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Tomb of Babur

Rahimov Laziz Abduazizovich
Head of the Department of Architecture
Samarkand State Technical University, Republic of Uzbekistan

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DOI : xxx
*Correspondence :
doktarant.scorp@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article examines the open-air tomb of Zahir-ud-din Muhammad Babur in Bagh-e Babur, Kabul, as an important and distinctive example of funerary architecture shaped by cultural exchange between Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. The study addresses four related questions: why Babur was buried in an open garden setting; whether comparable structures existed before his tomb; which architectural traditions may have informed its design; and whether the monument influenced later Islamic funerary architecture. Using a historical-analytical case-study approach, the research compares chronicles and memoirs with published architectural studies and Charles Masson's 1832 sketch of the monument. The evidence suggests that Babur's own preference for burial in his beloved Kabul garden, together with the unstable political circumstances following his death, helps explain the tomb's open form. The sketch records a five-arched composition, marble elements and finely worked jali screens. However, the available evidence does not establish a direct architectural prototype for this particular combination of features. Earlier funerary enclosures in Central Asia, Iran, Sindh and Baluchistan provide useful points of comparison, but none can be identified as an exact model. The article further discusses the relationship between Babur's tomb and later open-air tombs associated with the Tarkhan period at Makli, as well as later uses of lattice screens in Mughal funerary architecture. These parallels indicate a possible line of architectural reception, although they do not prove a simple or uninterrupted chain of influence. The study therefore interprets Babur's tomb as a distinctive monument at the intersection of Timurid, Central Asian and South Asian traditions, while acknowledging that its original appearance and precise construction history remain partly uncertain. Further archival, epigraphic and archaeological research is required to clarify the monument's chronology and its place in the development of Islamic funerary architecture.

INTRODUCTION

An examination of architecture during Babur's period indicates that many of the architects involved in major construction projects came from Central Asia and Iran, particularly from regions shaped by Timurid traditions. Local Indian craftsmen, including bricklayers, builders and tile-makers, also contributed to these projects [1]. The architectural culture that emerged under Babur can therefore be understood as the result of interaction between Central Asian and South Asian skills and traditions. Although Babur's rule in India was

relatively brief, he helped introduce Timurid architectural ideas to the subcontinent. Scholars have consequently described him as an important precursor to the architectural developments associated with later Mughal rulers [2].

Babur spent the final period of his life in Agra, where he was involved in urban and garden projects, including the development of gardens along the Jumna River. Historical accounts describe his growing weariness with political responsibilities and his attachment to gardens. Following his death on 26 December 1530, his body was initially buried in the Nurafshan Garden in Agra [3].

According to the historical tradition discussed in the literature, Babur had expressed a wish to be buried in Bagh-e Babur in Kabul, in a garden he particularly loved, rather than in a monumental building . His remains were subsequently transferred from Agra to Kabul. The political instability of the period may also have affected the form and timing of the tomb's construction .

The aim of this article is to analyse Babur's tomb in Kabul and its architectural significance. It considers why an open-air form may have been chosen, whether earlier examples of this type existed, which traditions may have contributed to its design, and how the monument may relate to later developments in Islamic funerary architecture [4].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a historical-analytical case-study method focused on the Tomb of Babur in Kabul. Four categories of material inform the analysis: (1) memoirs and chronicles, including the Babur-nama, Gulbadan Begum's Humayun-nama, the Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri and the Badshah Namah; (2) visual evidence, especially the small sketch (6.5 × 8 cm) made by Charles Masson in 1832; (3) scholarly studies of Mughal and Timurid architecture, funerary enclosures and Bagh-e Babur; and (4) published research on the patronage and construction history of Babur's tomb.

The analysis was conducted in three stages. First, the architectural features visible in Masson's sketch were described. Second, the chronology of Babur's burial and the subsequent construction works was reconstructed by comparing written accounts. Third, the monument was compared with earlier funerary structures, including Gur-e-Amir in Samarkand and brick tombs in Sindh and Baluchistan, and with later examples such as the Makli Hill tombs and Mughal funerary monuments. This comparative approach was used to assess the research questions while distinguishing documented evidence from interpretation.

RESULTS

1. The open mausoleum in Charles Masson's sketch

Charles Masson's small sketch, produced in 1832, is an important visual source for reconstructing the appearance of Babur's open mausoleum. It depicts a five-arched composition in which the central arch forms a larger entrance, while the two lateral sections contain marble elements and double-arched lattice screens. The surrounding surfaces appear to include vegetal ornament. The central arch is shown with a double door, and decorative inscriptions run along its upper perimeter. The lateral sections terminate in parapets decorated with floral patterns. Particularly notable are the finely carved jali screens fitted into the arches .

The tomb was situated on the fourteenth terrace of Bagh-e Babur, near Mount Sher Darwaza in Kabul. By the time of Masson's drawing, the structure was already in a deteriorating condition and later fell into ruin.

2. Chronology of the burial and construction

Babur died in 1530 and was initially buried in Agra. His remains were transferred to Bagh-e Babur in Kabul sometime before 1544, probably between 1539 and 1544. This transfer took place during a period of political difficulty, when Humayun had been forced to retreat from Agra under pressure from Sher Shah [5]. Laura Parodi notes that Kabul was then under the control of Humayun's brother Kamran. This context has led to the suggestion that Kamran may have played a role in establishing Babur's tomb and its funerary enclosure.

