

# Narratives of Nasir Khusraw: On the History of the Built Environment in Early Medieval Cities on the Edge

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Cross-cultural studies are highly reliant on the concept of the 'edge'. Cultural exchanges usually occur when these edges merge due to wars or migrations from one region to another. Alternatively, edges conjoin peacefully when safe places inhabited by people of two or more adjacent countries cooperatively maintain native customs, religions and languages. When exploring such cultural exchanges across medieval Islamic territories, obstacles arise in identifying contemporary written resources; however, travel accounts emerge as sources of great potential which have yet to be considered. In particular, these travel journals investigate various multicultural areas in a thoroughly descriptive manner. Consequently, scholars gain invaluable insight regarding the fluid nature of the travel itself, providing a unique opportunity to study the manifold boundaries that travellers transcended while exploring unfamiliar countries.

Nasir Khusraw's *Safarnama* (Book of Travels) significantly contributes to this study.<sup>1</sup> In addition to serving as a primary source on travel, Khusraw's narrative further functions as an important resource for Islamic architectural history as he describes in depth the locations that he visits. Although not considered an architectural treatise, this highly descriptive analysis differs from other works by contemporary travellers and geographers, as Khusraw primarily presents material with unique objectivity in his *Safarnama*.<sup>2</sup> It is not that native stories and folklore of the region fail to affect him; rather, Khusraw's rationality allows him to distinguish between improbable myth and reasoned observation. Moreover, Khusraw demonstrates an acute sensitivity towards the built environment. He never neglects to articulate unique characteristics of cities — including size and organisation — so as to highlight elements that shape the structure of the city. The architecture which Khusraw describes includes places of worship, bazaars, shrines of saints and prophets, and ramparts, which he juxtaposes with concrete data on each city's geography and economy. This further reveals Khusraw's architectural consciousness; his careful description and data analysis demonstrates his extraordinary attention to how social factors shaped civic structures, and vice versa.

In the oldest translation of the introduction to *Safarnama*, written in 1882 in Delhi, Seyyed Hassan pointedly notes the unique enthusiasm Muslims demonstrated for global exploration. Hassan argues that Western cultures developed an interest in exotic voyages and travel journals from their Muslim neighbours, ultimately lamenting the disappearance of the travelogue in his contemporary Islamic world.<sup>3</sup> Hassan identifies the origin of such enthusiasm in the very tradition of *Hajj*, an

obligatory pilgrimage of worship for Muslims capable of affording the journey. Moreover, several verses from the Quran emphasise the importance of exploring the world to see and hear what once affected our ancestors, consequently teaching worshippers lessons on wisdom. It is from this context that Khusraw emerges.

Khusraw served as a government administrative clerk for the Saljuqs in Marv, Khurasan (modern day Tajikistan). However, Khusraw abruptly resigned from this position, opting instead to set off on a 'quest for truth'. There have been different interpretations about the meaning of this 'truth', with several conceivable hypotheses interpreting this as a religious 'truth' with an emphasis on the *Ismaili* branch of *Shia* Islam. Scholars base this theory on Khusraw's later works on *Sevens*, in addition to his missionary activities when he returned to Khurasan after his seven-year journey.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the real purpose of his travel — either pilgrimage to Mecca or to visit his *Ismaili* peers in Egypt — what Khusraw wrote provides scholars with an invaluable resource on the medieval Middle and Near East, through which we can further examine the concept of 'edges' and the cultural exchanges that transcend borders.

