



Reflections of Beliefs and Religions in the Arabian Peninsula and Iraq: A Case Study of Naser Khosrow's Safarnama – An Analytical Study

Ayat Amer Jasim

Yasouj University

ayatamer388@gmail.com

Received May. 21, 2026

Revised Jun.16, 2026

Accepted Jun.20, 2026

Online October1, 2026

ABSTRACT

Travelogues constitute documents of profound historical and social value, forming primary sources that reflect the political, social, and cultural realities of their era. Among these, the travelogue of the sage Nasir Khusraw Qubadiyani stands out prominently. In the year 476 AH, he embarked on a pilgrimage journey that lasted seven years, during which he provided valuable information on the political and social conditions of Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula. In his observations, Nasir Khusraw paid particular attention to the beliefs and inhabitants of these regions, conveying his insights with depth and scholarly rigor, thereby reflecting the prevailing religious convictions and views of that period.

Keywords: Nasir Khusraw's travelogue, doctrine, beliefs and religious views, the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq.

انعكاس المعتقدات والديانات في شبه الجزيرة العربية والعراق (سفرنامه ناصر خسرو نموذجا) دراسة تحليلية
ايات عامر جاسم/ ايران، جامعة ياسوج

ayatamer388@gmail.com

المخلص

تعد الرحلات وثائق ذات قيمة تاريخية واجتماعية بالغة الأهمية، إذ تشكل مصادر أساسية تعكس الواقع السياسي والاجتماعي والثقافي لعصرها. ومن بين هذه الرحلات تبرز رحلة الحكيم ناصر خسرو القبادياني، الذي انطلق في عام ٤٧٦ هـ في رحلة حج استمرت سبع سنوات، قدم فيها معلومات قيمة عن الأوضاع السياسية والاجتماعية في منطقة العراق وشبه الجزيرة العربية، لقد أولى ناصر خسرو في مشاهداته اهتماماً خاصاً بعقائد وسكان هذه المناطق، وعبر عن ذلك بعمق وبمنهجية علمية، عاكساً المعتقدات والآراء الدينية السائدة آنذاك.

الكلمات المفتاحية: رحلة ناصر خسرو، المذهب، المعتقدات والآراء الدينية، شبه الجزيرة العربية، العراق.

Introduction

Travel literature is one of the literary arts in which the author presents his observations and impressions of the conditions of the cities and countries he visits, describing mosques, libraries, markets, scholars, customs and traditions, geographical locations, populations, and climates of the regions he traverses, thereby providing valuable information to the reader. In Islamic civilization, travelogues are considered among the most important sources for studying the history of the pilgrimage and the Two Holy Mosques (Al-Shamri, 2010, p 28) Among the most prominent and



significant of these travelogues is that of Nasir Khusraw, which is regarded as the oldest and most valuable journey written in the Persian language.

Nasir Khusraw Qubadiyani, who in the year 476, following a vision he experienced in Juzjanan, resolved to undertake a journey to the Hijaz, a journey that lasted seven years. Nasir Khusraw recorded the findings of his observations during this journey in his travelogue, which is considered an important source for the history of social, cultural, and religious life in parts of the Islamic world during the fifth century of the Hijri calendar. In his seven-year journey, Nasir Khusraw describes his travels to Anatolia, Egypt, the Hijaz, and Mesopotamia. As one of the elite scholars of the fifth century, and owing to his profound worldview and Ismaili Shia convictions, he adopted a particular perspective toward the sects and beliefs of the lands through which he passed.

Research Background

A review of the existing literature and prior studies reveals that numerous articles have been written on Nasir Khusraw's travelogue, addressing it from various literary, historical, and sociological perspectives. Nevertheless, no scholarly research has hitherto been devoted specifically to the beliefs and religious views of the inhabitants of Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula as recorded in Nasir Khusraw's travelogue. This subject has only been touched upon incidentally in some studies that examined the religious dimension of the journey. For instance, Hossein Izadi, in his article entitled "Nasir Khusraw and Ismailism," published in the journal *Keyhan Andisheh* in 1371, referred to the subject of Shi'ism in Nasir Khusraw's travelogue. Similarly, Sa'ida Purnasiri Bazanjani, in her article "Religion in the Thought of Nasir Khusraw and Jalal al-Din Rumi in Confrontation with the Other," addressed certain religious references in the travelogue. Furthermore, Muhammad Karim and colleagues, in their article "The Emergence of the Mu'tazila in the Islamic World and its Reflection in the Travelogue of the Sage Nasir Khusraw," published in the *Journal of Islamic Art Studies*, also discussed some religious features of this travelogue.

