Preface

This special edition of Eurasian Studies is based upon the conference “Iranian Cities from the Arab Conquest to the Early Modern Period”, held at Harvard University on 1 and 2 May 2015. In addition to a selection of the conference papers, the volume includes essays from scholars who were later invited to contribute.

The subject of the volume, medieval Iranian cities, has long been a favourite topic for historical research. Southwestern Iran, at the extremity of the Fertile Crescent, and Transoxiana at the northeastern end of the Iranian world, are home to some of the world’s oldest cities. Sites occupied continuously since ancient times, such as Susa and Samarkand, have been the focus of more than a century of archaeological research and excavation. Many other cities such as Hamadan, Herat, Nishapur, Rayy and Tabriz have also been major centres of civilization since pre-Islamic times.

The time period considered here, from approximately 700 to 1500 CE, corresponds to the pre-modern phase of Islamic Iran. The eight centuries under discussion include such transformative events as the Arab conquest, the subsequent conversion to Islam, and the arrival of central Asian nomads during the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, including the Mongol conquest of the thirteenth century. During this period Iranian cultures flourished, making their mark on world history. Iranian territories absorbed many peoples, first from the Arabian Peninsula and then from Central Asia, resulting in dramatic cultural changes. The continual revival of most cities following these migrations, including some of great destruction, demonstrates the vitality of urban life in the Iranian setting. The overall period encompasses both strong growth in the first centuries of Islam (accompanied by the writing of local histories), followed by centuries in which urban life was challenged and in some cases entered into decline.

The volume entitled The Islamic City: A Colloquium, edited by Albert Hou-rani and Samuel Stern, issued in 1970, dealt primarily with the Arab world – a reflection of the state of research at that time. It did include Jean Aubin’s influential programmatic essay on Iran, reprinted here in English translation, with commentary. Since then, there has been continued increase in the publications dedicated to city-related matters in medieval Iran. In 1994, Masashi Haneda and Hisao Komatsu offered a synthesis of scholarship on medieval
cities in present-day Iran and Afghanistan, in the volume *Islamic urban studies: history, review and perspectives*. Other useful volumes dedicated to cities have since been published, on the pre-modern Islamic world in general and on specific regions of that world (see the introductory review essay by Jürgen Paul).

This current volume deals with Iran as a whole. However, the aim is not to assemble a new general compendium, following Paul Schwarz’s famous *Iran im Mittelalter* (1896-1936), or the more recent compilation of articles from the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, gathered by C.E. Bosworth (*Historic cities of the Islamic world*) with some updated bibliography. A glance at our Table of Contents reveals that many regions are missing (Khuzistan, the Caspian region, the Caucasus, and the Persian Gulf). The cities under examination are primarily located on the Iranian plateau and in Central Asia. Not all the articles focus on specific cities: some deal with transverse problems, such as the role of irrigation in urban design or the transition from Sasanian to Islamic cities. The essays take very different approaches, and in doing so suggest still further ways in which cities can be studied. The authors clearly view Iranian cities not only as settings where history happened, but as phenomena to be understood in their own right due to their continuity across the centuries.

Many contributions consider geographical factors (and geographical writings in the original sources), bringing the relationship between city and hinterland into focus. The water supply of city and its hinterland is a central subject for Rocco Rante and for Etienne de la Vaissière in his discussion of Balkh. It also appears as an important issue in the discussions of Jamsheed Choksy on Yazd and of Roy Mottahedeh and Mehrdad Amanat on Kashan. Richard Bulliet and David Durand-Guédy, in examining the respective cases of Nishapur and Isfahan, explore the significance of the geographic setting in the positioning and history of major cities. The contributions by Ali Shojaee Esfahani and Denise Aigle focus more on features created for specific purposes in the city and its hinterland. Ali Shojaee Esfahani demonstrates how defensive works can extend far beyond the city walls, involving development of networks of fortresses and fortifications in the surrounding landscape, as at Isfahan. Denise Aigle demonstrates how the sacred landscape of Shiraz extends to the hinterland, creating a network of places interwoven with those inside the city.

The upheavals of the Arab conquest, the coming of the Turks in the eleventh century, and the Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century feature in many of the essays. Donald Whitcomb focuses on the transition from the Sasanian to the early Islamic period. He compares the specificities of the Iranian circumstances to those of the Arab Near East and discusses the events and motivations behind the changes in the shape of the city from Antiquity to the Islamic