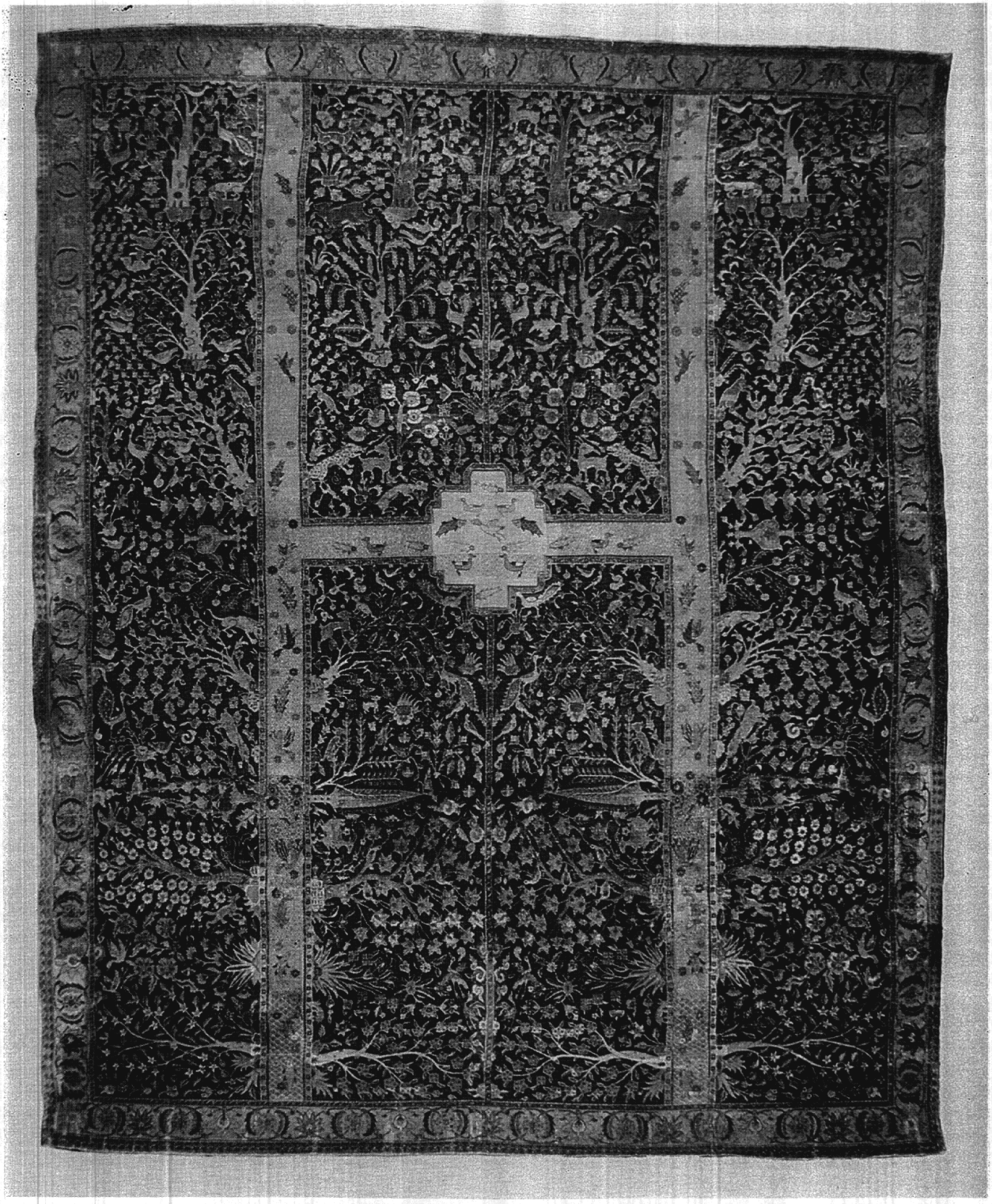
Miniatures, which could be an important iconographic source, are not always reliable (except in specific cases such as that of the *Babur-nama* in London, or an eighteenth-century view of Akbar's tomb), since they often give an idealized view of the gardens, to which not overmuch credit should be attached. But in any case they confirm the importance of gardens in the Islamic civilization of Persia and India and the favour found among the reigning princes.

