



A Review of Nishapur Revisited: Stratigraphy and Ceramics of the Qohandez

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In the early Islamic period, Khorasan was referred to as “*Place of Sunrise*” that stretched from the eastern side of the Lut Desert to the Hindukush Mountains. This region was divided into four parts or “*quarters*” of Neyshabour, Merv, Herat, and Balkh during the early centuries of Islam. The region that finally became the capital of Taherid dynasty was one of the important political, religious, and geographical centers during those years. A New York Metropolitan Museum’s expedition under Charles Carl Wilkinson was carried out on 3,500-hectare area of the ancient city of Neyshabour, from 1937 to 1948 AD.

One of the goals of this excavation was to trace Neyshabour in the Sassanid era. However, the discovery of magnificent remains of Islamic architecture and a multitude of exquisite objects led Wilkinson towards the Islamic era (Labaf Khaniki, 2014: 68). Although the discovered artifacts have been published in the form of articles and books on pottery, architectural decoration, glass, and metals, they have neglected to set correct and basic methods of excavation. Even though all artifacts date back to the period between the 8th and 10th centuries A.D., they have failed to establish an accurate chronological order for those materials (Haddon, 2016: 150). In 1967, Kambakhsh Fard carried out excavations in an area between the tombs of Khayyam and Attar as well as between Fazl Ibn Shahazan and Imamzadeh Mahroogh, which led to a surprising discovery of four baked pottery and a large number of pottery pieces and molds. Also, Rajabali Labaf Khaniki conducted surface surveys and archaeological excavations with the aim of more accurately identifying Shadiakh and its architecture in 1999.

The decorated wall fragments of Shadiakh show luxurious and magnificent structures highlighting the glory of Neyshabour. During 2004 and 2007, Rajabali Labaf Khaniki from Iran and Monique Krevran of France as part of a joint Iranian-French delegation unearthed the evidence of the Sassanid dynasty in Islamic layers; this major discovery led the excavation team to find a large residential area and recognize it an industrial and commercial city from the beginning of Neyshabour until the conquest of it by Mongols in the 13th century AD., however, their results have not been published yet (Labaf Khaniki, 2014: 68; Haddon, 2016: 150).

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The ultimate goal of these excavations and studies on the ancient city of Neyshabour is to construct an extensive archaeological museum that can recount the history of this important Islamic city. In this study, the main emphasis is on the sequence of pottery in the absence of dated materials such as coins and hence, the main questions of this study are to determine the exact date of the foundation of this city in the Sassanid or Islamic period and evaluate the extension of the city at the height of its glory (Gibson, 2013: 1).

The old fort of the city of Qohandez was destroyed and looted after Mongol invasions. For this reason, with the cooperation of researchers from C2RMF and using a wide range of scientific methods such as thermo luminescence and geophysics, an attempt was made to accurately assess the absolute chronology of this site. After collecting the information, it was found that this area has three different settlement periods: in the first settlement period, Neyshabour was inhabited in the years of 450 B.C. until 140 B.C. and then it had been abandoned for five centuries. The second settlement period, starts from 405 AD to 785 AD, and re-structuring and re-establishing of the cities of Neyshabour and Qohandez are attributed to this Sassanid period based on new excavations. The third settlement period of this city is divided into two: Period IIIa, which included the second half of the 8th to 11th century AD, and the second period of IIIb lasted from the 11th century to 1165 AD. Probably, an earthquake occurred in 1145 was a primary cause of the demise of this metropolis. Based on the research, it has been shown that the fort of Qohandez lost its military function and was rebuilt as the center of a larger city in Geater Khorasan in the first half of 10th century AD. On the other hand, it is assumed that the structure of the city shifted from the Qohandez before the Mongol invasion in the early 13th century AD. (Gibson, 2013: 1; Haddon, 2016: 150-151).

