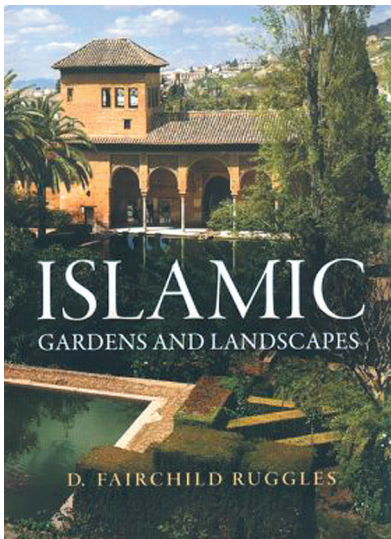


Book Review by Dr Narayani Gupta

# ISLAMIC GARDENS AND LANDSCAPES

Author | D. Fairchild Ruggles  
University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2008  
Hardcover xii + 262 pages  
Size: 258 x 198 x 23mm  
98 maps, drawings & photographs, glossary, notes,  
bibliography, index  
ISBN-10: 0812240251, ISBN-13: 978-0812240252



The term ‘Islamic’ when used for philosophy, science, architecture, for gardens or waterbodies, is not wholly satisfactory. It often leads to a collapsing of time and a reduction of geography and eco-systems. This does not happen in the study of similar themes in Europe, where these themes are historicised – no-one uses the term “Christian gardens and landscapes” or “Christian architecture”. As for philosophy and science, the very fact that for centuries Ibn Sina was disguised as Avicenna, and Ibn Rushd as Averroes, was an act of appropriation which was

not apparent for a long time. The downplaying of Byzantium in courses of history, the disjuncture between ‘Mesopotamia’ and ‘Iraq’ meant that the geographical and intellectual connections between the ‘Islamic’ and the ‘Christian’ (and, for that matter, Buddhist or Hindu) worlds got attenuated. The inheritances, the donations, the appropriations were ignored. What a contrast to the exhilarating open world of Baghdad and the amazing volume of translations done in its Bayt-ul-Hikma from the ninth to the thirteenth century (the core period of the book under review)!

D. Fairchild Ruggles, an American scholar, has worked steadily on the gardens of Islamic Spain and of Mughal India for twenty years. The present book ventures much further – the author bridges the distance between those two regions by including north Africa, Turkey and West Asia. This long narrow rectangle is *not* co-terminous with the extent of Islamic settlements, and can be seen as much in terms of ecology as of a particular faith. The gardens under discussion were for most part laid out between the 9th and the 17th century. Later gardens were admiring copies, without any novel features. Ruggles re-

minds us that while historians can map a precinct or a monument even from a ruin, it is almost impossible to get a sense of its garden setting and of the original plantation which has in most cases been overlaid. Her ‘List of gardens and sites’ (pages 148 to 224) has 23 gardens from India and Pakistan, as against only 50 from all the other countries put together (including two 20th-century fantasies from the USA). Is this paucity explained by appropriation by later regimes, destruction in war, or gardens being overlaid with urban settlements? Only recently have the botanical contents of historic sites become objects of archaeological excavation and, the author reminds us, “such investigations...are extraordinarily expensive for the amount of information that they yield” (page 51).

But the limitations of archaeological reconstructions do not seem to discourage scholars. Reading Ruggles’ meticulous citations makes one marvel at the quantum of academic work available on the subject. Readers are urged to go through her short version on page 151 – the ‘General Bibliography’, which lists 17 books published from the 1970s.

Gardens have been the subject of poetry, and also of technical manuals. To peruse them requires a facility with the language/s as well as a real interest. The author recalls that “In the course of my research I devoured Arabic agricultural manuals from the 10th through the 14th centuries”. Chapters 2, 3 and 5 (‘Making the Desert Bloom’, ‘The Science of Gardening’, and ‘Trees and Plants’) are the most original in this book. I cannot resist repeating a quotation from a tenth-century text from Iraq (page 32) – “Preserving people in a laudable condition depends on farmers and fieldworkers... Because of this they are the most excellent of people... The farmers are also the support of the king and of his subsistence...”.

Later manual-writers did not spend time on philosophical musings, but got down to compiling lists. They placed plants within the annual calendar (using the solar rather than the Islamic lunar), studied the curative properties of different plants, and provided illustrations. There must have been many such manuals in India too: both about agriculture and about the medicinal plants which form the basis of ayurveda. Dr Shaukat Ullah Khan’s ‘Ahmedabad 1411-1817: Environmental Facets of a Medieval Urban Centre’ (2007) refers to detailed inventories of garden-plantation, and there must be more such in other parts of our country. These are likely to be as instructive and enjoyable as the *Shilpasastra* and the *Mayamata* texts (since most manuals are written in verse

– a tip for our officials, who swathe the simplest statements in yards of opaque prose?). But, like the ancient and medieval Sanskrit texts, the treatises on gardens do not help us enter the time when they were written – “400 or 1000 years later, the sense of familiarity with the original form is lost, and with it has vanished essential information about gardens” (page 62).

“Trellising, irrigation, fertilization, pruning, pinching and grafting were necessary procedures for both agriculture and pleasure gardens, and it is in the translation from the purely utilitarian farm to the perfumed, colourful and exotic garden that the expressive function of a garden lies” (page 44). That magic mix of clear running water, flower-filled gardens and weathered chiselled stone which is an approximation to paradise on earth has so many morals for us. One is that the gardener is as important as the architect, and that engineers can create miracles not only with steel and concrete but with water channels and collection-points. In the geographical regions covered by this book, extreme heat could be countered by greenery and water, very precious because rain was scarce. In regions which are blessed with abundant rain, a humid climate and lush vegetation, people do not create gardens, though they plant fruit-bearing trees. In both humid and arid climates, the outdoors – natural or engineered -

was an essential part of civilised living. In the last half-century, we have been losing this – air-conditioned buildings and vehicles have created artificial bubbles which shut us off from the reality of nature.

Most of the examples in this book, obviously, are of palaces and of monumental mosques and tombs, in settings of water-channels and verdure. But there are also *sarais* for travellers and merchants, and there must have been gardens – albeit courtyard ones – in *havelis*. I personally find it depressing that the Mughal gardens do not seem to have inspired our modern city designers to incorporate even the basic notion that a landscape of water and vegetation should feature in areas where people gather. Where we *do see* it is in the work of two non-Indian architects – of Edwin Lutyens in the Rashtrapati Bhavan garden (thanks to a wish expressed by Viceroy Harding after seeing the gardens of Kashmir), and of the American architect Joseph Allen Stein.

This book should be essential reading for students of architecture – for two reasons: it is important to see human interventions in nature not in terms of political units but of ecological zones; it is wonderfully mind-stretching to see the connections between archaeology, texts and visual depictions.

**Dr Narayani Gupta** retired as Professor of History at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. She has written on urban history, and was a member of the Delhi Urban Art Commission. Dr Gupta can be reached at [narayani.gupta@gmail.com](mailto:narayani.gupta@gmail.com)