The simplest garden form is the Persian one, of *Chahar Bagh*, and this, at least initially, must have been laid out in a square space divided into four sections by two water courses at right angles to each other. In the centre there might be a stretch of water or a building (in subsequent elaborations we will find an islet in the middle of the water with its pavilion or palace). This pattern is the one applied in funeral monuments. It is observed, for example, in the tomb of Akbar at Sikandra, completed in 1613; the monument is noted in the centre with four lanes (each one with a modest rivulet: but there must in any case have been changes in the pattern) at the right angles. More elaborate, but based on the preceding one (an evident paradox as the tomb of Akbar is subsequent), is the plan of the tomb of Humayun in Delhi (1564-1573), with the building in the centre and a network of canals with grassy spaces (today very Europeanized by the low green hedges and the lack of tall trees) around it. Here one can easily make out an attempt — a succesfull one, to boot — to make the architectural space symmetrical and more articulate, while keeping fixed the four entrances on the main axes and hence the basic directionality.

Regarding carpets, the most important examples of this first phase are three in number: the carpet in the former Figdor collection, today in the Museum of Industrial Art in Vienna (quite particular as it reconciles two different carpet typologies and cannot in certain ways be considered paradigmatic); the carpet formerly in the Orendi collection (close to the pattern of the tomb of Humayun); and the Wagner carpet above all, today in the Burrel Museum in Glasgow, datable from the start of the seventeenth century. The carpet — rectangular but not very accentuated, i.e. nearly square — is characterized by three large canals forming the shape of a capital H, with a small multilobed pond in the centre of the horizontal stroke. A narrow channel also flows longitudinally. The rest of the field is characterized by an extraordinary series of tree and floral representation flanking the canals, completed by fluttering birds and quadrupeds. In the canals and in the pond, apart from a grating design (simulating the flow of water), fish of various sorts are depicted. There is a precise sensation, obserbing this carpet with its unique design and as far as we are aware never repeated, that it was wished to symbolize a sort of real earthly paradise complete with every species of animals and plants. The carpet is very densely decorated, with a very naturalistic taste not subsequently found in any other examples.

Moreover, the evolution of the design of gardens and of carpets seems to go hand in hand. An important garden — a transition between the Persian tradition (Timurid of Samarkand) and the more standardized one of Agra — is the one ordered by Babur in Kabul (the great attention with which the sovereign followed the works is documented in a very famous miniature in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London), partly remade several times, on which there exists an important and so far just a single monograph. The form of the gardens (and carpets) becomes elongated and the longitudinal axis starts to gain the upper hand over the transversal one; in the *Badshah nama*, Shah Jahan's action on the garden in Kabul is mentioned, and there is also mention of a series of twelve terraces linked by twelve cascades (perhaps not a casual number, as will be discussed further on). The gardens become almost modular, in the sense that new terraces can be added at one of the ends without the general pattern suffering. An analogous process is observed with the carpets. The most important and best known of the group is the garden carpet in Jaipur museum (875 × 375 cm), which bears registrations of an inventory of 1623 and which can thus be dated from the beginning of the 17th century, more or less the same time as the Glasgow carpet, even if it represents