The reader was captivated by an exciting photo of the northeastern part of ruins of Qohandez and Neyshabour on its cover. This book is written by Rocco Rante and Annabelle Coullinet, who is a prominent Islamic archaeologist. It was collaborated with several scholars, including Rajabali Labbaf Khaniki. A. Bouquillon, Y. Coquinot, C. Doublet, Y. Gallet, A. Genevey, E. Porto, A. Zink are other researchers contributing about Neyshabour in this volume. The primary purpose of this book is to review the results of 2004 excavations by the Iranian-French archeological team led by Rajabali Labbaf Khaniki and Monique Krevran, who conducted excavations in Neyshabour after an invitation from the Iranian Center of Archaeological Research.

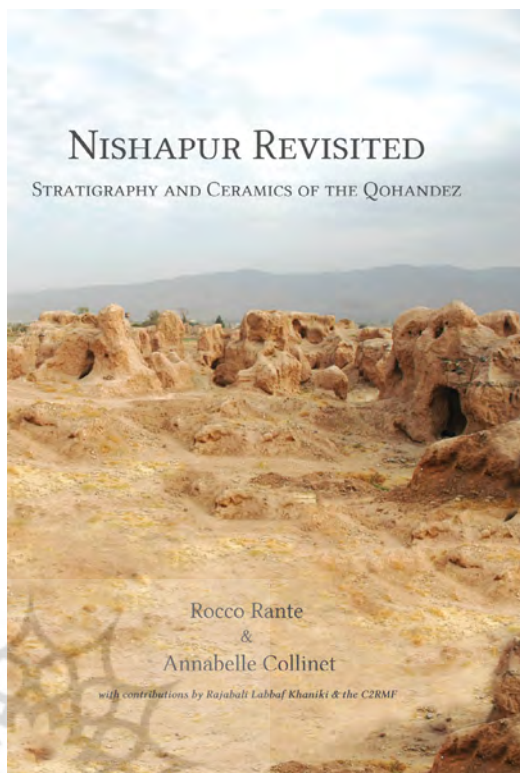
This group aimed to study the key city of Neyshabour based on historical and cultural materials discovered in other importance Middle Eastern cities including Baghdad, Merv, Balkh and Herat as well as cities in China and India (Haddon, 2016: 150). Finally, it has been provided important information for readers by conducting numerous scientific experiments. This book, as its content, has four chapters, each of which is divided into several sub-sections. Like any book, it begins with a preface, introduction, and thanksgiving. So, in the end, an introduction is given and finally, at the end of the book, a chapter of the conclusion and bibliography are inserted.

The introduction of this book has been written by late professor Shahriyar Adl. After introducing the book and its authors, he discusses the role and importance of this book in archeological studies of the Islamic period and Greater Khorasan. He points out that due to the results of scientific analysis of pottery and stratigraphy from

this site, this book can increase our understanding of the city of Neyshabour after centuries and that it can be an important beginning to further research on urbanization and material culture of Greater Khorasan and beyond.

In the introduction, the authors reveal that the purpose of this volume is to review history and material culture from the genesis of Neyshabour until the Mongol invasion, which is studied through archaeological excavations and potteries. One of the aims of the study is to probe the historical and geographical context of ancient Neyshabour. The authors point out that this book can be both a detailed research about Neyshabour and Greater Khorasan, as well as could provide accurate data of comparison of chronologies of other sites and serve as a basis for other future studies. So, the authors express their research questions and hypotheses with regard to the origin of Neyshabour as well as its historical name and relationship. When was Neyshabour built? Was it a Sassanid city? Based on the name of this city and written texts, it was probably built by Shapur I or II? The second and third questions are about the chronology and sequence of pottery. Also, these questions included information about the factual location of the ancient city of Neyshabour.

In the first issue, the types of pottery of Neyshabour were reviewed, and in the second case, the topography of the area and the excavated hills and the previous research of Richard Boulrier and Charles Wilkinson were examined, which, of course, is still incomplete. Based on these questions and hypotheses, a joint team in collaboration with the Khorasan Archaeological and Cultural Heritage Research Institute led by Labbaf Khaniki and the French team led by Monique Krevran (including the researchers of CNRS and the Louvre Museum) began excavations in Qohandez district. Their purpose was to review these two parts of the ancient city of Neyshabour. Cultural materials excavated over the years have been rich and useful, but due to the lack of exact stratigraphic data such as Carbon-14 and scientific analysis such as petrography



Nishapur Revisited: Stratigraphy and Ceramics of the Qohandez by Rocco Rante and Annabelle Collinet, with Contributions from Rajabali Labbaf Khaniki and C2RMF, Published by Oxbow Books, Oxford, England.

of pottery led the authors to start a new collaboration in 2009 that could answer to all of the questions such as the cultural, political, and geographical problems of Greater Khorasan. At the end of the introduction, the place of Khorasan has been discussed by the authors, which is the introduction of the historical landscape and geographical background of Neyshabour and this region.