Research Objectives

1. To study and interpret Nasir Khusraw's perspective on beliefs and sects in the Arabian Peninsula and Iraq.
2. To present the geographical descriptions recorded by Nasir Khusraw about the cities of Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula in the *Safarnama*, and to highlight their significance.
3. To study and interpret Nasir Khusraw's critical stance toward religious superstitions.

Nasir Khusraw: The Ismaili Scholar, Poet, and Traveler

Nasir Khusraw was of Persian origin by birth, upbringing, and culture. He was born near Balkh in 394 AH / 1003 AD, received a thorough education, and acquired an extensive share of the knowledge of his era. He traveled to India and served at the court of the Ghaznavid dynasty, before returning to Persia where he assumed a prominent position under the Seljuk state, serving as a secretary to Jafar, also known as Jafri Beg, the brother of Tughril Beg. He had been deeply immersed in amusements and pleasures until one night a man appeared to him in a dream, reproaching him for his sins and whispering to him that a pilgrimage to the Sacred House was the path to sincere repentance. This dream left a profound impact on his soul and brought about a radical transformation in the course of his life. He immediately abandoned his former ways and set out to perform the Hajj the following year, as a man who was throughout his journey a fervent Ismaili, deeply devoted to his doctrine.

He departed from Merv, passing through Nishapur, Rayy, Tabriz, Mayyafariqin, Amid, and Harran, then entered the Levant through Manbij. He toured the major cities of the region along his route, passing through Aleppo, Hama, and al-Maarra. He then headed toward the coast, visiting Tripoli, Byblos, Beirut, Sidon, Tyre, and Acre, from where he made a detour to Tiberias before returning to Acre and proceeding toward Ramla via Caesarea and Kafr Saba. From Ramla, he set out for Jerusalem, arriving there in 438 AH and spending four months in the city. He then performed the Hajj and returned to Jerusalem by way of Damascus, continuing his journey to Egypt overland through Ashkelon, arriving on the 7th of Safar 439 AH / 1047 AD. He remained there for eight months, performed the Hajj a second time, and continued to move within the realm of the Fatimid Caliph al-Mustansir for nearly two years, before finally departing Cairo on the 14th of Dhu al-Hijja 441 AH / April 1050 AD, taking the route of Aydhab to Jeddah. After completing his final pilgrimage, he made his way back to his homeland, crossing overland from Mecca to al-Ahsa and visiting Basra along the way, arriving in Merv on the 15th of June 1052(Niqula Ziyada, 1987, p111).

Religion in Nasir Khusraw's View and the Religious Affiliation of the Inhabitants of Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula

Religion is a system of heartfelt beliefs and behavioral practices consistent with those beliefs; religion and culture are inextricably intertwined. Culture is a factor that gives human life meaning and direction; it encompasses beliefs, ethics, behavior, and religious as well as non-religious customs and traditions. Religion is therefore considered a component and constituent part of culture. Scholar al-Tabataba'i holds that the relationship between religion and culture is one of mutual entanglement,

and states that the virtuous qualities found in people today — however few they may be — are the product of religious teachings (Al-Tabataba'i, 1999 ,vol. 2, p 115) Consequently, all elements of religion manifest in society and form part of social identity. Religious identity constitutes a portion of social identity; when values and norms are built upon a religious foundation and derive from divine revelation, religious identity is formed among the devout and followers of the faith. This identity is consolidated within the family, in educational and instructional systems, and in the process of socialization, and is reflected in the behavior of believing individuals and communities. Religious identity is an integrated system of Islamic values, norms, principles, prohibitions, and ethics (Sha'banpur, 1393, p 90) Based on this characterization, it may be concluded that religion has formed part of the culture of society, and that the culture of every society endows its people with a distinct identity.