THE "WAGNER GARDEN CARPET", BURRELL COLLECTION, GLASGOW



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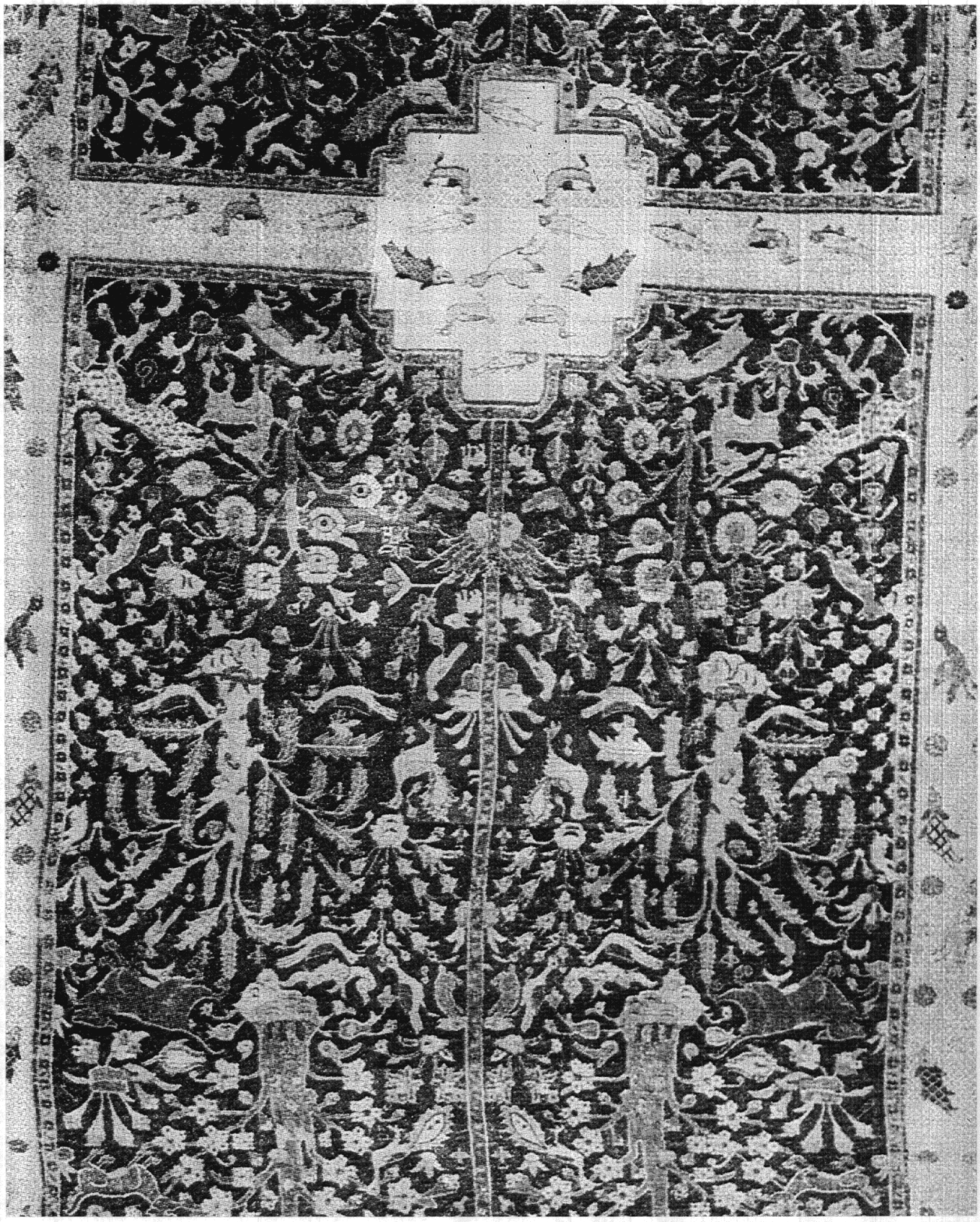


a subsequent typological stage. The focal point of the carpet is the central pond — water, as always, in the centre of everything — in which a domed pavilion is raised, a real miniatured representation; then there are two canals at right angles, the ones on the long side interrupted halfway along the side by two smaller basins. The four main sectors thus delineated are in their turn subdivided by an intricate mesh of canals communicating with little basins (square or round) at the most important points of intersection. In the canals there are fish, tortoises, serpents, birds and quadrupeds of all sorts, sometimes fighting with each other. The rest of the field of the carpet, that is, the majority of the space, is decorated with plants and flowers of every species and multicoloured; with a recurrent motif of flowering trees (at first sight we can recognize palms, cypresses and fruit trees) avenues are created, inside which what seem to be islands, these also flowery (representing perhaps terraces?), appear, separated from the rest by a mutation of colour of the background. Alongside features common also to subsequent carpets, this one in Jaipur has others (mainly the domed building in the centre and the tree-lined avenue) which make it stand out, even if within a precise typology.