First Chapter: *Historical and Geographical Background* includes three sub-sections entitled *Geographical Location*, *Former Excavations* and *Studies and Historical Setting*. This chapter has 12 pages, 7 pictures and a table noted a summary of the chronology of Neyshabour. In the first sub-section, the geographical location of Neyshabour is cited and very limited information is provided for Neyshabour. The information about the geography of Neyshabour is incomplete and limited, and the authors have even avoided mentioning the geomorphologic and hydrological information of the region and the city. The readers are referred to a cited article in the footnote for further information, which is one of the failures of this book. Also, the lack of accurate geographical maps derived from remote sensing, radar, and GIS studies led to a general shortcoming in this book and the absence of archaeological studies that are derived from the settlement patterns and surveys is another very serious shortcoming of preliminary studies. To take an interest in the presented information, the authors could provide topographic maps from the ancient city of Neyshabour and then, could be pointed to the history of the region and cultural connections with Greater Khorasan, which has been neglected. Probably, a detailed point to the landscape of Neyshabour makes it a very attractive proposition. The other parts of the first chapter face severe shortages. In the second sub-section, which deals with previous excavations and studies in Neyshabour, only descriptions of the purposes, excavations, and objects obtained by the excavation team of the Metropolitan Museum under the direction of Charles Wilkinson are given. Due to the lack of pictures taken from the findings, it is hard to refer to the previous research. In this section, it is discussed about the excavations of the Metropolitan Museum, the issue of the Sassanid origin, Neyshabour in the Islamic period, the excavations by Iranian delegations from 1995 to 2002 in the Shadiakh region, and the discovery of kilns and pottery in the Islamic period of Neyshabour. In the third sub-section, the historical situation of Neyshabour in the written sources and new results about this city are considered and conclusions are drawn based on the previous sources and materials. At the end of this section, a table consisted of the chronology and developed sequences of Neyshabour pottery is given, which provides brief information in this regard.

Second Chapter: This is entitled *The Excavation and the Absolute Chronology*, in 40 pages, 33 images, and 9 tables which are the results of laboratory experiments, have included sections on *the Introduction to the Irano-French Excavation*, *Dating Problems*, *Thermoluminescence Analysis (TL)*, *Insights from Archaeomagnetic Analysis*, *The stratigraphical Sequence* and *Interpreting the Occupation Chronology and Urban Development*. Also, this chapter discusses a commentary on the chronology of settlements, stratigraphic sequences, urban development, and the history of Neyshabour and its archaeological excavations. The co-authors in this section are A. Zink, E. Porto, A. Genevey, and Y. Gallet. In the beginning, a summary of the geographical and spatial

characteristics of Qohandez is given. Then, the reasons for selecting and concentrating the excavations of the Iranian-French archaeological cooperation in the north-eastern part of Qohandez are explained. Based on the goal of the excavation, areas are selected for trenches of archaeological excavation and then excavations are carried out. The chemical-physical analyzes are presented in the desired details, which can be misleading for the non-specialist reader and helpful for relevant experts. Finally, a section discusses the settlement chronology of Neyshabour, and based on the information obtained from the various analyses, urban growth and development in Neyshabour are interpreted. According to the findings, Qohandez has three stages of settlement (the third period is divided into two sub-periods).

Period I is the first period of this city, which is based on surface findings especially potteries from central and southern parts of present-day Qohandez and comparing to similar grey pottery of Parthian settlements such as Qoms and Rey is dated back to Arsacid and Sassanid dynasties. It is estimated to be around 450 to 150 BC.

