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## Neighborhood-Oriented Planning in the New Rural Settlements of the Islamic Period (Case Study: Iran, Iraq and Egypt)

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### ABSTRACT

The history of site selection and the establishment of the first settlements, including new villages and new towns with pre-designed layouts, dates back to the Iranian engineering system and subsequently to the Islamic era's engineers. This process began centuries ago in the Iranian Plateau and Mesopotamia through intelligent site selection, purposeful planning of neighborhoods, and a neighborhood-centered approach. Initially applied in villages and later in cities, this approach is considered the first notable example of planning for new settlements. Inspired by the unifying actions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in organizing Mecca and Medina, the concept of neighborhood-centered planning was further expanded and adapted after his passing. The present study aims to review the early experiences of site selection and the establishment of new villages and towns in Iran and Mesopotamia, as well as to explain the focus of early Islamic-era Muslims on neighborhood-centered planning in rural and urban settlement development. The findings demonstrate three key points. First, reports by Muslim geographers and historians regarding field studies of neighborhoods (*Khettat-writing*) present a rich body of literature on site selection and settlement establishment during the Islamic era. Second, long before the modern European experiences of planned cities, settlements in Iran and Mesopotamia were designed and built based on proximity to water resources and ecological foundations. Third, neighborhood-centered planning laid the foundation for security, access to services, improved quality of life, and development in rural and urban areas during the early Islamic period.

**Keywords:** New village, New cities, Central neighborhood, planning,, Islamic period

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## **Introduction**

The background of locating and constructing the first villages (Noukard) and new cities in the world, in the sense of planned settlements with pre-designed layouts, dates back to the pre-Islamic era by Iranian engineers and later by engineers of the Islamic period. The present article aims to explain the formation of the first new villages in the pre-Islamic era and the primary principles used by Muslims for the neighborhood-based division (Mahalleh محـoriented) of new rural and urban centers, focusing on neighborhood-centrism as the most important approach in the early years of Islam's expansion for designing new Islamic villages and cities. Therefore, the focus was placed on how the first new rural and settlement centers in the modern sense were formed, built by innovative Iranian engineers before Islam and later developed by Muslim engineers during the Islamic period in locating settlements and new cities. Subsequently, the formation and evolution of neighborhood-centrism in the villages and cities of the Islamic period as a dominant cultural and social approach were addressed.

## **Materials & Method**

In terms of type, this research is developmental, and in terms of method, following the interpretive paradigm, it is qualitative research. The required information was gathered through library and documentary research; and in the data collection method, the study of ancient, reliable, and trustworthy geographical-historical documents was used. After gathering the information, data classification was performed based on time periods and geographical location, and conclusions were drawn through data analysis. Two key concepts of the research were, first, new settlement centers in Iran and Islamic lands, and second, neighborhood-centrism in centers built during the early Islamic centuries. The temporal scope of the research is pre-Islamic Iran, the early Islamic period, and the early Islamic centuries in Muslim territories. The geographical scope was determined as regions of the Iranian Plateau, the Arabian Peninsula, Mesopotamia, and North Africa, which were relevant to the research topic. To examine the topic precisely, part of the research was dedicated to the subject's background in the writings of early Muslim geographers and historians, especially regarding the construction of new settlements or Noukard and neighborhood-centrism, which were presented in the form of Khattat writings (urban topography) by early geographers. Finally, the research conclusion was based on the collected geographical-historical documentation.

## **Discussion**

A) The Formation of the First Noukard (Village) and New Cities in Iran and Islamic Lands:

The history of establishing new villages and cities in Iran dates back to historical periods before Islam and, according to research, likely intensified during the Sasanian era. Based on reports, during the Sasanian period, numerous Noukards were built on the Iranian Plateau or surrounding regions, which later became new cities or, in Arabic literature, known as Hadithah. Reliable examples are Noukards that turned into new Sasanian cities in Mesopotamia and are today two settlements known as Hadithat al-Mawsil and Hadithat al-Furat. Hadithat al-Mawsil was an ancient settlement probably built by Shapur II near the Great Zab River, at the confluence of the Zab and Tigris rivers in northern Iraq, as a Noukard or new settlement. It was reconstructed during the Umayyad period in the 2nd century AH and named Hadithah, meaning "new city." Hadithat al-Furat, located in Al-Anbar province in western Iraq today, was initially built as a fortress-Noukard by Sasanian kings in the northern part of Mesopotamia and developed during the Islamic period on the banks of the Euphrates River to the extent that it became known as the new city of Hadithat al-Furat.