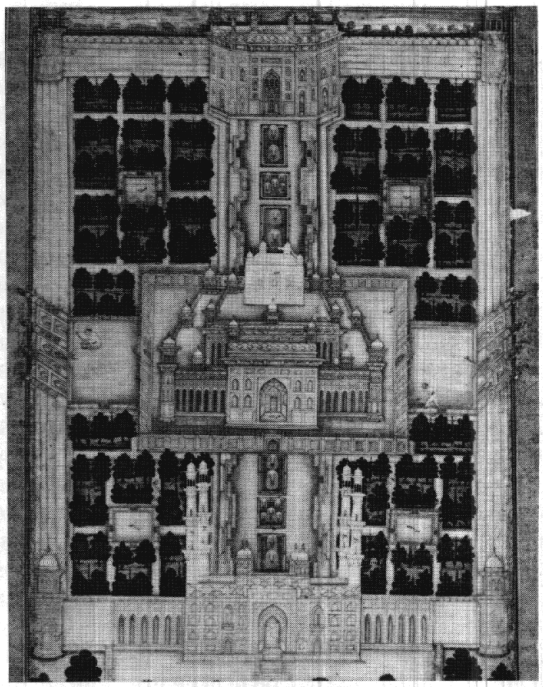
Identification of the flora in the carpets and in the gardens deserves special mention. The dominant impression is that of the tremendous variety which while at first sight it might appear casual, instead reveals itself, upon more careful examination, to be studied with a precise purpose. Paradise, supreme harmony, are the things it is wished to represent both in the simulated form (carpet) and in the more real form (garden), and the moment of its maximum expression is the spring time. But a special spring, prolonged in time, and which sums up and synthetizes in itself the other seasons. Perennial flowering, therefore, which means continuous renewal of the botonical species (spring flowers, roses, pomegranate trees, almond trees, cypresses and other evergreens), in such a way that the garden is always alive and splendid. It is in this optic that the sources should be judged when they speak of fruit orchards, the essential part of the programme of the garden — and not only decorative — with every sort of product. An ancient Persian tradition consists in eating fruit of all four seasons (if dried or in syrup it does not matter) on the day of the winter solstice (21 December). This rite, which serves to give good health throughout the year, is completed by a spoonful of honey, an ancient panacea, and by gifts. It is impossibile not to notice how this resembles an old-time new year's eve. Reckoning and enumerating the botanical families that flower in the four seasons and which are present in the Glasgow, Jaipur and the other carpets, takes on a more particular connotation. These carpets help us to define the ideology of the garden, where a less vigilant collective memory, more modest economic means and variations in taste and above all of the tyrant, fashion, have quite upset the real arboreal content. And we will not here go into the difficult but important chapter of medicinal plants. The gardens have, at all events, apart from symbolic features which we will shortly be dealing with, certain fixed structural particulars. We have mentioned the orthogonal canals; another characteristic is that of the space of the gynaeceum, in India called the *zenana*. It is selfevident that the imperial gardens had also other protocolar divisions. In Kashmir, the real homeland of gardens, the garden of Nishat, attributed to Asaf Khan (i.e. at the time of the region of Jahangir, 1605-1627), and hence not of royal foundation, contains twelve changes of level, the same number as the signs of the Zodiac. The circle too (symbol of eternity and infinity), and the octagon and the square (representing the worldly order and the human aspect, respectively) are often present in the basins and may be regarded as allusive. The same applies to the spiral and coils, always so highly appreciated in India, motifs of fertility and abundance of water. In the recesses under the little cascades oil lamps are placed, and in the night, with the filter of water, they created a dimension of transparency and mystery which was quite in keeping, with the emission of scents and first and foremost that of jasmine, with the mystical literary discussions.

The number eight corresponds to the sections of the Koran, the Koran in which there is talk of two gardens. It is hard to consider these choices of numbers a coincidence in the case of the Shalamar Bagh in Lahore, willed by Shah Jahan, executed under the supervision of 'Ali Mardan Khan, and completed in 1642. In the exact centre of the garden (which is in any case rectangular in shape) there is a large pavilion. The two halves, corresponding to two gardens, are divided into four sections, each by two orthogonal canals. Each square section is in its turn divided into four parts, which brings the total of the subdivision to thirty-two. It is a very well-proportioned garden in which nothing is left to chance, as may be observed in its plan. The garden facing the Taj Mahal is also in four parts.