Period II, which is dated between 405 and 785 AD, corresponds to the establishing date of this city. Period III can be found in the northern part of Qohandez with most changes in the facade of the city. This period, which dates from 745 to 1165 AD, is divided into two sub-periods: IIIA and IIIB. In the initial period, the city loses its military function and has a special urban structure, especially in the northern part of Qohandez. In the next period, this process of urbanization will continue and religious and administrative functions will be added to the city.

Third Chapter: It is entitled *Pottery Study and Analyses* that include three sub-sections; *Recording Methodology*, *Questioning the Material: The Ceramic Analysis Program* and *Interpreting the Analyses: The Ceramic Groups and their Productions*. This chapter contains 22 tables, 36 images, and 80 pages in this regard to the potteries analysis of the Iranian-French joint archaeological excavation team of Qohandez in Neyshabour. The co-authors of this chapter are A. Bouquillon, Y. Coquinot, and C. Doublet who assisted in conducting physical-chemical experiments on the pottery. In this chapter, the authors firstly explain the method of recording pottery pieces that were obtained during survey and excavation of Qohandez, Neyshabour, and finally a database is recorded for each of the obtained pieces. During these seasons, 5590 pieces of pottery during the excavation season and 1722 pieces were excavated from the surface survey of Qohandez Castle, the City area, and the mosque. Among them, 1178 pieces were designed, recorded, and selected for further experiments by C2RMF that have been dealt with in the second sub-section. Based on information, 67 pieces of pottery are collected from various types of glazed and unglazed, potteries and glasses, and from all layers and areas that they aim to access the structure of potteries using various scientific experiments including petrography, mineralogy, and chemical analysis. Their goal is to present a new approach to cultural materials that can show valuable data about the new findings and then, the results are finally compared with geological and mineralogical information of this region. The experiments were made with two aims: the stratigraphical studies of pottery collections and laboratory analysis, which are divided into petrographic, chemical, and mineralogical tests of different types of pottery. X-ray analysis of the pottery showed that their compositions, both glazed and unglazed, had the same spectrum, homogeneity, and uniformity. Also, petrographic

tests of potteries show that soil compositions used are natural and local indicating local and domestic productions in this area (Haddon, 2016: 150). One of the unique items excavated in the old city of Neyshabour is pottery kilns, which were discovered during the excavations especially Wilkinson in the 1930s and 1940s from Qohandez in Neyshabour. Their analysis shows the same compositions of the clay were used in kilns are comparable to pottery. Perhaps the only failure in the analysis of kilns is the lack of precise sketches of them that can represent their structure (Gibson, 2013: 1-2). The results of the Iranian-French joint excavation team in the area of Qohandez, Neyshabour prove the findings of Charles Wilkinson published in 1973, and provide a more accurate picture of what has had happened to this ancient city.

The fourth and final chapter, which is the most interesting and important probably, deals with pottery groups that pave the way for future studies on “*Chronology of the Qohandez Pottery*”. However, the pottery is the most important material found during archaeological excavations. This chapter includes 70 pages and 39 images of pottery groups. Also, it has three subsections entitled *Introduction to the Test-pits*, *Chronological Sequence of Qohandez Pottery* and *Comparative Study with the Main Khorasanian Sites*. This section introduces the stratigraphic sequences of Qohandez pottery based on their laboratory and stratigraphical studies; then it presents excavation trenches. In the second sub-section, chronological sequences of the pottery are explained based on settlement from Period I to Period IIIB, respectively. Moreover, the pictures of every pottery group, their shapes, and detailed tables about the ware pieces are mentioned. The pottery data derived from each excavation trenches are also mentioned in the settlement periods, which can help us a lot in the distribution of pottery in each period. In the third part of this chapter, the pottery findings of Neyshabour are discussed and compared regarding the settlement periods with adjacent and contemporaneous sites and the authors point to similar findings of these areas. One of the dark spots in this comparison is the lack of visual information as the authors have mentioned only their textual and bibliographic references for unknown reasons.