Various examples of the establishment of Sasanian-era Noukard and new cities in the Islamic lands of Iraq, the Levant (Sham), and North Africa are seen in the early Islamic centuries, generally built near sustainable water sources, with access to main civilizational routes, and considering ecological foundations.

B) Neighborhood-Centrism in Rural and Urban Centers of the Islamic Period:

Neighborhood-centrism in rural and urban settlements has been of interest since the very first years of the Islamic period. According to a report, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) implemented a neighborhood/district system by dividing lands into neighborhoods and assigning each neighborhood to tribes to strengthen social cohesion in Medina. This was based on the religious teachings of Islam and aimed at creating a bond of brotherhood among all tribes and groups of the Islamic community. In Basra and Kufa, which were among the first military centers of Muslims in Iraq and were established in the early decades of Islam, the pattern of neighborhood-centrism formed the basis of development. Although these two centers were initially managed as military camps, they quickly turned into residential settlements and then into important, central cities in Iraq. In the villages and cities of North Africa as well, neighborhood-centrism continued, especially in the two important centers of Fustat and Cairo, which attracted more researchers' attention. In Fustat, the settlement design was based on division into neighborhoods. It seems the founder first built a mosque and then allocated the area around the congregational mosque and the market for 47 residential neighborhoods for the tribes. The present-day Cairo – distinct from the ancient city near the Pyramids

of Giza – which was initially built in its current location in 969-970 AD by relocating the military headquarters (Dar al-Imarah) of Fustat and later became the Fatimid capital of Egypt, was first zoned according to Islamic urban planning principles. The city's founder, after determining the initial site and constructing the ramparts, first designated a location for the city's congregational mosque. Then he built the Great Eastern Palace as the Caliph's residence next to the treasury and military storage, and later the Great Western Palace, and shaped Cairo's neighborhoods in the four directions of the qibla(south), west, east, and the river (north); streets, squares, government offices, and schools were formed in these same directions.

### **Results and Conclusion**

The present study showed that the model for creating Noukard and new cities had been experienced centuries before it became common in European countries, by Iranian engineers in Iran and Mesopotamia, and was introduced and developed under titles such as Noukard, Now-shahr (new city), or Hadithah. Ancient and authentic sources from the early Islamic period and the studies of the Golden Age of Muslim geographers in the 3rd and 4th centuries AH extensively presented the characteristics of establishing Noukards, new cities, and Islamic urban planning, as well as the results of field research by scholars. This indicates that the status of geographical knowledge and studies among Muslims was particularly significant, and almost all research by Muslim geographers discussed the most prominent examples of establishing Noukards, new cities, or Hadithahs (new cities). New research shows what factors were effective in forming the neighborhood structure and what the function of the neighborhood system was. In neighborhoods, all services such as a mosque, bathhouse, small market (bazaarcheh), bakery, and other necessary neighborhood services existed. Therefore, it can be said that ethnic and religious characteristics, social stratification, patterns of life and livelihood were factors influencing neighborhood divisions, and the function of neighborhoods allowed for the manifestation of occupational, cultural, social, religious, and racial expression.

Recent studies also showed that Muslims had an ideal neighborhood with a mosque at its center and a maximum of 160 residential plots in the four directions from the mosque, with a maximum of 40 residential units in each direction, covering an approximate area of 20 hectares and a maximum density of 80 people per hectare. Based on this, the results of the present study are as follows in summary:

In locating and determining the future development directions of all new Iranian residential centers from before Islam or new cities of the Islamic period, including in Hadithat al-Mawsil, Hadithat al-Iraq, Basra, Kufa, and Cairo, proximity to water sources and ecological foundations was fundamental.

Neighborhood-centrism is the basis of the development plan for residential centers in the villages and cities of the early Islamic period, and its objectives were creating security, access to neighborhood center services, access to quality of life, and economic activity within the neighborhoods.

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