The progressive transformation of the shape of the garden, from square with the pavilion in the centre to rectangular with the building at the end of a long sequence, is shown also in the later carpets which remain to us (curiously these are mainly attributed to northwest Persian manufacture) in reasonable quantity. Typologically they are products with modest edges — to remind us that these carpets may be freely placed alongside each other and overlapped — that are fairly long and narrow. This might be the simple pattern of the two intersecting rivers with four terraces, or the design might be further complicated until successive aggregations occur (with the creation of polycentrism) typical of Islamic artistic culture which often proceeds by spontaneous gemination. The Shalamar Bagh in Kashmir was the work of Jahangir

(choice of site), but the design was by Shah Jahan in concert with his father, and there are subsequent interventions although the same basic scheme is retained.
Gardens and garden carpets probably influenced each other since they are two different formal expressions of one and the same concept: the aspiration for paradise and its possible immediate realization with everything that ensues therefrom. The brief remarks we have made so far should be regarded as a mere introduction to the fascinating question of the application of the Islamic cultural spirit to the reality of gardens: a subject for research that has yet to receive the attentions it deserves.

Giovanni Curatola



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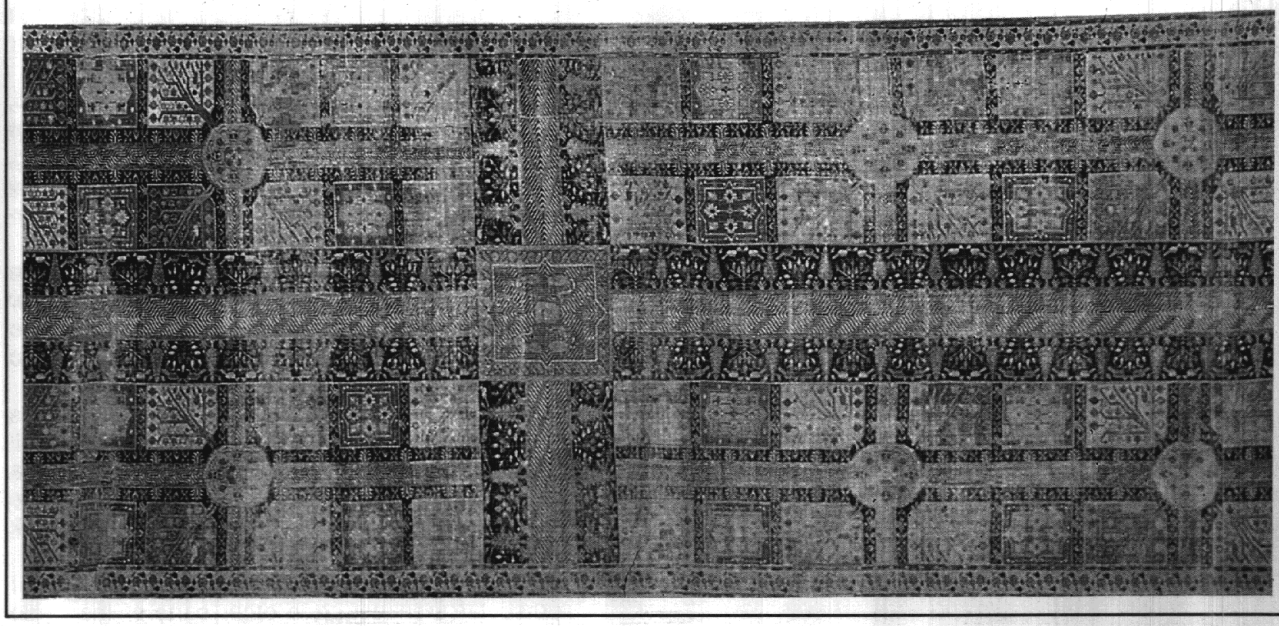
GARDEN CARPET, KUWAIT, NATIONAL MUSEUM