The final part of this book also includes *Conclusion* consisting 3 pages and a *Bibliography* on 6 pages, and finally, ends without indexing. In the final part, the authors once again emphasize the achievements of excavations and experiments and provide a brief and concise picture of Neyshabour in different centuries and settlement periods.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Regarding this book, it should be noted that although it has disadvantages, the information provided in the different chapters can be considered at least. One of the most important disadvantages is the lack of any text from Rajbali Labaf Khaniki although it has been mentioned that the book was written in collaboration with him, a prominent researcher of archeology of the Islamic period of Iran and Khorasan. This fault is vital because Labbaf Khaniki, who has a history of exploring many Islamic sites in Khorasan and more experienced than the original writers, could provide more complete information about the history of Neyshabour. The author hopes that this highly esteemed professor will be able to gather and present the findings of his excavations during these years in a separate and reference volume about the ancient city of Neyshabour.

In the first chapter, which gives geographical, historical, and archeological locations of Neyshabour, very useful information is provided from the previous sources. Also, this book has been considered the excavations and studies done on peripheral sites such as hills of AlbArsalan, Sabzpooshan, Ahangaran, and Madrasa by an American team and Shadiakh Hill by an Iranian delegation, and this was useful for readers and provides a background for future studies. The historical location of Neyshabour and references to this city and its name in the written texts has been neglected in this book. Of course, in the first chapter, it is noteworthy that the location of Neyshabour has been combined with supplementary stratigraphical information of new studies, and historical-textual data is compared with Carbon dating.

Depending on the available data in this section, the construction date of Qohandez and the city of Neyshabour dates back to Shapur II in the 4th and 5th centuries AD. Probably, presenting complete and accurate information help make a reference to this book for future studies of history and archeology of Neyshabour, which has been neglected unfortunately. As discussed in the first chapter, the text refers only to Google Maps or 3D maps, which indicates the weakness of the book's authors in using other accurate and useful designs and maps such as remote sensing, radar maps, and GIS.

Another advantage of this book that fascinates the reader is the information that archaeologists of a joint team of 2004 obtained using scientific methods and adapted and consolidated them with the historical data of this city and its excavations. This complete information is presented in detail in the second chapter. It should be noted, however, that providing laboratory information to a non-specialist reader may be a bit misleading.

The third chapter, which discusses the pottery of the Islamic period of Neyshabour and physical-chemical analysis done on them, is one of the brightest chapters in this book because it provides an accurate picture of pottery production in Neyshabour in the pre-Mongol period. So, the expert researchers are accustomed to the process of pottery production at that time.

The laboratory study of kilns unearthed during Wilkinson's excavations at Neyshabour is the other advantage of this book that has been able to present the applicable information. But in the meantime, one of the failures is the lack of accurate architectural plans and pottery comparisons, which due to the emphasis of authors on recognizing the history of pottery in this area, all information needs to refer to related sources. The small comparisons with other cities of Greater Khorasan such as Balkh, Merv, Herat, and Turang Tepe, and Gorgan is one of the positive points, of course, the name of Toos has been omitted from the list of the important cities of Khorasan apparently due to the lack of full publication of its excavations. However, comparing the potteries in every period could have been presented more completely and extensively to make this book a complete source for readers and for those who are interested in the history of Islamic periods of Neyshabour. A major fault is that there are many semantic and lexical ambiguities in written English texts, which may be due to the lack of an English-speaking editor who is familiar enough with archaeological terms. For this reason, some words are found to be unfamiliar, vague, and confusing to non-English-speaking readers. For example, English equivalent for a piece of pottery, the word of Shard is used, although the word of Sherd is used in many archaeological texts, both of them are the pronunciations of the same word, but in fact, the second is

more used in English texts.

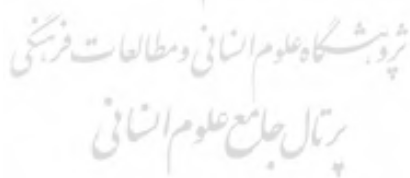
As mentioned, this book, despite being a leader in studies of the history of the ancient city of Neyshabour, its shortcomings and weaknesses make this work flawed. It is hoped that researchers interested in the history of Neyshabour will be able to write a better and more comprehensive work taking into account weaknesses of this book.

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