### Lands of Conflicts and Interactions

Akhlat (or Ahlat), the town which marked the border between Muslim and Armenian areas in the former Armenia, is the subject of Khusraw's writing and is described by other medieval geographers. In *Ahsan at-Taqasim fi Ma`rifat il-Aqalim* (The Best Division for the Knowledge of the Regions) the tenth-century geographer al-Muqaddasi describes Akhlat as a city full of beautiful gardens, punctuated by a rampart made of mud, a congregational mosque and a river dividing the town.<sup>5</sup> Al-Muqaddasi locates Akhlat within the boundaries of the prosperous and expansive territory of Rahab, which primarily served as the Muslims' fort against Byzantium.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the Iranian geographer, Abu Ishak Ibrahim Istakhri (d. 957 AD/346 AH), describes Akhlat as a "small flourishing town" in his book *Masalik wa Mamalik* (The Book of Roads and Kingdoms).<sup>7</sup> He records the region as one inhabited by Christians and ruled by Christian kings.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, what strikes our traveller Khusraw in Akhlat is the diversity of languages. Specifically, Khusraw is awed by the ability of the small-town locals to communicate in three languages: Arabic, Farsi, and Armenian. Such diversity affects Khusraw so deeply that he convinces himself that the etymology of the name 'Akhlat' derives from the Arabic root '*Khalata*', meaning 'to mix'.<sup>9</sup> Thus Khusraw's reaction to linguistic amalgamation highlights an important example of substantial cultural interaction along and across edges. However, significant disadvantages also exist for those straddling borders: fear is commonplace as disagreements and rivalries can provoke violence, particularly in areas with high risk of invasions. While celebrating such moments of cultural fusion, Khusraw equally comments on this fear accompanying borders — for instance, when discussing the city of Tripoli, Khusraw distinguishes the fortified walls and battlements, noting that

the populace “live in constant dread of naval attack by the Byzantine.”<sup>10</sup>

Commencing from Marv in 1046, Khusraw’s journey spanned the Caspian coast of Iran and crossed into Anatolia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Mecca, further continuing across the Arabian Peninsula and southern Iran back to Balkh. However, rather than examine the entire expedition, this article focuses on the section of his route from the border of Azerbaijan, in northwest Iran, to Armenia, Syria and Palestine. Within this geographical framework, this analysis primarily examines the commonalities and cultural-religious interactions that were manifested visually and structurally in civic architecture. Thus, Khusraw provides us with the unique opportunity to investigate the ‘edge’ in the eleventh century, which this article pursues through the study of the three main structures dominating medieval cityscapes: places of worship, ramparts, and gates.

### Places of Worship

The ‘edge’ commonly served as a rich setting for both religious collaboration and conflict, as in these areas one witnessed the cohabitation of traditionally separate religions. Consequently, previously distinct places of worship became neighbours. Istakhri writes about this proximity in the region of Armenia: “The congregational mosque and cathedral are situated close to each other.”<sup>11</sup> This proximity naturally resulted in competition between the two religions; primarily manifested by the materials used and money spent on building construction. Khusraw illuminates this phenomenon in his description of Amid: “The congregational mosque is ... of black stone, and a more perfect, stronger construction cannot be imagined. Inside the mosque stand two-hundred-odd stone columns, all of which are monolithic ... Near the mosque is a large church, elaborately made of the same stone, and the floor is laid in marble designs.”<sup>12</sup> This comparison spotlights the supreme sentimental — and monetary — value of stone works, which Khusraw and his peers always admired as precious objects of beauty and dignity. Moreover, such rivalries resulted in stylistic syncretism within places of worship on the ‘edge’, demonstrating a fusion of techniques and aesthetics that eventually transcended the ‘edge’ itself.

Even more significantly, the proximity of places of worship resulted in cultural exchange which could slowly prompt a mutual respect between religions. The best examples occurred in Jerusalem, which al-Muqaddasi describes as a city with nothing cheaper — and more abundant — than water and the *Idhan* (the Islamic call to prayer).<sup>13</sup> Khusraw’s *Safarnama* further describes the vast and varied nature of the population of Jerusalem, identifying the great number of visitors from the area as those unable to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. He writes: “From the Byzantine realm and other places, too, come Christians and Jews to visit the churches and synagogues.”<sup>14</sup> Yet this concept of respect is perhaps best articulated by Istakhri, who writes that Jerusalem is a city “where every prophet owns a famous *mihrab*” (a

niche in the wall of a mosque that indicates the *qibla*, or direction that all Muslims face to pray) but the pinnacle still remained the mosque of Jesus' cradle.<sup>15</sup> When describing it as the site of his prayers, Khusraw writes:

