HEATING AND COOKING IN NISHAPUR

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Every archaeologist is faced with the problem of satisfactorily explaining to himself and to others the functions of objects which are no longer used or are now differently used. Many of the objects shown in our museums, though interesting in form and made with the nicest craftsmanship, remain almost meaningless unless their purpose is understood. To get a true idea of what things are for and why they are of certain shapes is often a somewhat difficult task, but it is usually an interesting one. In the field we look first at the life of the people around us, hoping to discover survivals of the manners, customs, instruments, and furnishings of past ages that will help to explain and so revivify the things we are daily uncovering. Then, too, we search, among other writings, the accounts of ancient travelers, though here we have the difficulty of not knowing what is true and what is false, how much is accurate observation and how much is fiction added to impress the reader with the strangeness of the peoples they have encountered and the dangers they have overcome. We cannot adopt the attitude that if the author misinforms us once he is never to be believed. We have constantly to match our limited knowledge with his, accept what we can and use our incredulity as an incentive to inquiry elsewhere.

Ibn Battuta, a Moroccan of the early fourteenth century, was one of the greatest of travelers. He made many journeys in the Near East and went on to India and China. On his return home, he gave such an entertaining account of what he had seen and experienced in his travels that the sultan ordered it to be written down. He made two journeys in Persia, one in the southwestern part, around Shiraz and Isfahan, and another in the northeastern province of Khurasan, in which Nishapur is situated and which in those days included much of what is now known as Russian Turkistan. A cadi and a theologian, he had a retentive memory. Instead of remaining merely an interested observer, he joined in the life, often to the extent of marrying women of the strange lands he visited. He gives many details of how the peoples lived, how they were clothed, of what food they ate and what fuel they used. When in Turkistan he tells of receiving food and spices and loads of wood from the emir. He then goes on to say that the use of charcoal is unknown in Persia.

This simple statement may seem of small
Miniature from a book of poems by Sultan Husayn (1468-1505). In the Bibliothèque Nationale.” The picnic scene on the opposite page is reproduced by courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
A corner of a room in a IX or X century house in Nishapur

significance to many readers, but it at once arouses the skepticism of any modern traveler who has visited Persia, where charcoal, even in this age of oil, plays an important part in the life of the people. They still use it for cooking and in the winter for heating in a manner centuries old. We have learned by our excavations in Nishapur the particular way in which it was used in the ninth- and tenth-century houses there.

It is readily seen that the way fire is used directly affects architecture. It matters, for instance, whether the fire is put into a fireplace consisting of a recess in the walls or on a hearth in the center of the room, in a projecting stove or in a brazier that can be moved about. The kind of fuel has a bearing too, for it may produce smoke, necessitating a hole in the ceiling or roof or a chimney, which may develop into such fantastic proportions, as in Tudor England, that it seems to exist for ornament rather than for use. Within a room with a fireplace a hood may be constructed to prevent smoke from filling the room and it, too, becomes a decorative feature. The mantelpiece and hood were usually embellished, and at a later stage of development became parts of a larger scheme of decoration concentrated around the fire. This is not unreasonable, for the fireplace, in countries where the climate demands its frequent use, is the center of life within the room. It is the master's privilege to stand immediately before it, and the place above the fire is the decorative place of honor.

Sir John Chardin, a jeweler, who lived for several years in Persia in the seventeenth century, has something to say on the use of the fireplace there. This is what he says: “They make in the Parlours, or Winter Porches, and in the Rooms adjoining, small Chimneys, the Mantle-trees whereof are but three Foot high, and about two Foot broad, in the Shape of a Semi-circle, and which reaches down low enough to keep in the Smoke; they burn the
Wood upright in them; they make the Chimneys so small, . . . because Wood is pretty scarce in Persia." A fireplace of this type is to be seen in a Turkish miniature reproduced on page 290.

In the ninth- and tenth-century houses of Nishapur we found no fireplaces of this kind but others of a type which appears to be peculiar to Khurasan at the time. Many inner rooms were furnished with a central hearth which was enclosed by a rectangular plaster frame about two and a half feet long and two feet wide raised slightly above the level of the floor. A jar or stone pot was sunk into the center of the hearth as a brazier to hold the coals, and about two feet away was an orifice

A sunken fireplace in the white plaster floor of a X century house in Nishapur
connected with the bottom of the pot by an earthenware pipe to supply the necessary air to make the fire burn well. A servant could keep the fire up by applying a bellows to this pipe or even by fanning the opening vigorously with a fan made of a cock's wing. Sometimes the central fireplace is less elaborate and the air inlet is omitted. Occasionally it consists merely of a cavity in the plaster floor lined and edged with baked bricks.

It might be thought that the rooms in which these were found were kitchens, but, with one exception, they were obviously not. Kitchens can be distinguished by the remains of ovens or crude stoves for wood or charcoal consisting merely of two low brick walls between which the open fire was laid, and they usually have a well and a drain. There is also evidence to show that these centrally heated rooms were "Parlours or Winter Porches." Several of them have a small recess in one corner of the southwest wall. The one shown in the illustration on page 284 in its present state suggests a fireplace, but actually it is a small mihrāb, or prayer niche, a feature often found in the early Islamic houses of Nishapur. It is so placed that he who prays before it is not only facing Mecca but also is withdrawn from the body of the room.