In 1607, Jahangir visited Kabul and ordered inscriptions to be placed on the tombs of Babur, his son Mirza Hindal and his grandson Muhammad Hakim . Ruqiya Sultan Begum, who had visited the grave of her father Mirza Hindal, was buried in Bagh-e Babur after her death in 1626. Jahangir also ordered the construction of a platform at the grave [6].

During his visit to Kabul in 1639, Shah Jahan ordered an open mausoleum with a marble screen over the grave of Ruqiya Sultan Begum. He also commissioned a mosque on the thirteenth terrace near Babur's tomb, completed in 1646. The fact that Shah Jahan commissioned an open screened structure for Ruqiya Sultan Begum, rather than a comparable building over Babur's grave, has been interpreted as indirect evidence that an open mausoleum already existed over Babur's tomb by that time [7].

3. The search for architectural prototypes

Babur's mausoleum, as represented in Masson's sketch, has no roof and is distinguished by its white marble latticework. The precise origin of this architectural type remains uncertain. A small number of open funerary structures are known from areas such as Aswan, Sindh and Baluchistan, but their brick construction and overall design differ from Babur's marble monument. Similarly, the marble enclosure surrounding the tombs at Gur-e-Amir in Samarkand does not provide a direct parallel. Lattice motifs in surviving miniatures also do not appear to match the specific arrangement or decorative pattern shown in Masson's sketch .

The monument's fine marble workmanship and open jali screens suggest the involvement of craftsmen familiar with Indian stone-lattice techniques. One possibility is that artisans skilled in producing such screens accompanied the transfer of Babur's remains to Kabul. This remains a hypothesis rather than a confirmed historical fact. Nevertheless, the tomb may be regarded as an innovative synthesis of a garden-based burial setting and refined stone-screen craftsmanship.

4. Later open mausoleums

Later examples of open-air funerary architecture can be found among the tombs at Makli Hill in Sindh. These structures were generally made of sandstone rather than marble. One example is the tomb of Emir Sultan Muhammad, dated to 1556; another is associated with Mirza Isa Khan Tarkhan [8]. Compared with these monuments, Babur's tomb appears more elaborate in its material treatment and decorative design. Nevertheless, the structures share several features: they are raised on platforms, incorporate arches in their walls, and emphasise the central arch through its greater height [9].

This architectural vocabulary continued in later funerary monuments associated with the Tarkhan period, including the tombs of Baqi Khan Tarkhan and Hansa Bay, both dated to 1585 in the cited literature. The historical connections between the Arghun and Tarkhan groups and Babur's political world may help explain the adoption of related forms. However, similarities in design and political association alone cannot establish direct copying; further comparative research is needed to determine the precise channels through which these forms circulated [10].

DISCUSSION

The evidence offers a qualified answer to the four questions posed in the Introduction. First, Babur's preference appears to be the strongest explanation for the open-air character of his burial place. The historical accounts associate his burial wish with Bagh-e Babur, a garden that held personal significance for him. The open form can therefore be interpreted not simply as an architectural decision, but also as an expression of the relationship between the ruler, landscape and memory. The unstable political circumstances following Babur's death may have further influenced the scale and timing of the construction [11].

Second, the present evidence does not identify a direct prototype for the specific combination of a roofless structure, five arches and finely carved marble jali screens. Earlier funerary enclosures in Central Asia and other regions offer points of comparison, but they differ in material, arrangement or decorative treatment. It is therefore more accurate to describe Babur's tomb as an unusual or innovative example than to claim that it originated from one clearly identifiable earlier monument [12].

Third, the possible role of Indian craftsmen provides a plausible explanation for the technical character of the marble screens, particularly in the context of sustained movement of artisans and building practices between Central Asia and South Asia. Yet the available sources do not conclusively document the identity of the craftsmen or the exact process by which the design was developed. This interpretation should consequently be treated as a reasoned hypothesis [13].

Finally, the relationship between Babur's tomb and later funerary architecture appears to involve both formal parallels and possible cultural reception. The open tombs at Makli share features such as raised platforms and emphasised arches, while later Mughal monuments employed elaborately carved lattice screens. The octagonal jali enclosure associated with the tomb of Mumtaz Mahal in the Taj Mahal may be considered a later parallel in the use of screened funerary space. The tradition attributed to Aurangzeb, who reportedly wished for a simple open burial like his ancestor Babur, also suggests the continuing symbolic importance of Babur's burial choice. These connections, however, should not be overstated as proof of a direct, linear influence [14].

The study has several limitations. The principal visual evidence for the original structure is a small drawing made in 1832, when the monument was already deteriorating. The date of the transfer of Babur's remains and the construction of the tomb is reconstructed from indirect evidence, while the origin of the marble lattice form remains unresolved. Further archival, epigraphic and archaeological investigation at Bagh-e Babur, alongside systematic comparison with funerary enclosures in Central Asia, Iran and South Asia, is necessary to confirm or revise the interpretations presented here [15].

CONCLUSION

The Tomb of Babur in Kabul represents a distinctive form of open-air funerary architecture, characterised in Charles Masson's 1832 sketch by a five-arched composition and finely worked marble jali screens. The available historical evidence suggests that its open form was closely connected with Babur's wish to be buried in his beloved garden at Kabul, while the political conditions of the period may have influenced the monument's construction. No direct earlier prototype for this precise architectural arrangement has been established. Comparisons with the open tombs of Makli and with later Mughal uses of lattice screens indicate possible architectural and cultural relationships, although a direct line of influence cannot yet be demonstrated. Babur's tomb should therefore be understood as an important meeting point of Timurid, Central Asian and South Asian traditions, whose precise origins and subsequent influence require further archival and archaeological research.

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