[It] is an underground mosque, to reach which you must descend many steps ... It contains Jesus' cradle, which is made of stone and is large enough for men to pray in ... It is firmly fastened to the floor so that it cannot move. This is the cradle the child Jesus was placed in when he spoke to people. In this mosque the cradle takes the place of the *mihrab*. On the east side is the *mihrab* of Mary and another said to be of Zacarias. The koranic verses concerning Zacharias and Mary are inscribed in these *mihrabs*.<sup>16</sup>

Consequently, Khusraw reveals unique insight into the *mihrab* in mosques: he illuminates the structure as a place of worship built to respect the values of a neighbouring religion in a religiously individualised manner.

## Ramparts

The theme of safety emerges as a primary concern for Khusraw. This attention is unsurprising considering that the fundamental purpose of city planning was to secure safety. This ambition was sometimes sought in the simultaneous utilisation of minimal, unsophisticated constructions with a purely functional role, and sometimes in highly adorned structures produced by thriving communities. In either case, Khusraw does not limit his discussion on safety to architecture on the 'edge'. It is noteworthy that Khusraw's perception of each place differs greatly when calibrating the safety of each city: he does not describe cities on the 'edge' as 'safe places', an expression which he often used to admire areas further from boundaries, such as Tabas, located deep in the heart of Iran. Instead, when documenting border cities, Khusraw devoted more lines of his journal to the description, design and martial facilities of ramparts. For instance, while in Mayyafarqin and Amid, both located in Diyarbakir province of modern day Turkey, Khusraw discussed the ramparts with a sense of admiration: "the rampart ... with crenellations looked as though the master builder had just finished working on it."<sup>17</sup> In Amid — which al-Muqaddasi records as a city with "rampart and towers" elevating it to "the most fortified city with the most established boundaries in the realm of Islam,"<sup>18</sup> where Istakhri identifies the rampart as the "strong wall"<sup>19</sup> — Khusraw elaborates in a positive manner, providing an extensive account that notes:

There is a wall around made of black rock, each slab weighing between a hundred and a thousand mounds. The facing of these stones is so expert that they fit together exactly, needing no mud or plaster in between ... Every hundred ells there is a tower ... The crenellations are also of this same black stone. Inside the city are many stone stairs by means of which one can go up to the ramparts and atop every tower is an embrasure.<sup>20</sup>

Obviously, Khusraw considers fortified ramparts to be indispensable structures in border cities. The result is a conspicuous sense of absence when Khusraw does not find them. For instance, he wrote: “We arrived in the town of Sarmin [in Syria]. It has no fortification walls. Six leagues farther on was Ma’arrat al-Nu’man [between Aleppo and Hama, Syria]. It has a stone wall.”<sup>21</sup>

## Gates

The four cardinal directions (north, south, east and west) in a town are not just of significance because they map out the city; rather, they contribute to the inhabitants’ identity. Specifically, these cardinal points determine the population’s perception of where they are within the town, the region, and, most importantly, within the universe. In fact, the majority of ancient and medieval cities shared this common concern. Consequently, many cities also shared a similar widespread organisation featuring four gates, with each facing one of the four directions. The gates even acquired specific names, often in reference to the nearest city that one could reach by passing through that gate, or after natural wonders nearby. Khusraw’s description of four gates in the town of Amid exemplifies this: the east gate was called the Tigris Gate, the west gate the Byzantine Gate, the north the Armenian Gate, and the south the Tell Gate.<sup>22</sup>

What happened to these gates on the edges was, to a great extent, affected by their names. It might be true that a gate could simply be named the ‘Byzantine Gate’ because by going in that direction you could reach the territory of Byzantium. However, this seemingly simple choice could also profoundly influence the inhabitants’ perception of the place. For instance, in *Safarnama*, Khusraw defines Hamath (Hama, Syria) as “a fine populous city on the banks of Orontes”<sup>23</sup> [Fig. 1]. Khusraw believed the reason that this water is called ‘Asi’, or ‘rebellious’ in Arabic, was “because it runs to Byzantium, that is when it goes from the lands of Islam to the lands of the infidels.”<sup>24</sup>

In fact, the directions along the ‘edge’ are disturbed by cultural differences. This is best demonstrated by the case of Aleppo in northern Syria, formerly the site where levies were collected from



**Fig. 1.** The Orontes River with one of the water wheels (Noaris) in the background, Hama, Syria, April 2011. Photo: Peyvand Firouzeh.