It is obvious that wood was not a suitable fuel for these rather small, sunken fire pots, and it was not surprising to find that many of them contained charcoal. We are thus forced to the conclusion that Ibn Battuta's memory failed him on the use of charcoal in Persia. It is unlikely that fuel would be common at least to the twelfth century, fall out of use in the fourteenth, and appear again in the sixteenth, especially if we recall that braziers are shown in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Persian miniatures.

The sunken fire pot, however, suffers from a serious drawback when used for heating, for, owing to the fire's being below the surface of the ground, far less heat would be radiated from it than if it were on or above the floor surface. For a reasonable explanation of how this sunken fire was made into an efficient heater we may turn again to Sir John Chardin, who, after describing the "Chimneys," which he says were little used, proceeds to describe the kursî, a device still used in Persian houses. "They usually warm themselves in a sort of Chafing-dish or Furnace, in this Manner; they make a great Hole in the Floor of those Parlours, and of the Winter Rooms, near twenty Inches deep, and eight Foot Diameter, according to the Wideness of the Room; those Holes are cover'd over in Summer with Boards, under the Carpets, and are not seen; in Winter they uncover them, and set over them a Wooden Table, a Foot high, and a Foot wider than the Hole on which it stands, and they spread on the Table one or two stitch'd Coverlets, which hang down half a Yard round the Table; when they have Occasion to use the Furnace, they put in a few Coals, well lighted, and strewed over with a few Ashes, to make them last the longer, then they draw near the Table close to the Hole, and lay the end of the Coverlet in their Laps, as high as their Waste; there they sit very warm, and very easy, and the Heat inclines them insensibly to a sweet Slumber; and they eat in the Winter over that Fire, and lie round it; the Persians call it, Coursî. i.e., Seat, because that Table looks like a Seat."

The matter of having the coals well lighted is a necessity, otherwise those using the kursî would die of carbon monoxide poisoning. The similarity of arrangement in the seventeenth century is obvious, but there are some
A late XIII century brazier with special hooks to hold a spit when used for grilling.

In the Metropolitan Museum

differences in detail; for example, the large hole is substituted for the fire pot which figures in the Nishapur houses. Today the kursî is chiefly used in the anderûn, that is, in the inner, or women's quarters, where the table is placed over a movable metal brazier standing on the floor.

In spite of the fact that this seems the only way that a sunken fire could reasonably be used to keep warm, it may seem extraordinary that no Persian paintings, so far as we are aware, show the kursî. This omission appears less strange when we realize that it is very doubtful if the fireplaces mentioned by Chardin are ever represented in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century paintings, though bed and brazier often figure in them. There is a miniature in the Louvre painted in Bokhara in 1553 which shows what might be considered a fireplace at the end of a room.¹ The flaming fire is symbolical of the love of the Sheikh of Sanaan for a Christian lady who is shown peering in through a window just above it.

¹ E. Blochet, Les Peintures des manuscrits orientaux de la Bibliothèque Nationale, (Paris 1914-1920), pl. XLI.
But the way it is represented suggests that it is a panel, symbolically decorated, and not a real fireplace—a painting within a painting. Actually we do not know when the fireplace with a chimney was introduced into Persia, and for this, as for the kursi, miniatures do not solve the problem. Scenes of Persian life represented in the paintings, familiar and intimate though they seem to be, do not present as complete a picture of everyday manners and customs as the unwaried beholder might think. Most of us are disposed, when we are shown much, to believe it possible to see all. Persian painting is not alone in deluding us in this way.

That the sunken fireplace in inner rooms was also used for cooking is practically certain, owing to the scarcity of fuel; just as at the present time one rarely sees a brazier heating a room in Persia without at least a tea-pot on the coals. We found no transportable metal braziers in the excavations, though it is unlikely that such useful and simple contrivances were not used at all. It is probably owing to the accidents of time that none has survived. We know from literature that they were used in the ninth and tenth centuries but none has come down to us. The Museum has, however, a very fine thirteenth-century brazier in the Moore Collection from which we can learn much.

It was made, probably in Egypt, for the Sultan of Yemen, al Malik al Muzaafir Yusuf, who reigned from 1290 to 1295. It is made of brass and is elaborately decorated with the sultan’s name inlaid in silver letters. In the middle of the top of each side there are hooks in the form of two dragons’ heads opposed to each other. Braziers such as this were used not only for heating but on occasion for cooking in the master’s presence. We reproduce a miniature of the fifteenth century which shows one being used for grilling a fowl skewered on a spit that has a handle at one end so that it can be revolved. The dragon-headed hooks on our brazier were added to hold the spit in place and to prevent it from slipping about when it was being turned. They are derived from forked metal spikes that were driven in the ground on opposite sides of a fire to support the spitted meat when cooking in the open. A Mughal miniature which depicts Shah Abbas with the ambassador of Shah Jahan has a scene on the border showing the use of these metal spikes by two cooks, one a Hindu and the other a Persian, who are preparing kebabs (see ill. p. 282). In their original form these supports were doubtless nothing
Breadmaking in a village near Shiraz

but a pair of forked sticks cut from branches.