In Nasir Khusraw's *Safarnama*, references to religion, sect, and religious rituals are made in relation to numerous countries and cities. Through this work, it is possible to identify the religions, sects, and religious practices in both Islamic and non-Islamic countries during the fourth and fifth centuries of the Hijri calendar.

1. Nasir Khusraw's Description of the City of Basra

In his description of the city of Basra, Nasir Khusraw notes that it is surrounded by a great wall encircling it from all sides, except for the part overlooking the river, which is Shatt al-Arab. At the city's borders, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers meet, and the Huwaiza Canal also flows into them; at this confluence the river becomes known as Shatt al-Arab. Two large canals branch off from Shatt al-Arab, both originating from a single source one farsakh apart, then diverging southward for a distance of four farsakhs before reuniting to form a single canal that flows one farsakh further south. From these two canals, numerous streams and waterways extend in all directions, along whose banks palm trees and lush gardens have been planted. The upper canal, located to the northeast, is known as Nahr Muaqqal, while the second, to the southwest, is called Nahr al-Ubulla. Between these two canals stretches a large rectangular island, and Basra is situated at the shortest side of this rectangle. To the southwest of Basra lies a barren desert, completely devoid of settlement, water, and trees. At that time, most of Basra lay in ruins, while the inhabited quarters were scattered here and there, as we witnessed during our stay (Alawi, 1993, p. 163)

Nasir Khusraw reveals in this passage an objective and precise view of the city of Basra. He does not limit himself to describing its geographical features such as walls, rivers, and canals, but shows a clear interest in the city's water infrastructure and canal network in a manner that approaches a

scientific geographical method. Notably, Khusraw does not romanticize what he observed; rather, he candidly states that most of Basra lay in ruins at the time of his visit, reflecting a critical spirit and intellectual honesty that distinguishes him from many travel writers of his era. It can thus be said that Nasir Khusraw did not view Basra through the eyes of an admirer or a biased observer, but through the eyes of a neutral witness who records reality as it is.

2. Description of the Neighborhoods of Basra

Basra comprises twenty districts, each containing numerous villages and farms, namely: Hashan, Sharba, Ballas, Aqr Maysan, al-Muqim, Nahr Harb, Shatt al-Arab, Saad, Sam, al-Jafariyya, al-Mishan, al-Samad, al-Jawna, al-Jazira al-Uzma, Marawt, al-Shirayn, Jazirat al-Arsh, al-Humayda, al-Huwaiza, and al-Munfaradat. It is said that at the time when it was nearly impossible for a ship to pass through the mouth of the Ubulla River due to the great depth of its waters, a wealthy woman of Basra ordered the fitting out of four hundred vessels, filled them all with dates, and had them sunk there after being carefully sealed — causing the riverbed to rise and navigation to become easier. In sum, we departed Basra in the middle of Shawwal, year 443 AH (20 February 1052 AD). We boarded a small boat and sailed along the Ubulla River, and for four farsakhs we were treated to an unbroken succession of lush gardens and breathtaking scenery lining both banks. From this river, numerous streams branched off, each bearing the name of a canal. Upon reaching Shaq Uthman, situated opposite al-Ubulla, we disembarked and lodged there. On the seventeenth of Shawwal (22 February), we boarded a large vessel called Bawsa. Crowds of people stood on both banks calling out: “May God keep you safe, O Bawsa.” We eventually reached Abadan, where the passengers disembarked from the ship (Alawi, 1993, p. 168)

In this passage, Nasir Khusraw demonstrates a keen awareness of Basra’s administrative and social fabric by documenting its twenty districts along with their villages and farms, reflecting a structured and methodical approach to urban description that goes beyond mere surface observation. His inclusion of the anecdote about the wealthy woman who sank four hundred date-laden vessels to raise the riverbed reveals his interest in preserving local oral tradition and popular memory, treating them as valuable historical data rather than dismissing them as mere folklore. Furthermore, his personal account of departing Basra by boat along the Ubulla River, with its vivid depiction of lush gardens and continuous scenery, shows a traveler who is equally attentive to the human and natural dimensions of the places he visits. The scene of crowds bidding farewell to the vessel adds a warm social texture to his narrative, suggesting that Khusraw viewed Basra not only as a geographical space but as a living community with its own customs and collective spirit.