Fig. 2. View to the Bab al-Nasr (the Jews Gate) on the left, Aleppo, Syria, April 2011. Photo: Peyvand Firouzeh.



Fig. 3. Bab al-Nasr (the Jews Gate), Aleppo, Syria, April 2011. Photo: Peyvand Firouzeh.

merchants and traders among the lands of Syria, Anatolia, Diyarbakir, Egypt, and Iraq. Khusraw found it to be a nice city with a huge rampart and four gates [Figs. 2-5]: “the Jew’s Gate, God’s Gate, the Garden Gate and the Antioch gate.”<sup>25</sup> Despite the coexistence of different religions in the region, an evaluation of Jewish-Muslim-Christian relations sheds light on the fact that these names engendered a deeper significance than we initially expect. For instance, let us imagine a vacant desert — an empty space [Fig. 6.1]. If we demarcate a special area and enclose it within a wall, we explicitly reinforce concepts such as ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, fracturing the space [Fig. 6.2]. We can then construct four gates aligned with the four main directions along the perimeter of this wall, which are of the same value and therefore treated in the same way [Fig. 6.3]. However, if we then situate a city or feed a river in one direction outside the town — even far from the walls — the different directions will not be of the same value [Fig. 6.4]. In contrast, let us consider if a contentious body — whether a competing town or religious group — were placed in a given direction. Here, we again change the value of the directions within our primary circle, rendering its own behavioural pattern by the inhabitants — a fact that necessitates a thorough study of the placement of cities’ structures, regarding these patterns.



Fig. 4. View to the Bab al-Nasr (the Jews Gate) from the adjacent *Souq*, Aleppo, Syria, April 2011. Photo: Peyvand Firouzeh



Fig. 5. Bab al-Antakeya (the Antioch Gate) today, Aleppo, Syria, April 2011. Photo: Peyvand Firouzeh.

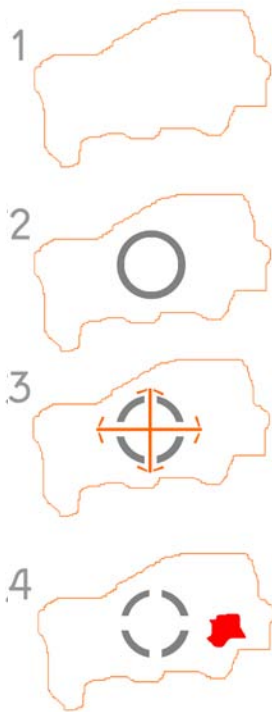


Fig. 6. The Gates and their relationship to the built and natural environment, 2010. Photo: Peyvand Firouzeh.

To write a history of architecture on the ‘edge’, the specific sites of interaction and conflict that primarily affected the built environment must be investigated. This approach can be applied to various architectural structures and expanded to others than those discussed in this article. However, a rich historical context would be a prerequisite for such a study. Moreover, this analysis highlights the unparalleled importance and effectiveness of medieval travel journals as primary sources which record the values and priorities of medieval cities.

Comparison of the structure of Khusraw’s travelogue with the writings of his contemporary geographers illustrates the unique utility of travelogues. In his book *Ahsan at-Taqasim fi Ma’rifat il-Aqalim*, al-Muqaddasi tries to approach the geography of Islamic lands as a whole. To achieve this, he starts with larger regions and divides them into distinct districts, provides a brief list of the towns within each, and subsequently details the structural and social makeup of each town. As might be expected, the smaller cities receive significantly less attention. Instead of valuing data specific to individual cities, al-Muqaddasi privileges general information about each region, such as the languages spoken, the location of rivers, trading patterns, and the distances between the towns. Istakhri, Khusraw’s other important contemporary, adopts a similar method for his *Masalik wa Mamalik*.