The function of these forked hooks, either alone or incorporated in the metal brazier, suggests a use for a number of small animals carved from Mashhad stone that were found in the early houses of Nishapur. They are rectangular blocks about four and a half inches high, six and a half long, and an inch and a half thick, roughed out just enough to be recognized as quadrupeds of no certain species and sometimes even having two heads. Each of them has a deep V-shaped notch in the middle of its back. It therefore seems not improbable that they served as supports for spits and that they were stood on the plaster hearth in pairs, one on each side of the sunken fire pot. They were sturdy, almost unbreakable, and had the advantage of not damaging the floor as the metal spikes would.

Most of the cooking was done in the kitchens on open fires of wood, dried dung, or aromatic thorn laid between the walls of the simple stoves. Cooking vessels of many shapes and sizes were supported over the fire either by the walls, for large pots, or on a grid for small ones. Some kitchens had batteries of these stoves. Many of the cooking pots were made of stone, the same stone of which the animals were carved. Rather crude stone cooking vessels are still found in the cooking equipment of the villages of Khurasan, but in the ninth and tenth centuries they were sometimes very carefully made. Occasionally they
An apprentice being initiated into a guild. A XVII century Turkish miniature

had elaborately fretted vertical lugs as well as two plain horizontal ones for use as handles. Large cooking pots of extremely thin and somewhat gritty unglazed pottery were much used. The thinness of these vessels, considering their size (as much as fourteen inches in diameter), is quite remarkable, for they are sometimes thinner than the glazed casseroles of the present day. At this time the craftsmanship of the Persian potter had reached a very high level indeed, with fine, thinly turned unglazed pottery being made in great profusion. The development had been continuous from early Sasanian times and the Arab invasion had done nothing to set it back.

In one instance we find that the same shape was used in Khurasan for cooking vessels of stone, earthenware, and metal. Its marked characteristics are: a hemispherical body, a rim that is cut away to form four sharply pointed shapes, and three small legs placed very close together. The stone and pottery vessels illustrated are from ninth-century houses in Nishapur, and the metal one, which is some three centuries later, is reproduced from D’Allemagne’s book Du Khurassan au pays des Backhtiari. D’Allemagne notes the frequent occurrence of this shape in Khurasan but is mistaken in saying that it is confined to metalwork. In Khurasan the decoration on vessels of this kind is confined to the rim, but on the similar but much finer metal cauldron found in Daghestan, now in the Museum of the Caucasus in Tiflis, the body also is decorated. This cauldron, which is probably of the twelfth century, is obviously a development of the humble little pots found in ninth-century Nishapur. It is highly probable that this type of pot with its very characteristic rim (which does not appear on any Sasanian vessels yet found) originated with the Turkish craftsmen of Central Asia, as it is not common to the whole of Persia. It does not appear, for example, in the southern province of Fars. Contact between the Khurasanians and the Turks had been extremely close for centuries before the Saljuk Turks invaded Persia in the eleventh century and migrated westward into
Asia Minor. In fact, by the ninth century large colonies of Turks had settled in the province of Khurasan.

The open fire served also for baking the thin disks of unleavened bread so common in the Near East. In the excavations of the Sasanian-Islamic site of Kasr-i-Abu Nasr we found several low three-legged tables of stone and pottery. The purpose of these flat, circular objects was quite unknown to us until a visit to the modern village chanced to show us their connection with breadmaking. In private houses the Persian custom is to roll out balls of dough into thin circular sheets and bake them one by one on an inverted tray laid above the fire. The modern version of these low tables is a little clumsier, but the new and the old are essentially the same. The photograph on page 289 clearly demonstrates how suitable its shape is to the functions it has to perform and how well it conforms to the way people sit and work. There is a tray full of baked bread and a piece cooking over the fire. In Nishapur, however, this type of table for rolling out dough is not and seems never to have been used. In the photograph there is also a metal tripod which is to be stood in the fire to hold pots when there is something to boil and, demonstrating the economy with which fuel is used in Persia, there is a teakettle heating at the edge of the fire.

Thus, in order to throw more light on some of the domestic aspects of daily life in ninth-century Nishapur, we have had to examine details of life in modern times and at different places, to look into the accounts of two travelers, one of whom proved to be mistaken, and to search for help in scenes from fifteenth- and seventeenth-century miniatures. And in spite of all the links we have discovered, we have also found it true that each province and each period of time had its own character and its own way of doing such simple and fundamental things as keeping warm and baking bread.

For further details of the brazier shown on page 287 see M. S. Dimand in Metropolitan Museum Studies, vol. iii, part 2 (1931), pp. 229–231.