3. Description of Mecca:

Mecca lies nestled among towering mountains and cannot be seen from a distance in any direction. The nearest mountain to it is Abu Qubays, which is round-shaped like a dome. It is said that if an arrow were shot from its summit, it would land inside the Grand Mosque. The eastern side of Mecca faces the sun from within the mosque, and atop this mountain stands a tower built of stone traditionally attributed to the Prophet Ibrahim, peace be upon him, who is said to have erected it.

The city occupies the valley between these mountains, and the area of the valley is no less than two arrow-shots in width. The Grand Mosque lies at the center of this valley surrounded by the markets and streets of Mecca. Walls were constructed between the mountains as a fortification, with gates serving as entry points. The only exception is the western gate of the Grand Mosque — known as the Gate of Ibrahim — near which an abundance of large trees grow along the edge of a cliff.

On the eastern side of the mosque lies a market stretching from south to north. To the south stands Mount Abu Qubays, while at its northern end lies the hill of Al-Safa, whose gentle slope is visible from below. The flat stones covering it are walked upon by pilgrims who refer to this place as Al-Marwa — located to the north of the market's end, at a slightly lower elevation than the center of Mecca. Numerous dwellings were built upon it. The area between Al-Safa and Al-Marwa is known as the Sa'y — the ritual walk — and this market runs the full length between them. Anyone wishing to perform Umrah and coming from afar will find, at a distance of half a parasang around Mecca, towers, structures and mosques. (Alawi, 1993, p 138)

4. In his description of the city of Al-Ahsa, Nasir Khusraw refers to the prevailing religion and sect, noting that the city's ruler had forbidden its people from practicing Islam: "It was said that its ruler was a man of noble lineage who forbade the people from practicing Islam, saying to them: 'I have relieved you of prayer and fasting,' and summoned them to the belief that their religious authority could only be derived through him. His name was Abu Sa'id, and if anyone from the city was asked: 'What is your sect?' he would reply: 'We are Bu-Sa'idis.' They neither pray nor fast, but they acknowledge the prophethood of Muhammad, the Chosen One, peace be upon him" (Qubadiyani, 1354, p 105)

In his description of Mecca, Nasir Khusraw focused on the Hajj rituals of the Muslims, providing a precise and detailed description of the Sacred Mosque, the Black Stone, the Jamarat, Safa and Marwa, the place of sacrifice, the opening of the Ka'ba's door, and all the rites of the pilgrimage. Nasir Khusraw's *Safarnama* provides uniquely valuable historical information about the history of

the Hajj and the performance of its rites during the fifth century AH, including his reference to the 'Umra of al-Ji'rana (Khomehyar, 1399, p 73-74, citing 'Ayyashi, 2006, p 166).

Nasir Khusraw speaks in detail about the religious customs and traditions of the peoples he encountered, and these descriptions reveal the profound influence of religion on daily life, human behavior, and social interactions. His portrayals of religious diversity and doctrinal differences contribute to a deeper understanding of the multiple national and cultural identities present in the region. Furthermore, the references to the various sects and their relations with one another reflect the reality of cultural and religious diversity in those societies — a diversity that can lead to coexistence and cultural exchange.

Religion is frequently employed as a tool for legitimizing political and social systems. Nasir Khusraw's descriptions of religious sects can assist us in understanding how religion influences politics and power. His accounts of specific religious rituals and celebrations also attest to the significance of these matters in social culture, as they contribute to strengthening social bonds and creating a sense of communal belonging.

Popular Beliefs and Superstitions

Every idea that a person considers to be true constitutes one of his beliefs; beliefs drive a person to have faith in something or to accept its existence. A superstition, however, is a type of belief that has no scientific or logical basis, does not rest upon reliable knowledge or data, and instead stems from ignorance, fear, or a misunderstanding of causal relationships.

The word "superstition" (khurafah) in its original meaning refers to vain and fruitless speech; in the Persian language, it is applied to actions or beliefs arising from ignorance or misunderstanding. Every society therefore possesses a set of beliefs commensurate with its ethics, thought, religion, and sect.