Like al-Muqaddasi, Istakhri divides large regions into smaller subsets, focusing on the distances between each, and only later providing rough details about each town. Istakhri rationalises his geographic divisions by engaging in a dialogue with himself — questioning the distinctions of each region that warrant their division. In both books, the ability to study such towns on the borders is minimised due to the special consideration that the authors afford to larger, more prominent cities.

*Safarnamea*, on the other hand, distinguishes itself by distancing its focus from such divisions. Instead, Khusraw’s approach privileges the fluidity and harmony inherent to the nature of travel. His narrative mimics his movements; he writes without haste and with careful observation — a patient reflection of the traveller’s journey. Such an approach leads to an unprejudiced attitude toward the cities: whenever he paused *en route*, he diligently recorded his impressions of the city, its architecture, and its people. Consequently, Khusraw’s travelogue evidences a



greater depth and breadth than those of his geographer peers, as he recounts cities in greater detail and range. Towns are included irrespective of their size, importance and even religion; rather, they all share a unique position along the 'edge'. Therefore, Khusraw's approach, similarly found in contemporary travelogues, becomes an invaluable resource for cross-cultural, multidisciplinary studies, providing scholars with substantial context for analysing civilisations on the 'edge' and their unique built environments.

- 1 N. Khusraw, *Safarnama*, M. Dabir-Syaqi, ed. (Tehran: Zavvar publishing, 2008); N. Khusraw, *Book of travels*, Safarnāmah (an edited and translated parallel Persian-English text), trans. W. M. Thackston Jr, (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 2001).
- 2 For instance see Abu Dulaf al-Yanbu'i, *Travels in Iran* (Cairo: Cairo University Press, 1955).
- 3 S. Hassan, 'The Latest Introduction to Safarnama', in I. Afshar, ed. *Farhang-e Iran Zamin*, Vol.17, (Tehran: Sokhan, 2006).
- 4 N. Khusraw, *Divan-i qāsa'id va muqatta'at* (Tehran: 1304-1307 [1925-28]) and N. Khusraw, *Knowledge and liberation: a treatise on philosophical theology*, trans. F. M. Hunzai (London: I.B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 1998).
- 5 M. Muqaddasi, *Ahsan al-Taqaṣim fi Ma'rifat al-Aqalim*, trans., G. S. A. Ranking & R. F. Azoo (Calcutta: 1897-1910), 557.
- 6 Muqaddasi, *Ahsan al-Taqaṣim*, 553.
- 7 Istakhri, *Masalik wa Mamalik*, I. Afshar, ed. (Tihran: Intisharat-i 'ilmi va farhangi, 1368 [1989 or 1990]), 159).
- 8 Istakhri, *Masalik wa Mamalik*, 158.
- 9 Khusraw, *Book of travels*, 8.
- 10 Ibid., 16.
- 11 Istakhri, *Masalik wa Mamalik*, 158.
- 12 Khusraw, *Book of travels*, 11.
- 13 Muqaddasi, *Ahsan al-Taqaṣim*, 235.
- 14 Khusraw, *Book of travels*, 27.
- 15 Istakhri, *Masalik wa Mamalik*, 60.
- 16 Khusraw, *Book of travels*, 33. For an example of Koranic verses containing Zacharias and Mary see Surah 3:37.
- 17 Ibid., 9.
- 18 Muqaddasi, *Ahsan al-Taqaṣim*, 197.
- 19 Istakhri, *Masalik wa Mamalik*, 77.
- 20 An *ell* is a unit of measurement, approximately the length of a man's arm. Khusraw, *Book of travels*, 10.
- 21 Ibid., 14.
- 22 Ibid., 10.
- 23 Ibid., 15.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid., 14.