Nasir Khusraw, in the *Safarnama*, paid attention to the beliefs of various peoples. Since his journey was undertaken through Islamic lands, he documented the beliefs of Muslims in these regions, beliefs which are largely influenced by the religion and dominant sect in those places.

In his description of the city of Ma'arrat al-Nu'man, Nasir Khusraw recounts a popular belief: he says he saw at the city's entrance a stone column inscribed in a language other than Arabic, and when he inquired about it, he was told: "It is a talisman against scorpions; there are no scorpions at all in the city, and even if one is brought from outside and released within it, it flees and cannot remain" (Qubadiyani, 1354, p 14) This reflects a superstitious conviction likely held for psychological comfort, given that the Arabian Desert is a natural habitat for dangerous scorpions.

Conclusion and Findings

Nasir Khusraw is considered one of the most prominent intellectuals and scholars of the fifth century AH. In his *Safarnama*, he documented observations of great importance that reveal the conditions of Islamic societies in Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula, particularly with regard to religious and sectarian beliefs and popular heritage.

This research has reached a number of conclusions, the most significant of which are as follows:

First: Nasir Khusraw's affiliation with the Ismaili Shia school directed his attention toward the Shia communities in the cities he visited, and this affiliation was reflected in his evaluation of the religious practices of others, lending his narrative a selective character in certain instances.

Second: The *Safarnama* reveals a rich religious and sectarian diversity in the regions Khusraw documented. Multiple sects coexisted in Iraq during that era, while in the Arabian Peninsula there emerged communities with distinct religious ideologies, such as the Bu-Sa'idi group in al-Ahsa, who had abandoned the fundamental Islamic rites, in addition to the presence of Christians in Nubia.

Third: : Khusraw paid considerable attention to documenting the geographical features of cities such as Basra, Jerusalem, and al-Ahsa, combining this with social and religious description, which makes his *Safarnama* a rare and comprehensive historical source that extends well beyond the merely literary.

Fourth The research demonstrated that religion during that era was not merely an individual practice, but rather a fundamental pillar in the construction of the social and political identity of communities, and was frequently employed as a tool for legitimizing authority or for consolidating social bonds within groups.

References

- 1_ Khamehyar, Ahmad (1399), The Significance of Nasir Khusraw Qubadiyani Balkhi's *Safarnama* for the Study of the History of the Hajj and the Two Holy Mosques in the Fifth Century, *Miqat-e Hajj Journal* (Academic-Promotional Quarterly), Issue 112.
- 2_ Al-Maqdisi, Shams al-Din Abu 'Abd Allah (1998), *Ahsan al-Ta'asim fi Ma'rifat al-Aqalim*, Cairo, Maktabat Madbuli, Third Edition.

- 3_ Nasir Khusraw Alawi (1993), *Safarnama*, translated by Yahya al-Khashab, 2nd ed, Cairo, Egyptian General Book Organization.
- 4_ Qubadiyani, Nasir Khusraw (1354), *Safarnama-ye Nasir Khusraw*, Edited and annotated by Nadir Wazirpur, Franklin Book Programs.
- 5_ Qubadiyani, Nasir Khusraw (1983), *Safarnama, Nasir Khusraw's Journey to Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, and the Arabian Peninsula*.
- 6_ Sha'banpur, Muhammad (2014), *Principles and Methods of Criticism from the Perspective of the Quran and Nahj al-Balagha*, Siraj Munir Journal, Fifth Year, Issue 14.
- 7_ Al-Shamri, Muhammad Karim Ibrahim (2010), *Al-Husayn ibn Salama al-Nubi and His Role in the History of Islamic Yemen*, Al-Qadisiyya Journal for the Humanities, Issue 13.
- 8_ Al-Tabataba'i, Muhammad Husayn (1999), *Tafsir al-Mizan*, Translated by Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Musawi al-Hamdani, Qom, Publications of the Society of Teachers in the Hawza of Qom.
- 9_ Ziyada, Niqula (1987), *Geography and Travel among the Arabs*, Beirut, Al-Sharika Al-Alamiyya lil-Kitab.